

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Responsibilities of the Minister for the Armed Forces, HC 717

Wednesday 8 March 2023

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Sarah Atherton; Robert Courts; Dave Doogan; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1-110

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon James Heappey MP, Minister for the Armed Forces, Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall, Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff, Commitments, Lieutenant General Charlie Stickland, Chief of Joint Operations, and Paul Wyatt, Director General Security Policy.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon James Heappey MP, Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall, Lieutenant General Charlie Stickland and Paul Wyatt.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this Defence Committee hearing on Wednesday 8 March 2023. I am delighted to welcome the Armed Forces Minister, the right hon. James Heappey. Thank you very much indeed for coming. Accompanying him is Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall, Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff for operations and commitments; Lieutenant General Charlie Stickland, who is Chief of Joint Operations; and Paul Wyatt, who is Director General Security Policy. Thank you very much indeed for your time this morning.

Minister, we are going to focus very much on your portfolio, but given where we are with Ukraine, there will be some emphasis on that. Just to begin, all of us on the Committee are very proud of what Britain has done as a whole in supporting Ukraine, not least in pushing the envelope. But that should not prevent us from understanding how we can do things better, and the impact that this is having on our own defence posture, not least with the pending Integrated Review. That leads me nicely to my first question: do you have a date for the publication of the Integrated Review refresh?

James Heappey: I think, in the Department, we have an inkling of when it might come, but I don't think the date has been formally released yet, so you will excuse me if I don't share anything today.

Q2 Chair: You could give us a little hint.

James Heappey: Imminent, Chair.

Chair: Imminent—that is better than “soon”. That is an upgrade from soon.

James Heappey: Imminent, Chair.

Q3 Chair: Okay. We can expect it perhaps in the next couple of weeks, given the Budget is occurring very soon.

James Heappey: Imminently.

Q4 Chair: Imminent. Right. Last time, things were split between the Integrated Review publication and a Defence Command Paper. Are you expecting to update both publications?

James Heappey: I would anticipate that if the I realise, as published, brings with it some changes to what is required of Defence, a Command Paper update would be required also.

Q5 Chair: Right. Good.

Turning to Afghanistan, from a military, tactical perspective, I think we have done well. Strategically, I think there are still some question marks



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as to what we are actually doing. If I were asked what the mission for Ukraine is, I would say it is to support the people of Ukraine in liberating all of their sovereign territory, including Donbas and Crimea, and to help build a long-term strategy framework that can stand up to any Russian aggression in the future. Minister, would you agree with that mission statement?

Richard Drax: Chair, do you want to quickly clear up the record? I heard you say Afghanistan.

Chair: I beg your pardon—I was mixing things up.

James Heappey: I was with you—don't worry.

Chair: I will just repeat that. Our mission is to support the people of Ukraine in liberating all of their sovereign territory, including Donbas and Crimea, and to help build a long-term security framework that can stand up to any Russian aggression in the future.

James Heappey: I think we would say that the purpose of UK support for Ukraine is more broad than that. We would say that, really, this is about achieving two things. The first is that Russia and President Putin must fail in their invasion of Ukraine and must be seen to fail in their invasion of Ukraine. Secondly, this must end on terms acceptable to President Zelensky and the sovereign, democratically elected Government of Ukraine.

Q6 **Chair:** He has made it very clear that he wants Donbas and Crimea liberated. This is what I am trying to tease out of you. I have yet to hear a western leader confirm that it is the complete sovereign territory that we are aiming to liberate.

James Heappey: The reason you have not heard it from any western leader, and nor will you hear it from me today, is that that is unhelpful. It would give President Putin something with which to rally the Russian people, and I don't think that is helpful. Our collective assertion is that we are supporting Ukraine for the purposes of maintaining—restoring—its sovereignty and that it is for President Zelensky, and President Zelensky alone, to decide on what terms this war ends.

Q7 **Chair:** He has decided. He has made that very clear.

James Heappey: Well, he has said a number of things. I don't think, Tobias, that there is any value in setting a clear territorial ambition, because President Zelensky may, in time, choose to change his conditions, or he may choose to strengthen them; that is his sovereign right as the leader of the Ukrainian Government. I don't think it is helpful at all for us to go below what is actually a very clear and unambiguous statement of intent, which is that we will continue to support Ukraine for as long as it takes for Russia to fail, and to be seen to fail, in its invasion of Ukraine, and for this to end on terms acceptable to President Zelensky.

Q8 **Chair:** Okay. I have a final question on this before we move on to the



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substantive questions. In order for Putin to fail, Zelensky must win. For Zelensky to win, he needs to gain territory. For him to gain territory, he has to punch through Russian defences, hence his request for tanks, which we have done well to provide. Those tanks can be successful only if they have top cover. I am trying to frame all this. The tactical assistance—the military assistance—that we are providing must go towards a clear strategy, and the ambiguity around what we are trying to achieve means that there is ambiguity around what equipment we need to be sending across.

James Heappey: I don't accept that one equals the other. There is no ambiguity in the statement that we continue to support Ukraine for as long as it takes for this to end on President Zelensky's terms. That is a completely unambiguous statement. Very obviously, to get to a place where this ends on President Zelensky's terms, the Ukrainian Army, or the Ukrainian Armed Forces, must recover a significant amount of Ukrainian territory. To do that, the UK has recently catalysed a significant round of gifting to the Ukrainian Armed Forces of tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery, all of which will be essential to their forthcoming offensive.

If you wish, and have the time, I might invite Charlie to talk you through a little of what the Ukrainians are up to and how the international community is assisting. Would that be helpful?

Chair: Very briefly, and then we will get on to the individual items that we might be sliding across the table.

Lieutenant General Charlie Stickland: Very briefly, and I am conscious of the level of security of this session, you would be unsurprised to learn that we are in regular communication with our Ukrainian partners, and also with our allied partners across Europe. A really important piece of this jigsaw is the Security Assistance Group-Ukraine, for which we have the International Donor Co-ordination Centre lead.

We are basically getting to a point where we are seeking to understand Ukrainian plans and ambitions through 2023. Therefore, how do we match—this is my phrase—kit into capability? It is not just about military hardware being provided; it is about building that into capability on the training grounds in the UK, where we said we are going to try to train 20,000 basic recruits this year, and training areas in Germany, where you are linking gifted equipment—sorry, granted equipment—with Ukrainians and seeking to make sure they can train, use it appropriately, and move it forward at a time and place of their choosing.

This is about kit into capability. It is about building a force that is able to undertake the offensive. I can't go into what they are likely to do, but from my perspective it is about the synchronisation of deep, close and rear, and with our allies we are seeking to get them to think in those terms.

Chair: I am grateful for that. We just recognise that there is a political dimension to this. The symbolism of those tanks going forward, even



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though Challengers might not be appropriate, opened up other countries to do the same, and I think the UK should get credit for that.

- Q9 **Dave Doogan:** I have a very quick point of clarification. General Stickland, I think I heard you correct yourself from saying “gifting” to Ukraine to “granting” to Ukraine. I hope I heard you say that. I assume you would agree that gifting is a benevolent gesture from one entity to another that benefits the receiver, not necessarily the giver, which means that “gifting” is the wrong term and “granting” is the right term.

Lieutenant General Charlie Stickland: I would completely agree with that. I am very grateful—thank you for correcting me.

- Q10 **Dave Doogan:** No, no, you corrected yourself. I just want to put that on the record. We should all make an effort to rephrase how we discuss this. These are not gifts. We are in the same conflict; it is just that Ukraine is very much at the sharp end.

James Heappey: Dave, you are right to make that point on the sentiment, but our permanent secretary was also drumming into us that the words mean something very different in the legal sense. So “granting” is the word.

Chair: Dave was commending your own correction, I think.

- Q11 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** General, on the back of what you mentioned about donor agreements and delivery of equipment, in our evidence session yesterday we heard that there tends to be a time lag between the agreements and the actual delivery of the equipment. Do you recognise that, or do you think it is swifter? We heard yesterday that there is a significant time lag.

