

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific, HC 183

Tuesday 21 March 2023

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Robert Courts; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 133-155

Witnesses

[I:](#) Baroness Goldie, Minister of State, Ministry of Defence; Nick Gurr, Director, International Security, MoD; Brigadier Adrian Reilly, Head of International Security, MoD; Shimon Fhima, Director of Strategic Programmes, MoD.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Goldie, Nick Gurr, Brigadier Adrian Reilly, and Shimon Fhima.

Q133 Chair: Welcome to this Defence Committee hearing on the Indo-Pacific. Welcome back Baroness Goldie. It is good to see you again. We now have Nick Gurr with us, who is the director of international security at the Ministry of Defence, as well as Brigadier Adrian Reilly, who is the head of international security, and Shimon Fhima, who is director of strategic programmes, also at the MoD. Thank you for your time this morning.

We have just had the integrated review. Many of us were perhaps expecting an update on the Pacific tilt, given our focus on Ukraine. I will begin with a general question as to how we then balance that, given the fact that we are not going to have any more ships, planes, or tanks, and the Army is not going to increase in size. We know that. How are we going to manage, with the scale of the Armed Forces we have, to not only look after an insecure environment but tilt to the Indo-Pacific?

Baroness Goldie: Certainly. I would respond by saying that, as the integrated review refresh identified, we have two separate issues here, but they are not mutually exclusive. The refresh identified that our Euro-Atlantic security obligation is certainly a priority for us in the short to medium term. It also identified that the Indo-Pacific tilt, which we have delivered on—and actually gone beyond what we anticipated in 2021—continues to be a highly significant area of interest for us. Indeed, the refresh itself identified that, and it identified that this is an area of extraordinary tumult. There are competing geopolitical tensions. There are activities that we, and other like-minded partners and allies, might find questionable and objectionable. Therefore, we have to be sure that, with our allies and partners, we can continue to build on what we have done.

Some significant work has taken place. Since the Indo-Pacific tilt was first announced, we have had the carrier strike group. I think what surprised us about the carrier strike group was its universal appeal out in that region. The number of requests we had for the carrier to dock, be boarded and convene meetings was quite extraordinary. I do not think we had realised—

Q134 Chair: Sorry to interrupt. We are very familiar with what the carrier strike group did, and it was impressive. But it has not changed China's behaviour whatsoever. It has shown that we have tilted to the Indo-Pacific, but we now have one of the carriers stuck in a dry dock, which has limited how we can use the carrier strike group in the future.

My question is to do with capability. We understand the threats, and that the situation is advancing. We also understand the commitment that Britain is now making towards that. I am asking you how are you going to do it in reality? For example, when is the next carrier strike group going to go to the Indo-Pacific?



Baroness Goldie: The carrier strike group was a major part of our tangible demonstration of the tilt. We have augmented that with, for example, our two permanently deployed craft, Tamar and Spey, which have been very popular in the region. Again, I think we have been surprised at the response, but Tamar and Spey, under Operation Woodwall—we can give details of that to the Committee—have been very active, which has been generating a lot of good will. We also work with a network presence and an enhanced British defence staff presence, which we now have augmented out there. We have very strong bilateral relationships with Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Korea and Vietnam, and, of course, we work with these pivotal multilateral fora, which may be ASEAN, the Five Powers defence arrangement or Five Eyes. We have a strong mix of relationships that are absolutely critical to what we do in the area. A further carrier strike group will go out. I can't be specific about date, but that is in the planning.

The important point, to respond to your question, is that we made clear that our intensifying activity in the region—this has been made manifest very recently, of course, by the AUKUS statement, which is an impressive demonstration on a trilateral basis of how we want to contribute to security and stability in the area—is, importantly, not directed at any one nation. You mentioned China, Mr Chairman; in so far as China is concerned, I would say that there is a potentially positive implication in there, in that China has so much it can offer the rest of the world, and where that is positive and intended to co-operate and be helpful, we respond to that. However, we are equally very clear that if China traduces international law, breaches human rights obligations or engages in destabilising activity in the region, we will respond—

Q135 **Chair:** But it is doing all those things. I am a little concerned, if I may push back here, that you are saying this is not about China. When are we going to say, "Yes, this is about China. China is the spoiler in the Indo-Pacific. We would not be doing this tilt if it wasn't for what China is doing"?