Lieutenant General Charlie Stickland: I think it is a reality. If we use the example of the Challenger 2s, what you have to do is actually have that equipment capable of operating with the force you are supporting. You have to make sure the radios are correct; you have to make sure that things are actually refurbished appropriately. You have then got to get the Ukrainian forces in. We have some Ukrainians now with us in Bovington. They are training in our combined arms training facility to ensure they are as up to speed as they possibly can be.

Inevitably, from when somebody makes a commitment at a donor conference to the delivery of that capability, there is a delay. It is not a delay because nobody is doing anything; it is a delay because we are building the capability in terms of training, linking things together and ensuring the equipment is appropriate to go forwards.

- Q12 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** In terms of the equipment we have agreed to send, what are the current delays? How long have those delays to delivery been?

Lieutenant General Charlie Stickland: I would not recognise the word “delay”. This is about a systematic way of taking a donor offer and turning it into a capability. It is in a conversation with our Ukrainian partners. To



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use the Challenger 2s as an example, there is absolutely no point in us not training our Ukrainian partners properly and not linking them properly, and then saying, "There you go. We're going to push this across the border into Ukraine and crack on."

- Q13 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** We know what the UK has promised, but what I am trying to get at is how long, from the point that something is promised, is it taking to actually get where it needs to be?

Lieutenant General Charlie Stickland: The issue is you cannot go by individual pieces of equipment. Essentially, it is linked into an entire donor co-ordination system through the International Donor Co-ordination Centre. I can assure you as a Committee that at no point is something sitting on a tank park or in Bovington waiting for something.

There is a Herculean effort going on to get things in the right place. There is a huge logistic chain running into Europe—which we have actually been responsible for nationally and catalysed across the international community—to get things in the right place at the right time.

I genuinely do not recognise this issue of delay. I see an announcement, and I see a machine going as fast as it possibly can to deliver equipment in the right timescale to our Ukrainian partners.

James Heappey: The reality is that, if I was to announce 5,000 rounds of artillery ammunition today—actually, that is pretty much business as usual—that would be in Ukraine tomorrow. With something like MLRS, for example, you make the announcement that you are gifting MLRS, and Ukrainians come to Rollestone camp on Salisbury plain for two months and learn how to use MLRS. You then move the MLRS across Europe with all the missiles and you get it into Ukraine in a far more covert and considered way, because it is quite a high target.

Charlie and his team will move some stuff at great pace because it is pretty straightforward. Other things are quite complex and require a lot of training and a lot of consideration around the move. In the case of the things required for combined arms manoeuvre for an offensive, it is even more complicated still. In Bovington, they do individual tank crew training and then they do squadron-level stuff, which I think is just getting under way. Then they have to integrate as battle groups and then into brigades and to get on to the offensive. Some things take longer than others.

Chair: Okay. Let's go into some of the detail of the equivalent that could be gifted.

- Q14 **Robert Courts:** Minister, it is good to see you. Thank you for coming to give evidence.

I would like to start by talking about Typhoon. There are a number of different aspects, and this is of course the big-ticket item that Ukraine is asking for now. I would like to explore some of the different facets of this. The Secretary of State has said that we will not be supplying Typhoon to Ukraine. For the record, could I get clarity on your reasons



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for that statement?

James Heappey: The Prime Minister has asked us to look at what the options would be, and everything is on the table. To be clear, I think what the Secretary of State said was that we are not giving the Ukrainians Typhoon now.

Robert Courts: That was my second question.

James Heappey: He absolutely sees the opportunity, as do we all, to give the Ukrainian air force jets post war. There is an opportunity in the meantime to train pilots who have significant combat experience, but for whom the Ukrainian air force currently does not have the jets. You could give them a rifle, put them in a trench and make them a Ukrainian air force infantry battalion, but that would be a waste of their skillset. There is the opportunity to get those pilots out of Ukraine and into training with partners—

Q15 **Robert Courts:** Sorry to interrupt you, but I just want to break this down. You have anticipated the next question I am going to ask, but, on the first question, I just want to get clarity on your reasons for not supplying Typhoon now. I accept there is a point about later, and I am going to come to that in a second.

James Heappey: Even though the Ukrainians have combat experience—in fact, they have pilots with multiple combat kills who are available now—there is still some training that needs to be done. That training has been announced, and we will get on with it, but even then, there are still engineers, logistics and munitions. These are quite complex systems, which require quite complicated infrastructure on the airfields that operate them, so there is a run-in to the gifting of these things that means that, as we have been saying from the outset, these were never the sort of things that you could give on the same timescale that you could give a tank.

Q16 **Robert Courts:** I totally understand that, and I would like to move on from that point because I think we are in danger this request for combat air being a bit sterile around Typhoon now. I accept the force in the point you make: you need the training, a logistics tail, long fixed runways and so on—I understand that. But you are quite right: what the Secretary of State actually said was that no Typhoon jets would be supplied in the short term. There is, of course, a space in which Typhoons could be supplied in the medium to longer term, which is presumably something you are considering once the situation has been stabilised and we are looking at a deterrent air defence posture, for example.

James Heappey: One hundred per cent. Just to be clear, it is not quite as binary as “definitely not now” and “definitely only in peacetime”. The Prime Minister has said he wants us to look at all options, so that political choice remains available to him. The Secretary of State has been very clear that it is not happening now. That is right, but the pilots being trained, and the wider work we are doing to deliver on the Prime Minister’s ask, is all about giving him further political choice, if and when that is necessary.

Robert Courts: That is extremely helpful; thank you. I follow that, but it does of course beg a question, because President Zelensky's request is for what can be done now. I accept the points you make, but there are surely some things that could be done now that would help. That is why I want to step away slightly from this point around the artificiality of supplying Typhoon directly to Ukraine. The other option is backfill.

James Heappey: Yes.

- Q17 **Robert Courts:** For example, there are MiG-29s in Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria that could potentially be supplied if backfilled, either directly through the Royal Air Force or, indeed, through transferring those aircraft. There are approximately 100 Gripens available, which are surely the aircraft that is optimised for this theatre and, again, there is a backfill issue there. We have the 30 Tranche 1 Typhoons, which are air defence-optimised and limited in ground attack—I understand all the technical capabilities around them. But would it not be possible to supply those, if not directly to Ukraine, then to one of those other partner nations that could release MiG-29, Sukhoi Su-24, Gripen or one of the other platforms that is available around the world? That could go directly to Ukraine now.

James Heappey: It is eminently possible. As you heard the Secretary of State say on the radio the other morning, it is something that we are very open to considering.

- Q18 **Robert Courts:** Is that something that you are looking at now?

James Heappey: Yes, absolutely. The conversations that happen within the donor community are very dynamic and happening all the time. There are a number of countries that are having this debate. There are some that will find it easier than others to provide stuff that the Ukrainians can use. As you rightly note, there are plenty of countries within NATO that still operate MiG-29, and the ability to backfill into those countries is very evident. There are also a number of countries that are updating their fast air fleets right now, which means that they have an opportunity with the disposal of their existing fleets. It is a very live debate.

I would just say that, when he visited Parliament, President Zelensky made a very obvious focus on jets. We heard that. We understand the requirement. But the dividend from his visit to London, Paris and Brussels was huge commitments—admittedly not on jets, but he has secured even longer-range precision strike capability, and an acceleration of the gifting of armour. I think he would, hopefully, reflect that, although he did not get the headline thing he came for, he definitely forced the pace on a number of other capabilities.

- Q19 **Robert Courts:** We will perhaps come back to that.

There are two other points I would like to raise before the Chair will want to move on to other things.

First, Minister, there is a political imperative here, isn't there? You touched on this a moment ago. What about that large, grand statement that triggers the political granting or gifting of this capability? We could



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do that now, by saying that we are looking at a way to do this. In the way that happened with Challenger, that could trigger the wider provision of such kit.

James Heappey: From the outset—and I am aware that there has been commentary from people on this Committee that disagrees with this approach, and I think it is a fair matter for debate—our approach to escalation management, both as the UK Government and in co-operation with the US, has been that each extension in the capability we are providing is directly linked to an outrage or a decision taken by Putin and his Armed Forces to brutalise the Ukrainian people. So, the attacks on Ukrainian critical national infrastructure and the reduction of the Ukrainian energy grid, and the impact that had on the Ukrainian civilian population, were the trigger for deciding to provide longer-range strike capability, which is a significant increase in capability.

Others might argue—the Chair has done so—and can make the argument compellingly that, if we had gone all in with what we have done now a year ago, the outcome would be different. I think it could have been different for the better; it could also have been different in a very catastrophic way. It is a fair subject for debate.

Our approach has been to extend capability in response to an outrage, and we have messaged that very clearly to the Kremlin. They are the ones that are causing the international community to go ever further in our support of Ukraine.

Q20 **Robert Courts:** It does rather suggest that you need to wait for an outrage before you would consider provision of combat air.

Chair: It is political appetite, isn't it?

Q21 **Robert Courts:** Maybe the Air Vice Marshal Marshall wants to comment on the capability. Can you reassure us? I am worried about the sterility of this being necessarily looked at as fast jet, around Typhoon. Is there a consideration of what kind of platform would be most effective? If they are after a close air support platform, there are of course others available. Is that wider consideration taking place?

James Heappey: I say Harrier. *[Laughter.]*

Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall: Sadly, that ship has sailed, or that plane has flown.

Ultimately, we do need to look at that and we are looking at that. You know—and you have mentioned already—that Tranche 1 is an air defence asset.

I think they would prefer a combination. I think there is an air defence requirement in there, there is a ground attack requirement as well, and the close air support. It is a combination of things, in an ideal world.

As we look towards the future force, we should be going all the way from attack helicopter, through, hopefully, a volume of platforms that can



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provide capability, all the way through to the high end of NATO-standard platforms. Multi-role is the phrase, and both fixed wing and rotary wing air power.

Q22 **Chair:** So air power.

Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall: I think air power overall. You have got to give them the edge over the opposition, on a deterrent basis.

Q23 **Robert Courts:** The reason I am thinking that is that you have got expensive fast jet, but you have also got things like Tucano, which is used in some parts of the world. It is a good, effective, cheap, close air support platform. I am not getting fixated on a particular platform—I am asking whether a range of those sorts of considerations are being looked at.

Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall: Yes, there is a range. We do need to bear in mind that the current air environment in Ukraine, particularly in the east, is not very palatable.

Robert Courts: Yes, it is highly contested.

Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall: So, I think, all these come with a consideration of survivability; what they give; and when in the evolving conflict, or hopefully the cessation, they would be provided.

Q24 **Mr Jones:** We have lots of people suggesting what we should donate to Ukraine, but General Stickland summed it up. This is not like going down to your local garage, buying a Ford Escort, putting the keys in and driving it out the showroom, as he explained. Is it not the case that we should push back a little, certainly on things like Typhoon and other things that people are calling for, and just open up the reality that General Stickland outlined in terms of training, logistics, spare parts and everything else? The debate sometimes annoys me because it is very simplistic, whereas delivering a piece of kit and providing training and supporting it in—well, you can do it, but what would you do without that?

I always remember, from when I was a Minister, meeting General Wardak. When I met him, he was the Defence Minister of Afghanistan, which some of you might know. Every time you saw him, he wanted tanks. When you said, "What are you going to do with the tanks and how would you do it?", he never had the answer. You can ask for things, but the question to ask is surely what, at the end of the day, is going to make the most difference on the frontline.

James Heappey: And I think, Kevan, we do. I think both can be true. The Ukrainians are never going to stop, and nor should they—they face an existential threat—asking for ever more. But they also know and make a point of saying how grateful they are for everything that they are getting. The foundations that were laid through the UK's commitment to Ukraine on Op Orbital meant that we were very, very quickly able to build relationships, from the very top of Government and all the way through the MoD down to the operational level, that allow us to have exactly those conversations with the Ukrainians. So I don't think we need to push back



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too hard against President Zelensky. He made such an inspirational speech to Parliament—

- Q25 **Mr Jones:** No, it is not him, but irresponsible nonsense is spoken both in Parliament and in the media.

James Heappey: But we are very, very clear-eyed both here to you as a Committee, in terms of saying what we are doing and why we cannot do other things, and to the Ukrainians; and they get it and are very grateful.

- Q26 **Mr Francois:** To prove we have a plurality of views on this Committee, I will say this. Challenger is a highly capable tank. On its own, a squadron will not change the whole war, but that donation did help—it was followed by the Americans with the Abrams—to then unlock up to 200 Leopards, so it was as much a political initiative as a military one. Zelensky stood in Westminster Hall and pleaded for jets. Some people would say the man knows what he is doing. And as the Chairman said, if the Ukrainians are going to counter-attack, they will need at least local air superiority over the battlefield. We have Typhoon jets in storage. We have a squadron of tranche 1 in storage at RAF Shawbury, gathering dust. If we were to take at least half of those, a half-squadron of six, and announce that we are going to give them to Ukraine—we appreciate you cannot do that overnight, General; your point is well made to the Committee—that might help to unlock the MiGs and the F-16s that they really want. Rather than having them gathering dust in a hangar, and even if it took a while to deliver them, why couldn't we, as I think No. 10 wants, make a political signal, offer them six of those Typhoons that are sitting in a hangar and doing nothing, and then unlock those MiGs and F-16s and maybe Gripens as well?

Chair: Minister, I think I can guess what your reply is. Is this something that you can take away, because I think a number of people on this Committee believe the same thing? I don't think you are going to give us a comprehensive reply now.

James Heappey: As I think I said to Rob, we are very aware of the leverage that things we could gift could have. But it cannot just be symbolic. Yes, Challenger 2 was catalytic, but Challenger 2 is also a warfighting capability. There is a squadron of Challenger tanks—

- Q27 **Mr Francois:** Very quickly, because we are tight for time—we have 30 tranches 1s. We are going to take them out of service in two years anyway. That is departmental policy.

James Heappey: That is true.

Mr Francois: They are not tokenistic; we mount Quick Reaction Alert against Russian bombers with tranche 1, so it is very capable. If we gave the Ukrainians six of those, that is actually a proper capability, even though it would take time to bring it into service. Surely you must take the point, from the tank example, about what that could unlock. I fear that the reason why the RAF are saying no is that they are worried that if we give them six, we will give them 12 and then we will give them 24.



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James Heappey: No, no, no. It is definitely not—

- Q28 **Mr Francois:** You say that, but I understand that Ministers were told every single Typhoon was on the frontline and was unavailable and the RAF forgot to tell Ministers they had 12 in a hangar.

James Heappey: No—no. Ministers have—well, Ben and I have been around for three years and we have a pretty good sense of where everything is. But anyway, that is not the case. We are very, very aware of the leverage, the catalytic effect, that a gift, a grant, could have. But it cannot just be symbolic. It has to be something where we are giving a capability and not just kit, to use Charlie's language; and that capability cannot be delivered in time for an offensive—

- Q29 **Mr Francois:** But we have made the point. If you could take it away—

James Heappey: Point registered.

- Q30 **Robert Courts:** Isn't it backfill where this really becomes important?

James Heappey: That point taken, too.

Chair: There is a tactical element here. I think the message comes loud and clear that Putin is the most destabilising force in Europe at the moment. We have equipment that can help stand up to that. We have been slow. It has taken us a full year to get main battle tanks there—conscious of the escalatory ladder—and Britain has done more to push the envelope. What we are saying here is, let's rekindle that cold war statecraft, recognising what we can do without agitating things to get out of control. If we do not put this fire out in the next few months, we are going to end up with a stalemate, and Putin then claims victory. That is what we are concerned about.

I want to move on to other items, particularly the land warfare capability and the Challenger 2 tank.

- Q31 **Richard Drax:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. How many Challenger 2 are available, either deployed or ready to deploy?

James Heappey: There are 157.

Richard Drax: Available.

James Heappey indicated assent.