Baroness Goldie: As the integrated review refresh makes clear, we are engaged in a regional enhancement of presence. We cannot do this on our own, Mr Chairman. We have to do it with allies and partners. But part of this is not just what fire you can bring to the game; part of it is how you strengthen relationships and how you seek to influence. It is the case, for example, that the AUKUS announcement does not aim specifically at China; it is aimed at anyone who is minded to disrupt the international order and breach international law in the area.

Q136 **Chair:** Okay. I read from page 3 of the integrated review refresh: "China poses an epoch-defining challenge to the type of international order we want to see". That is very powerful language from any integrated review. Mr Gurr, you are director of international security. Are we at the foothills of a new cold war?

Nick Gurr: We are trying very hard to avoid seeing it in those sorts of terms, because, as the integrated review refresh does make clear, there



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are also some opportunities around the relationship with China. However, as the paper says, Chair, it is very clear that we will focus, and the Ministry of Defence will play a part in helping to protect the nation against a whole range of adversaries and challenges.

As you have just pointed out, China is referred to as a challenge in the document. We will also work very hard with other like-minded allies and partners, and that is not just our traditional relationships with the Americans and Five Eyes and countries like that; since the integrated review itself was published, we have also developed much stronger relationships, as the Minister said, with Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam—a whole range of countries. There is something about making sure we are not alone in confronting the challenges and that we work with others who see things in a similar way, although not necessarily on everything. There is also an element around seeking to engage with China where we can, although, from a defence perspective, I think we would admit we do find that challenging.

Chair: Okay. We will come back to that subject. Let us now move on to something that I think we have all encouraged and support, but there are still questions about it: AUKUS. John, do you want to take us forward?

Q137 **John Spellar:** We have talked about the response to the challenge of China. Given the timescale for AUKUS to come to fruition, do we anticipate that that will in any way in the near or immediate future modify China's behaviour?

Baroness Goldie: Going back to what has now emerged as a kind of common theme, you quoted from the integrated review refresh, Chair, but I am looking at paragraph 19.vii, which is on page 13. It is quite clear about how we will combine "national security protections in those areas where Chinese Communist Party actions pose a threat to our people, prosperity and security", but, very specifically: "we will deepen our cooperation and increase alignment with both our core allies and a wider group", and, "we will engage directly with China...in international fora so that we leave room for open, constructive and predictable relations". That encapsulates our holistic attitude to China.

On Mr Spellar's specific question, AUKUS follows from that—it was generated by Australia obviously, which had a particular desire to enhance its capability with the addition of nuclear-propelled submarines. We are very pleased, as is the United States, to be two of the three partners in this trilateral arrangement and contributing our experience and expertise—as manifest by our industrial prowess—to this endeavour. But that is only one part of what will be a contributor, hopefully, to enhancing security and stability in the area.

I referred earlier to the critical relationships through ASEAN, the Five Powers defence arrangements and the Five Eyes, not to mention the important bilateral arrangements that we have. They all strengthen states within the region to accept that there is risk and challenge and to be amenable to advice about how to address that. I think that goes to the



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core of what the integrated review refresh is talking about, that we do this with allies and partners, so AUKUS is important—but it would be wrong to think that AUKUS is one singular string to the bow, as it were.

Q138 John Spellar: Thank you for that, but AUKUS is not just—there is a danger that all the focus is on this—a nuclear-submarine deal, significant as that is. Surely a key area, one that we are all having to face up to, particularly after the lessons of Ukraine, is supply-chain resilience. That is partly about industrial capacity and partly about storage, but it is also—in this particular area—about crucial minerals, and the ability and capacity to refine them. Would you care to expand on that at all? Nick Gurr might have some comments.

Nick Gurr: All those potential areas of vulnerability are recognised by us and by our allies, partners and friends. The sort of areas that you described—supply-chain security, the need to safeguard critical minerals—are things that we not only think about ourselves, including how we will become more resilient, but talk to the Japanese, Americans and others about. They have very similar concerns.

Q139 Robert Courts: I want to come in on that point. We have talked about the importance of safeguarding supply chains and logistics, and this is partly a reflection on the question we were talking about a moment ago—the tilt to the Indo-Pacific and the resources that we have. I am conscious of the question that John Spellar asked about ensuring that AUKUS is not the entire thing.