- Q32 **Richard Drax:** Right—either deployed or ready to deploy.

James Heappey: Well, they are available, so they are either deployed or ready to deploy. Last year, we peaked at 82 Challenger 2 in Europe. I know that there has been some concern over the deployability of division, but a division's-worth of armour was deployed to Europe last year as part of the NATO thickening. But of the 227 Challenger 2 that are currently in the UK—in the British Army inventory—157 are currently available, meaning that they are either on or available for operations.

Richard Drax: So if we go to war, we have 157 ready to go.



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James Heappey: Sometimes I fear that a clear answer is—

Q33 **Chair:** That is two regiments, though. Is that our NATO—

James Heappey: I think it is three. It is while since I did my captain staff training, but I think there are—

Q34 **Chair:** Minister, you need some for training, and some will need to be repaired. You can get two working regiments out of 150.

James Heappey: There are 157 available. I think that what we have seen in the last year is that, when you want to get stuff out of the door in time of crisis, you make it happen. The fact that 82 were deployed at peak last summer, across, I think, four or five separate deployments in Europe, in addition to all the other stuff that we were doing, just goes to show that you can make this stuff happen. But there are 157 available today, which was the question that Richard asked.

Q35 **Richard Drax:** It was a very clear answer; thank you very much. Out of the 157, with the new turret and the new gun, where is the work?

James Heappey: The IR commitment is for, I believe, 148 to be updated. I am afraid that, unless I can quickly find a page, I am not conversant in when the Challenger 3 conversion programme commences and at what pace.

Q36 **Chair:** We can tell you when it completes, which is 2030. That was established when we had the Procurement Minister and his team here. That is another seven years from now, but we have only 148 main battle tanks, which will then be upgraded. When I said that we had only two regiments, that was because some are required for training, some will break down and therefore be in repair, and others have been gifted or granted to other nations to be operated there, including, I think, a squadron to Ukraine. The bigger question here came up over a year ago, when I had an exchange at the Liaison Committee with the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who dismissed the idea that we need main battle tanks. Surely what has happened in Ukraine, which has prompted the Integrated Review to require a refresh, shows that we do not have enough main battle tanks.

James Heappey: Two things on that. The first is that, yes, Ukraine is a driver for the IR refresh, but it is not the only driver for an IR refresh. There was also a concern that the initial IR might not have fully understood the challenge of China and that therefore we needed to address that. In fact, I think that Prime Minister Truss was probably more around the latter driving the need for an IR update than the former.

Q37 **Chair:** Let's stick to land warfare, because that is what we are focusing on now.

James Heappey: Understood. The decision in the initial IR was that the future British Army required 148 tanks. I am not going to pre-empt the content of the IR, and certainly not the Defence Command Paper that followed it, but the Secretary of State and I have been clear throughout



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that not only are we working hard to support Ukraine, but working hard to study the lessons from Ukraine. Very obviously, if the conflict in Ukraine proves that we made the wrong call two or three years ago, that is something that we have always been open to looking at again.

Q38 **Chair:** We actually have 227 main battle tanks, Challengers 1 and 2—

James Heappey: The question was what was available.

Chair: Exactly, but my point is: if you recognise what is coming over the hill and that the threat picture is changing, maybe all 227 should be upgraded to Challenger 3.

Q39 **Derek Twigg:** Where are the other 70?

James Heappey: Fourteen of them have been gifted.

Derek Twigg: Fourteen from 70, then.

James Heappey: The remainder, I suspect, are at extended readiness mostly, probably, having been cannibalised to sustain the other 157.

Derek Twigg: So they are never going to be—

James Heappey: There is no plan to upgrade them or use them again.

Derek Twigg: So the max we can stick out is 157.

James Heappey: Exactly. Well, that is the amount—

Q40 **Derek Twigg:** So 227 is really an irrelevant figure.

James Heappey: That is the full inventory of Challenger 2, but there has been a lot of cannibalisation that started well over a decade ago.

Q41 **Mr Francois:** We have some other dozens in deep storage behind the 227, Minister.

James Heappey: But I suspect they have now been cannibalised. Challenger 2 is now such an old platform that, in a lot of cases, there isn't a spares chain, so the cannibalisation is the best way to sustain them.

Q42 **Mr Francois:** You have basically told the Committee that we have got 157 Challengers that are ready to fight tonight. Is that right?

James Heappey: No, I said available.

Q43 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, you said, "I have given you a really clear answer. They are available." So this is starting to sound like sophistry. What does "available" mean?

James Heappey: "Available" means on operations or at R5 or better, and R5 is 30 days' notice.

Q44 **Derek Twigg:** You used the word "deployable" as well, Minister.

James Heappey: No, I used "available".



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Q45 **Mr Francois:** So we have 157 that are either on operations or that would be available to fight within 30 days.

James Heappey: Correct.

Q46 **Mr Francois:** Okay, that is clear. If that is the case, why did the Chief of the General Staff sound so anxious and say that if we donate 14 to Ukraine, which the Committee completely supports, that would temporarily affect our ability to fight. If we have 157, why was CGS getting so exercised about 14?

Derek Twigg: Sorry, Chair, we have to clear this up. You are saying there are 157, but they are not all available. How many are actually available today?

James Heappey: I cannot give you that number. You are probably aware of why that is the case, Derek. The breakdown of exact readiness—the number that we hold at very high readiness—is a secret matter. The 157 is a number that we can give you without compromising the wider readiness profile. To say that 157 are either on operations or at R5 or better probably gives the Committee a good sense of the availability of the fleet.

Q47 **Chair:** There is a theme developing here. Of the numbers that we are given on whether they are available or at readiness—"force elements readiness" is the technical term—we get fuzzy numbers from the MoD. We got this when we visited Warton in the north-west of England. That was where we had to go to get the numbers of tranche 1, tranche 2 and tranche 3 of Typhoon. Please, Minister, the Committee needs to have these numbers so that we understand exactly what is available to fight. If we do not have that, we cannot help you press for more funds and more support to make sure that we advance our defence posture for the changing threat picture.

James Heappey: On "available to fight", I think the number could be even higher. In a time of crisis, there is such a thing as a "war goer". There was in the second world war. It was pretty routine for a Spitfire to come back and for someone to go round with a spanner and patch it up as best they could to get it back in the sky again. All of your peacetime measures of readiness, availability and serviceability are held against an entirely different metric if you are in a fight. The question that was asked was how many are available. I think a fair definition of "available" is R5 or better, or currently committed on operations.

Q48 **Chair:** There is also the question of what is appropriate for our land warfare capabilities, given our commitments not just in the UK but now across the world, which are expanding. At the end of the last cold war, we had 900 main battle tanks. There was a major decision to say that is not how battles or conflicts are fought any more. We now realise, looking at Ukraine, that actually, yes, you do need to hold terrain and the main battle tank has a role to play in combat warfare.

James Heappey: That question was asked a few minutes ago, to which I said, "Absolutely right. The IR is being refreshed." We have studied the lessons hard from—



Q49 **Chair:** We look forward to an increase in tank numbers—

James Heappey: Don't put words into my mouth. I answered the question and said there has been an IR refresh. There will probably be a Command Paper refresh to come. The Secretary for State and I have never hidden from the fact that the lessons from Ukraine need to be learned, and that might lead us to change our minds on decisions taken already, but it might also be that it vindicates the decisions we have taken.

Chair: We have spoken about Ukraine and the fact that Britain stepped forward more than most, but that has had an impact on our stockpiles. Mark, do you want to pursue that?

Q50 **Mr Francois:** RUSI recently produced a report on the first three months of the war; it was a very good document. One of the things that report said is that the Russian Army had fired off the equivalent of the British Army's entire artillery reserve in two days. How they got that number, I don't know, but they seemed fairly definitive about it. Given the extremely high usage of ammunition we are seeing in the Ukrainian conflict, and given that, quite rightly, we have donated quite a lot of artillery ammunition to the Ukrainians, who have put it to good use, what steps are we undertaking to backfill the gaps in our own reserves, which were pretty depleted of artillery and other munitions anyway? Have we started to let major contracts to replace that stuff yet?

James Heappey: As the Secretary of State has said to the House, contracts have been let on LMM, HVM—Starstreak—and NLAW. We are in discussion with manufacturers of artillery ammunition, and we expect a big increase in UK manufacturing capability.

Q51 **Chair:** May I interrupt, if you don't mind, Mark? We visited Belfast and we went to the factory that makes Starstreak. It stopped making them a couple of years ago. The factory told us it had had no order for Starstreak 2.0. In fact, many of the components that make up Starstreak are now obsolete, and it will take a couple of years to get the supply chain and the assembly line up and running again. It is an amazing weapon system to give to the Ukrainians, but only 60 were left. Unless you are buying them from other parts of the world, from their stockpiles, for us to make new orders, the order has yet to be slid across the table from the MoD.

James Heappey: No, the order has been placed. Paul, do you want to come on this? Are you able to?

Paul Wyatt: No, thank you.

James Heappey: The order has been placed for the replacement of Starstreak.

Q52 **Chair:** Sorry, but Thales made it very clear that there is no order whatsoever for Starstreak. It stopped making them a couple of years ago. Sorry to press this, but there is obviously a disjoint between the request that you're putting in and it landing in the very place where they are made. I will leave that with you.



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James Heappey: It is my understanding that an order has been placed. If I am incorrect, I will write to you to correct the record.

- Q53 **Mr Francois:** On NLAW, the PAC had to correct Andy Start a couple of months ago because he gave the impression, to begin with, that we had placed a major order to replace NLAW. We have not. We had made a preliminary order to help restart production, but the major order—because we have, quite rightly, sent thousands to Ukraine—still has not been placed, or it certainly hadn't been when we had that exchange. Again Minister, you are giving the impression that all these big orders have been placed, but they have not. What is the precise situation on NLAW?

James Heappey: I have just been passed some stuff, but I will ask the Minister for Defence Procurement to write to you and set it out very clearly.

- Q54 **Mr Francois:** Thank you. Let me come on to artillery ammunition. We have a dispute about Starstreak and a bit of dispute about NLAW. On artillery, you said candidly that you had asked the manufacturers, who in this case are BAE Systems, for a bunch of quotes, but you still haven't placed a major order. Given the lead times to produce this stuff, why not? As you know better than anybody, there is a major war a few hundred miles from our shores. Why haven't we already ordered them to ramp up artillery production?

James Heappey: Again, can I ask the Minister for Defence Procurement to write to you? Forgive me, but there is an awful lot that isn't in my portfolio—

Chair: We are very conscious that this is wandering off your portfolio, Minister.

James Heappey: Exactly.

- Q55 **Mr Francois:** Alright, but very quickly, related to that, other people are supplying the enemy. There are press reports today that the Iranians have been using Russian-flagged cargo ships to supply large quantities of ammunition to the Russian effort in Ukraine. Can you confirm that? Does your intelligence stand that up?

James Heappey: I think what you have read in open source is what you have read in open source. I have read those reports as well. You have been in my job; you know that I can't tell you whether what is in classified intelligence accords with what is in open source.

- Q56 **Mr Francois:** All right, but you are not saying that those reports are flat wrong.

James Heappey: I am telling you that I have read those open-source reports, and I can't tell you what is in classified intelligence.

- Q57 **Chair:** Sorry to interrupt again, but this is an important point. If Iran is supplying Russia with weapon systems, surely the world should hear



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that?

James Heappey: You have both been Ministers in the MoD. You know that I can't tell you what is in classified intelligence.

Q58 **Chair:** I am asking why you cannot tell us when it is actually in the world's interests, particularly Ukraine's and indeed ours.

James Heappey: If something is in open source, something is in open source. I can't tell you whether that is verified or not by classified intelligence. You both know that you would not have been able to sit in this chair and give the Committee back then the detail of classified intelligence.

Chair: I am trying to understand why you can't share that, though.

Q59 **Mr Francois:** It can't be classified; it's been on Sky. The world has seen it.

James Heappey: No one is disputing what is in open source.

Q60 **Mr Francois:** You are not disputing it?

James Heappey: No, I am not disputing that you have seen it. What you can't ask me to do is verify something in open source with something I have read on secret paper.

Q61 **Chair:** Before this turns into "Yes Minister", could you go back and perhaps challenge as to why you can't confirm whether you know Iran is supplying weapons to Ukraine?

Mr Francois: Is it because the Foreign Office doesn't want you to admit it?

James Heappey: No, Mark. You are seeing demons where there are none.

Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall: We have already highlighted during a briefing on advanced conventional weapons to the UN that we have published evidence of Iranian unmanned aerial systems found in Ukraine—so exactly the same process and intent that you want. The answer is yes, we can look at that, and it is not that we are resistant to doing it. We have done it with other systems, and we will explore opportunities to do the same messaging.

James Heappey: Moreover, one of the things that has caught the Russians out over the last year has been the willingness, selectively, to declassify very high-level intelligence to get ahead of Russian false flag narratives or various other things. There is no default resistance to doing so, but there are straight obligations under the Official Secrets Act, which I think you both well understand, that mean I can't tell you what I read on secret paper.

Mr Francois: Again, I think we have made the point.

Chair: If China and Iran are both tacitly supporting Russia, we should



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know about it. Let's turn to land forces.

- Q62 **Dave Doogan:** Minister, both you and the Secretary of State have described the hollowing out of UK Armed Forces. To some of us, that seems like a curious thing to say for a Minister in a Government that have been in power for 12 years. Where were the mistakes made that have resulted in that hollowing out?

James Heappey: I don't think that there were mistakes made, if I am completely honest with you.

- Q63 **Dave Doogan:** It was inevitable?

James Heappey: No, not at all. Rewind to the post-cold war period in the late '90s and early 2000s. This Committee or its predecessor, and the Public Accounts Committee of the time, were pointing out to the MoD that our stockpiles and logistics efforts looked profligate. We had 20 warehouses where one would do; we had three entirely separate logistics chains for each service. A number of decisions were made in the early 2000s and subsequently about the way Defence would do logistics and hold strategic enablers, which delivered a very cost-effective way of doing logistics and sustainment.

The Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns were in a very regular six-monthly drumbeat that allowed you to contracterise sealift and airlift, because you knew exactly when the changes in tour were coming. You could make a partisan point about the stuff that was done in the early 2000s, but I think it would be deeply invidious. That would be to deny the evidence and the politics of the time. The various reviews that were done, and the various changes to defence logistics, were entirely sound given the threat picture at the time. However, when your warfighting capability is brought into the sharp focus that Ukraine has put it under, you cannot help but conclude that we had the stuff we had in the cold war for a reason, and we might need to consider what we need to regrow in order to re-establish our expeditionary warfighting capability.

- Q64 **Dave Doogan:** So the attrition, as you set out there, is around the pursuit of value and reductions?

James Heappey: Business as usual value, exactly.

- Q65 **Dave Doogan:** Hindsight might dictate to us that it probably was not that wasteful after all.

James Heappey: I think that is unfair; this is a very cross-party, bipartisan point. It is invidious to try and score political points, because I think all of us would have made the same decisions if sat in their seat at the time and given the evidence of the time.

Dave Doogan: I am not trying to make a partisan point.

James Heappey: The reality is that a resilient warfighting capability is not value for money, so there is an inevitable tension between what you



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need for resilience in warfighting, versus what you need for cost-effective sustainment of the force for business as usual.

- Q66 **Dave Doogan:** In terms of the value agenda, having made the strategic reductions in stockholdings and equipment, you would expect there to be evidence of savings, but over the same period, we have seen the equipment budget rise from £12 billion in 2012, to £28.7 billion. Even when it plateaued, it did so for a few years at around £18 billion, which is 50% higher than it was in 2012. Public funding for land has been consistently increasing or flat, and recently it has increased very much.