I am looking at the IISS report, which talks about the importance of distance and maintaining the logistical sense of communications with the Indo-Pacific region: “The reduction of UK airlift by the retirement of the C-130 Hercules transport aircraft risks slowing the speed of deployment and resupply by air, in particular within the region.” What do you have to say about that? The loss of the Hercules threatens everything you are trying to do with the tilt and with AUKUS and supply chains, does it not?

Brigadier Reilly: A number of questions sit inside that—the logistics chain necessity in the event of conflict, and what that looks like. We probably have to assume that the UK would be part of a broader coalition with partners in the event of a conflict.

Q140 Robert Courts: We will be relying on our partners to fill in the loss of airlift capacity that we have through losing Hercules.

Brigadier Reilly: I don’t think that is what I am saying, Mr Courts. There are a number of different strengths that other partners will bring, and we would have to be part of the coalition because, necessarily, the idea that the UK would engage directly in a conflict with an Asian power is one that we would have to step through a number of decisions.

There are global capabilities in the UK military that the UK could choose to employ and could actually sustain at distance. There is a difference here between the Indo-Pacific region, and the global challenge of China. I think we have got to differentiate between what those things are. Historically,

the UK is well placed in a number of bases around the world, because of our history, to be able to project power and sustain power.

Q141 **Robert Courts:** I don't disagree with any of that, but we can do less of it if we don't have Hercules. That is my point.

Brigadier Reilly: I think that depends on how you see any potential conflict. The idea that the military is the only lever, or even possibly the principal lever, is one that you could question.

Nick Gurr: I wonder if it is worth saying a few words about what we are doing to try and make sure that our logistics capability and our ability to project into the Indo-Pacific region is strengthened. Adrian has touched on some of this already.

The development of the defence hub in Oman will give us reach into the western Indian Ocean. Of course, we have got permanently deployed assets in the Indo-Pacific that we haven't had before. We have got arrangements with allied nations, where we can draw on some of their support—not just with the Americans; we have facilities in Singapore.

There are things like the treaty that we have just signed with the Japanese. It was signed by the Prime Minister earlier on this year. That is also about how we work together more effectively in the region. That reinforces the point that Adrian was making—we have got these enabling agreements that we have been reaching with other countries who are present there, which will help with our logistical requirements.

Q142 **Robert Courts:** But, essentially, I think you are admitting the point that I am making. Enabling agreements with other countries mean we are going to be relying on allies to make good the shortfall that we have through lack of airlift, which is precisely what I am drawing your attention to. Do you accept that?

Nick Gurr: On the lack of airlift point, I am not an expert. If there is a specific point on that, we probably need to write to you.

What I am saying to you is that how we work together collectively with allies and partners is a collective endeavour, rather than a specific one for us. They look to us for support as well, using some of our facilities and assets in the region.

Q143 **Robert Courts:** The point that the IISS report is making is: "The reduction of UK airlift by the retirement...risks slowing the speed of deployment." Even if you are dealing with other—yes, we have got Oman, but if you have got less aircraft, you are going to be doing it more slowly, aren't you?

Baroness Goldie: Chair, I am not briefed specifically on our aircraft capability. We can offer to write to the Committee on that.

Q144 **Chair:** Yes. We have wandered a little bit down a cul-de-sac. I will come back to Robert in a second on the Quad.

Just to pursue this question, and as you are going to come back to us,



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there is a problem with single-stick and multiple-stick parachute drops out of the A400M, which is why the Hercules is so important. Maybe you could just, in your reply, say where things are with the A400M. I understand the Parachute Regiment cannot use the A400M in the same way that they were using the Hercules. That is the dilemma.

The second question I have is related to AUKUS, but it is on procurement. How many are we expecting to build in the AUKUS class—the SSN-AUKUS? And will the Tomahawks be fired horizontally or vertically?

If you don't have those answers—understandably, you might not—we would be interested to learn them.

Baroness Goldie: What I can say to the Committee is that there is no specific number identified at the moment for the number of AUKUS successor submarines that will be built for the United Kingdom. As for the detail of weapons systems to accompany that, I have no information, but I will make investigations and will give the Committee what information we can.