As we have just discussed, against that we see challenging delays with NLA Starstreak, what some would argue is a suboptimal conversion ambition for Challenger 2, and a very pedestrian approach to new medium-lift helicopters. It does not fill the Committee, and, I would suggest, quite a lot of people in uniform, with an awful lot of hope for the cogency, ambition and heartbeat of the equipment plan and the value attached to it.

James Heappey: I note your concern. I fear we are straying back into procurement. I have not brought with me a team of people who can answer questions about the detail of contracts, because my portfolio does not include that. I do have the design of the force, and what the future fight might look like, and you are right that the money coming into the Army's equipment pipeline over the next 10 years is significant.

It would be fair to say that there are a number of transformational programmes in the Army that have been deferred and deferred and deferred. We have reached the point now where the Army has a number of systems that are quite out of date. I do not think we take any real solace from the fact that there is this money in the Army's capital programme over the next decade. We are acutely aware of the urgent need to modernise. For things such as the artillery capability, the ability to gift AS-90 as a catalyst to the renewal of the Army's artillery capability is quite welcome.

- Q67 **Dave Doogan:** To pivot back to people, are you content that everyone suffering mental or physical injury following a career in the Armed Forces has been properly judged to have had that injury connected to their military service?

James Heappey: Can I get the Minister for Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans to write to you? I would love to answer your question, but it is just not remotely in my portfolio.

- Q68 **Dave Doogan:** So we are struggling on procurement, and we are struggling on people—okay.

James Heappey: Yes, because the MoD has a Secretary of State, and then it has a team of four very good Ministers: one who is responsible for people and veterans; one who is responsible for procurement; one who does our business in the Lords and a number of other things; and I do operational policy.



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Q69 **Dave Doogan:** For people who are in service now—who are not veterans—are you content that the regime that looks after their best interests, and whether or not they suffer from any form of injury, is robust?

James Heappey: I am going to get the Minister for Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans to write to you.

Chair: You have made that point very clear.

Q70 **Gavin Robinson:** Good morning, Minister. When you write to us about the procurement issues that are—

James Heappey: I am not going to write to you; I am going to get the Minister for Defence Procurement to write to you about procurement.

Q71 **Gavin Robinson:** It is outside of your portfolio—I get it. But in December there was an order placed for thousands of NLAWs that will be delivered over the next three years. It was an order through Saab and Thales. When you ask for that correspondence to be sent, all of us who were on the visit would appreciate some detail on where you are at with the portfolio agreement, so that we have longevity of orders, sustained work for manufacturing and readiness of supply.

Minister, in fairness to you, unlike predecessors who have valiantly defended decisions when in office and criticised them subsequently, you are standing up for the Armed Forces in your role, but what I want to ask you about in the context of this question and the hollowing out of the Army is: the IR refresh was predicated on a 3% rise and it was announced that there was a Prime Minister in place who had indicated that there would be a 3% rise, and therefore that there was not only cushion but growth for the decisions that needed to be made. We are not clear that commitment pertains, are you?

James Heappey: The Prime Minister has never made that commitment.

Q72 **Gavin Robinson:** No. It was the former Prime Minister, who commissioned it.

James Heappey: The previous one. Absolutely.

Q73 **Gavin Robinson:** We are on the cusp of the publication of an IR refresh and yet we do not know the foundations upon which it will be structured. Do you?

James Heappey: There is a Budget coming.

Q74 **Gavin Robinson:** There is a Budget coming. Are you indicating that we will get clarity next week?

James Heappey: On defence spending, yes.

Q75 **Gavin Robinson:** Are you confident or disappointed?

James Heappey: Nice try. There have been some robust exchanges with the Treasury in public, and some even more robust exchanges behind closed doors. I can honestly tell you that I do not know the details of the



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settlement that has been done. I assume that it has been done because the book by now will have gone for independent verification.

Chair: We need to make progress. I call Derek Twigg.

Q76 **Derek Twigg:** Will you resign if you do not get what you ask for?

James Heappey: I cannot hold this Prime Minister to account for a pledge made by the previous one. Derek, the quote you refer to was on whether I would resign if Prime Minister Truss did not deliver on a promise that she had made to me personally. I absolutely would have done but, when I was in the process of deciding who to support in the leadership election last time, no one was offering those sorts of percentages. I cannot hold a Prime Minister to account for a promise they never made.

Q77 **Derek Twigg:** Can we just come to a couple of quick questions on something that we know is definitely within your remit and which is sort of connected to what we have just been discussing? On 22 January this year, the Defence Secretary gave an interview to *The Times*. The headline was, "'Hollowed-out' UK military can't send a division to war". The Secretary of State had a great quote: "We have not been able to deploy a warfighting division for decades." That was on 22 January. On 23 February, in answer to a question similar to one from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne, you said "The British Army already has a warfighting division, the 3rd (UK) Division, which has in excess of 10,000 troops." What changed in that month?

James Heappey: The point I was making earlier on around logistics and strategic enablers is a broader defence capability. The British Army has three brigades within the 3rd (United Kingdom) Division that are all equipped with the capability that allows them to do armoured manoeuvre. No one is pretending; almost all of that stuff is long overdue an upgrade. It is also important to note that, within the equipment pipeline, all of those upgrades are coming or under way. I think that the two quotes or the answers to the questions and the Secretary of State's quote are not mutually exclusive; there is a warfighting division, but, as we have just been discussing in the previous section of the evidence session, there are disinvestments in strategic enablers and logistics made since the end of the cold war that definitely make hollow our ability to project and sustain that division.

Q78 **Derek Twigg:** Let us just come to the direct quote from the Secretary of State again. As far as I know, he has not said it to you. You challenged it. Let me just read it out again: "We have not been able to deploy a warfighting division". Do you agree with that?

James Heappey: No, I do not, actually, not least because we did deploy a division to Iraq in 2003. We have a division's worth of—

Q79 **Derek Twigg:** So the Secretary of State was wrong then?

James Heappey: Derek, I have not read the full article and, in my experience—



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Q80 Derek Twigg: Do you not get the daily briefs on the newspapers?

James Heappey: In my experience, Ben is very, very knowledgeable and very careful about the language he uses.

Q81 Derek Twigg: So you disagree with the Secretary of State?

James Heappey: I do not recognise that we cannot deploy a division because we have done on a number of occasions.

Q82 Derek Twigg: How quickly could we deploy a division?

Mr Francois: That was 20 years ago.

James Heappey: Exactly, but—

Q83 Derek Twigg: How quickly could we deploy the division in Europe—a warfighting division of 10,000?

James Heappey: I know that it is frustrating for the Committee to hear, but the readiness states of the whole of the 3rd (UK) Division are, I'm afraid, not disclosable in public.

Q84 Dave Doogan: Is that because you are worried the enemy will find out how ready, or not ready, we are?

James Heappey: The readiness of all NATO force structures is not an open-source matter, and 3 (UK) Div sitting within the arc is part of those NATO force structures.

Derek Twigg: Chair, I will leave it there. I think enough has been said.

Q85 Chair: I think this is apples and pears. Back in 2003, the size of the UK Army was 110,000. We are heading towards 72,000. I am hoping that that is something that might be reflected—

James Heappey: A different issue. The 3rd (United Kingdom) Division continues to exist. We have said that at the Dispatch Box in response to a number of questions from people. There is no doubt that it needs updating. There is no doubt that we intend to maintain that divisional capability and, once the transformation programmes in the Army are delivered, that division will look very different and will be infinitely more capable. But it is also true, as we have discussed, that the strategic enablers are not there to move things as a consequence of decisions taken over the last 20, 30 years. That is what is meant when we talk about hollowing out.

Chair: Our closest NATO allies have a view on the British Army, which I think Richard is now going to pursue.

Q86 Richard Drax: I wish I could be gentler with you, Minister, but I am afraid I cannot on this point. Having served for nine years, as you know, I never thought I would hear our closest ally say, in effect, that we are a second-tier fighting force—or no longer a top-level fighting force is what, I think, the General said. In response, you heard about the hollowing out that Ben Wallace mentioned. He also said we have “fallen behind its peer



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group". That was his quote. Are we now a second-tier Army?

James Heapey: I do not think we are a second-tier Army, but I think the Secretary of State and I have both made a virtue over the last three years of being very honest about the consequences of—perfectly reasonable—decisions taken during the Iraq and Afghanistan years to disinvest in the capabilities that allow you to move large forces quickly.

Q87 **Richard Drax:** Is it not the classic historical mistake that human beings never accept that there could be another war on the scale of world war one or world war two? You mentioned Afghanistan in your earlier comment and the ability to regrow. You have served with great distinction. You know that regrowing battalions, aircraft carriers and squadrons takes years. Both of you have made that point very emphatically on training the Ukrainians. We are going to have the same problem if, God forbid, we get involved in this war in Russia.

Over the years, we have hollowed out all our Armed Forces. There were 150,000 in my day, and 5.2% was spent. It is now struggling on 2%. We are trying to get 3% and I still think that is criminally small. I know you are fighting all you can to increase it, but can you confirm that the cuts to the Armed Forces—the 10,000—will go ahead, or will that be stopped?

James Heapey: I will bring in Paul in a second to talk about the wider way we learn the lessons—

Richard Drax: Well, we don't—clearly.

James Heapey: I think we try to, but you make decisions given the resource available at the time and based on the threat that exists at the time to best meet the threat at that moment with what you have available. I am careful not to throw too much mud at those who have gone before, because I think they made very reasonable decisions given where we were at the time.

I also think that, even at the highest level, the way that defence spending has been prioritised against the public's appetite for spending in other parts of Government competence is probably also validated. But I have been making the point pretty consistently over the last year, so too has the Secretary of State—and we have had great flanking fire from many around this table—that the geostrategic situation is changing and that there is an argument for more.

Q88 **Chair:** We need to make progress.

James Heapey: Do you mind if I bring in Paul to talk about the IR process more generally?

Paul Wyatt: Happy to. As the Minister has said, we completed the previous IR. We are now conducting the IR refresh process. That is going to be conducted in a budget-aware way, so it is being done in the knowledge of the budgetary negotiation process. That attends to exactly those kinds of questions.



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As the Minister said, there should be a follow-on Command Paper that will address the lessons we have learned and will look at the force structure considerations that are necessary, as far as that is concerned. We are looking at the composition of the force and the force structure considerations, including sustainability, as part of that refresh process.

Richard Drax: I would love to stay here for a lot longer, but I know the Chair wants to move on because time is short.

- Q89 **Chair:** Jens Stoltenberg, the head of NATO, is increasing the size of the rapid response force from 40,000 to 300,000. I hope we are going to make a contribution to that. Time prevents us from asking what our components might be, but that gives a massive indication to all NATO members that perhaps they need to up their defence posture, including their land forces, and numbers.

James Heappey: Allan or Paul could probably talk about that. Do you want to talk about the NATO force structure, as much as we are able to?

- Q90 **Chair:** Maybe you could write to us and tell us what that will be in advance of Jens Stoltenberg's request.

Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall: The only thing to confirm is that, at the moment, that will be an indicative, because NATO has not settled on the construction of that, but we will offer where NATO has got to.

- Q91 **Sarah Atherton:** I am going to drill down on Army numbers. You are going to have a Defence in a Competitive Age refresh. Are we going to have a Future Soldier refresh?

James Heappey: I don't know. That would be a subsequent activity beyond the Command Paper. It is highly likely that we will do a Command Paper refresh following the IR. Whether Future Soldier needs to be refreshed will depend on what we conclude in the Command Paper.

- Q92 **Sarah Atherton:** Okay, so that begs the question: where are we going to be with Army numbers? What are Army numbers currently?

James Heappey: There are 75,933 trained regular personnel.

- Q93 **Sarah Atherton:** And if needed, how many could be deployed tomorrow?

James Heappey: I'm afraid that's not a number that we can share.

Chair: Is it a secret?

- Q94 **Sarah Atherton:** What percentage, then, are on the sick?

James Heappey: As I understand it, about 10% are non-deployable because of long-term injury, and there will be a number who are ill. Let me go back to the point about wargoers. Take, for example, dental fitness. Not to deprioritise the importance of the health of your teeth, but if you were to look at the readiness stats, you would get a lot of people who are awaiting a dental appointment. If the balloon went up, we would send those people to war without having seen a dentist.



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Chair: That's good to know. The nation can rest easy knowing that.

James Heappey: That is the key point. Whether it is people or equipment, that is a really important point: your dashboard around how ready you are in peacetime is very different from what you throw into the fight if the situation requires.

Q95 **Sarah Atherton:** The Future Soldier concept relies on Army reserves. You are looking at 30,000, and you currently have 25,000. I believe that number has gone down. What are you doing to encourage recruitment and retention in the reserves?

James Heappey: I should quickly note—forgive me if this has not been updated—that for the last year or so, I haven't had recruitment or the reserves in my portfolio, but I do have force structure, so I can probably comment to a degree.

All three services have reserve recruitment programmes running at the moment. I think the requirements of Future Soldier specifically require more reservists to be available at readiness as integral parts of the Army's war-fighting ORBAT. There are parts of the reserve structure that have been quickly able to switch to that requirement, and I think we can deliver it with some confidence. Frankly, Sarah, there are other parts of the reserve that don't fill out that ORBAT in a resilient way quite so well.

The questions that causes one to ask are twofold. First, do we need to look again at terms and conditions for reservists in order to get people into reserve service in a way that allows them to be integral to the war-fighting ORBAT? Secondly, in some capabilities, did we make judgments in Future Solider that we would need to look at again? We are very open and honest about the fact that we might need to do so.

Q96 **Sarah Atherton:** Allan, I just want to ask a question about tranche 1 Typhoons while I have the opportunity to speak. In world war two, it took 18 months to train Lancaster bomber crews—that was in world war two. For tranche 1 Typhoons in the current configuration—not with the Centurion uplift, or whatever—how long will it take for a Ukrainian to train to fly one?

Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall: You said 18 months—I don't think you meant 18 months for Lancasters.

Sarah Atherton: Yes.

Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall: 18 months?

Sarah Atherton: Yes.

Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall: Okay, good. For the UK crews, it takes nine to 12 months—they are trained on all marks of Typhoon on a suite of roles. As we work through the PM's statement that we are going to train Ukrainians, we are looking to tailor that to make it as efficient as possible, both in the impact on our capacity and to get the Ukrainians ready when we choose to do that. We will train them specifically in the things a



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tranche 1 needs to do. I expect it will be in the order of four to six months.

It will be a reduced course. Again, just to be clear, we have not finalised exactly how we will do it, but the intent is to try to not involve the military flying training system—I know you have been looking at that—and to give them a brief introduction into the UK airspace language and procedures, and then do an abridged course on the Typhoon—

Chair: That tallies in with what we heard from BAE Systems, where they said you could take a MiG-29 Ukrainian pilot and, within three months, they could be flying a Typhoon. Useful to know and take away for next time you have a conversation with the Prime Minister. Let us turn to NATO expansion. Sorry, Minister, you have been very generous with your time—we are almost there.

James Heappey: I think we're good for another five, if that's alright.

Chair: Fantastic. Robert, let's do NATO, and then we'll do another subject.

Q97 **Robert Courts:** Very quickly, NATO accession for Sweden and Finland, which has obviously hit some obstacles, is clearly very important in strategic and capability terms. We have just released a report on this, in which we recommend the Government continue to liaise particularly with Hungary, and Turkey, of course, to make sure we remove those obstacles. What are Government doing on that?

James Heappey: The Government have been engaged keenly at both Head of Government and Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary levels in shaping the politics and diplomacy around accession. Forgive me, Rob, did you ask me about Finland and Sweden?

Robert Courts: Yes. Finland and Sweden's accession and the need to—

James Heappey: For a moment, I thought you might have asked me about Ukraine, which is an entirely different issue.

We have been working hard on that. One advantage of the Secretary of State's longevity in office is that he has relationships around Europe that mean that he can be quite persuasive. We remain very excited about the accession, and we hope it can all happen at or by Vilnius; however, even if it doesn't happen at that point, it is inevitable that it will happen at some point soon. We will continue to work towards it. Putin should take no solace at all from any delay, if there were any, because Finland and Sweden will accede to NATO, and that will be arguably the biggest strategic failure of his invasion of Ukraine.

Q98 **Chair:** Thank you for that. You mentioned Ukraine. It's not going to be joining NATO any time soon, much as we would like that. Could I ask you to take away the idea—this is not a Committee position, although some agree—that Ukraine, and indeed Poland, could be invited to join the Joint Expeditionary Force?

You are very familiar with this concept: it was set up by the United



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Kingdom in 2014; like-minded nations sharing protocols, doctrines and going on exercises. Again, this has political power to show that we are going to stay with Ukraine. I simply ask that—maybe a great announcement could be made at Vilnius at the NATO summit.

James Heappey: I think Allan was quite keen to come back in.

Air Vice Marshal Allan Marshall: Ukraine joining has been explored. The JEF nations have discussed it and they have formally written back to Ukraine—we can give you a copy of that—but membership of the JEF was not agreed at this stage, but that does not preclude operating together as you described.

Q99 **Chair:** So, tentative steps that are heading forward—that is, I think, what we need to do. I hope it is not because we are spooked again by what Putin says.

James Heappey: No, it would be more to do with the fact that there is a geographical cohesion to the JEF. Ukraine has 10 of its best friends in the JEF, undoubtedly. While there is huge sympathy for Ukraine and appetite to do stuff with Ukraine, I think the reflection of the JEF—

Q100 **Chair:** But where is the threat now? It's Russia. That is perhaps where we need to focus, and if NATO can't be there—I've made the point. I'm really pleased to hear that it's been discussed.

James Heappey: You will not find 10 more front-footed nations over the Russian threat than the JEF.

Chair: You are making my point. Which is why I think that including Poland and Ukraine would be a welcome step forward. Now to our final, main, chunky subject of the day, but no small one. Mark.

Q101 **Mr Francois:** Minister, one of the reasons why we are pushing you so hard on readiness is, first, that it is in your portfolio. Secondly, you should be aware that the Committee has been asking for weeks for a private briefing on readiness from the Department, and we have been continually fobbed off. Perhaps you will take that one away, and your civil servants might learn a lesson from it. You are more than capable of looking after yourself, James, as you have proved this morning.

James Heappey: You were kind enough to mention that as we passed each other yesterday evening. It is already a line of inquiry that I have passed on.

Q102 **Mr Francois:** So will we get that briefing soon, imminently, presently?

James Heappey: Let me come back to you. I am aware that this is a very knowledgeable and experienced Committee. When you have been out and about, we routinely brief you to a level that we would not be able to do on camera, on the record. My hope would be that we are able—as we do regularly—to take you into our confidence to a degree and to brief you more fully on some of these things—

Q103 **Mr Francois:** Point made. Last set of questions. Ajax. You are not the



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Procurement Minister—

James Heappey: Thank heavens!

Chair: You are on the record.

Mr Francois: Touché! Ajax, however, is meant to be an important part of your bat, the Army. It is delayed. It was meant to be in service from 2017, and that affects your force posture, so you have a locus in the matter. It was meant to be in in 2017 and you have spent £4 billion to date.

GD is pressing you to restart payments and said in its annual report that it expects to be paid again by the end of March. The PUS told us two weeks ago that it would not get a penny until you had an IOC for Ajax. Can you tell us today what the revised initial operational capability for Ajax is, and what the full operational capability for Ajax is?

James Heappey: I don't know what the definition of IOC is; I have simply not been engaged in that process. FOC, I think, is pretty obvious: it is the full fielding of Ajax within a field force in an operational—

Q104 **Mr Francois:** Could you start with FOC and work backwards?

James Heappey: Yes, but IOC for some capabilities is something different from others. For some, it is a squadron, and for others it is whatever. What I would say, Mark, is that what I am hearing is that, for all its issues—those are well documented, and I had endless sympathy for Jeremy Quin, and now Alex Chalk, as they had to wade through that—

Mr Francois: We had slightly less sympathy.

James Heappey: I know you did. What that system will deliver for the land force is very significant. It is going to need to rewin people's enthusiasm, because it has had a pretty difficult route to service, but Ajax is an impressive platform—I just can't wait for it to be in the field force. At the moment, Warrior is filling the gap—

Q105 **Mr Francois:** Minister, I interrupt only because you told us you have to go. We are listening to you, but you still, today, cannot give the Committee the date when Ajax will enter initial service. You cannot do that yet.

James Heappey: I cannot, no.

Q106 **Mr Francois:** We were promised an update on this. The Department issued a WMS a week ago, which was one paragraph long. You might as well not have bothered. Will you take that back to your colleague?

A couple of last questions. With regard to Ajax, the Secretary of State commissioned Clive Sheldon QC—as he then was, KC as he now is—to do an independent review, not into whether or not you can solve the vibration problems, but into the flow of management information—what a politician would call a “who knew what when” review.

We understand that he completed his task and that that review was



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submitted to the MoD over a month ago. It is now going through a “fact-checking process”. PUS intimated that we would have the results of that review by Easter. The House rises for the Easter recess on 30 March. Will that review be published—ideally, unredacted—by that time?

James Heappey: I understand that our desire is to publish it without redactions—

Mr Francois: Thank you.

James Heappey: But I cannot confirm when the finalised version will be issued. Two reasons: first, I am just not in the loop on that process.

Q107 **Mr Francois:** James, I have never met Mr Sheldon, but I understand that his reputation is absolutely unimpeachable. You will understand, however, that the longer that this report sits in the MoD, the more some cynics will fear that it will be watered down. So the sooner we see it the better. Will you take that one away as well, please? We have given you a long shopping list.

James Heappey: I absolutely will. David, the permanent secretary, came to give you evidence, and he is a good man—he is not the sort of person to try to play games with the Committee.

Q108 **Mr Francois:** He is a good man. He was using words like “imminent”, and that was two weeks ago. “Imminent” does not last forever. Again, have we made the point on that one?

James Heappey: You have.

Q109 **Chair:** We are imminently coming to the end of our time. I have two final points to make. First, one on the Odesa grain deal to take away. The Committee visited the port. It is sad to see that still, even today, only one fifth of the grain is getting out. Russia is now threatening to pull out of the grain deal.

I ask as a P5 nation whether we can do more. It is affecting the Ukraine economy that we cannot get all those grain ships out. It is affecting Africa and the famine. It is affecting the cost of living crisis here. Please can we look at a new UN deal, which Britain leads, to see an independent maritime force able to escort those ships out? Turkey is on board for that—I spoke to the Foreign Minister. I just slide that across the table.

My final point is on the wider picture of calling for an increased Defence budget. You made the point about resilience, but we would make the point that half of the UK’s GDP is internationally facing. If the world out there gets more unsettled and the threats increase, our entire Budget—our entire economy and prosperity—is then affected. That is the justification to the British people for why we should be increasing Defence spending to 3%. That would help all the Departments, not just the MoD.

Again, I ask that to be considered, as we consider not just the Budget, but the integrated review refresh coming up imminently.

James Heappey: I suspect we both preach to the choir on that.

Q110 **Chair:** I think we are.

James Heappey: Before you bring down the gavel, may I make a point? I hope the Committee will add its thanks to this. It is International Women's Day: there are tens of thousands of servicewomen and female Defence civil servants who do amazing work to keep our country safe, so today, can we just say thank you to them all?

Committee Members: Hear, hear!

Chair: May I invite Sarah to make a quick comment on that? She led a most profound report, one of the most impactful ones we have done.

Sarah Atherton: I would like to share and echo that, James, as a servicewoman myself and as someone who chaired that report. I think that the MoD has made great strides to improve. I think you can do better, and I will be on to that towards Christmas. I thank all servicewomen out there on behalf of the Committee and of Parliament.

Committee Members: Hear, hear!

Chair: Thank you for that spirited and informative session. That brings our Committee hearing to a close.