Chair: That is very kind. Let's get back to the strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

Q145 **Robert Courts:** I would like to talk about India. Given the prioritisation of the tilt, the strategic importance of the area, and particularly India's economic importance, what are you doing to draw India closer to the UK and her allies? I am conscious that this is a particularly tricky issue, given India's long-established and principled neutrality.

Baroness Goldie: Maybe I should lead on that. I suppose what we are building on is the UK-India comprehensive strategic partnership, which was launched in 2021 through the Prime Minister and Prime Minister announcement of the 2030 UK-India roadmap. That was underlined by the joint statement issued as part of the visit of the former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, to India in April 2022.

Since then, we have maintained close contact. We are working on that strategic partnership, and there is close engagement. I will let one of my colleagues comment in further detail on that. We want to support India's G20 presidency, and we want to advance negotiations on a free trade agreement. We want to strengthen—indeed, we are strengthening—our defence and security partnership, and we are progressing collaboration on technology. We are leading the maritime security pillar of India's Indo-Pacific oceans initiative. Maybe one of my colleagues would like to fill in some more detail.

Nick Gurr: I can start, and I am sure Shimon will add. One of the things we have been doing with India is trying to develop a series of baseline agreements that will make it easier for us to do business with the Indians. We haven't traditionally done a lot of things with India beyond single-service connections, which are still quite strong from historical times.

What I mean by that is that we signed with the Indians at the end of last year a logistics MoU, which enables our ships, for example, to use Indian facilities much more easily. We signed with them another agreement on



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the exchange of information over maritime shipping so that we share information about what is going on, in particular around the western Indian ocean. We have also been reaching agreements on how to work together in science and technology. Those are a series of enabling frameworks, and there is also something in train on training and education. That has cleared away some of the bureaucratic undergrowth that has inhibited the way we worked with the Indians in the past.

We have also significantly increased our high-level contacts with India, including among the chiefs of defence. The Secretary of State has been speaking to his Indian counterpart. We are building relationships and trust at that level. The other element has been to talk to India about joint capability development. On that, I will ask Shimon to come in.

Q146 Robert Courts: Before Shimon comes in on that, you mentioned business briefly. We have heard evidence that India would like to move away from its reliance on Russian kit, partly for strategic reasons and partly for capability reasons. Is that the type of thing you are looking at?

Nick Gurr: India regards Russia as a reliable supplier and feels that, in the past, when it has needed equipment for whatever crisis it has faced, the Russians have been there in a way that, in Indian eyes, the West has not always been. The Russian supply of equipment to India is very well established. What India is seeing now is that that is more challenged, as Russia has found that more and more of its effort is having to go on maintaining its own equipment. The Indians have been thinking about what that means for them. Separately, we have felt for a while that there is scope for a much more mutually beneficial and rich capability dialogue with India. There are a number of specific areas that we have been taking forward as part of that. As I say, Shimon can talk about that.

Shimon Fhima: Coincidentally, as we speak at the moment, there is an India-UK defence industry workshop looking at those opportunities. One of the challenges for UK industries is that, from an Indian perspective, there is a real drive on made in India. Therefore, from a UK perspective, there is a real challenge around the IP side of things. Obviously, there is an understandable worry that if you share the IPs and put design authorities in a certain place, there is a risk that when it comes to exports the UK is not as competitive as we could be in those markets.

Coming back to your original question, there is no question in my mind that, when we look at the history, what is important is that these relationships need to be long term, particularly if they are quite personal. They need to be built over quite a long period of time. When we look back over the history, the challenge is that we have not always institutionalised some of those relationships. Therefore, the personal relationships have gone and the idea of seeing some results has not always materialised as we would want.

We believe that core capability collaboration on defence capabilities is critical. We know that India is really particular on that. What we are looking to do is, through organisational structures such as defence



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partnership India—which is essentially a UK-India structural relationship—and through some of the activities that we are doing around combat air engine capability and areas of maritime, to really demonstrate our commitment and that we are there for the long term rather than in a cyclical cycle.

Q147 **Robert Courts:** Thank you. That is very helpful. I have another question, perhaps for the Minister, on the Quad. Is there an ambition to join the Quad?

Baroness Goldie: The partners are very important to us. They are probably four of our closest partners. We do not have any plans at the moment to seek to join the Quad. We are in the fortunate position that we have very strong bilateral relationships with Australia, India, Japan and the United States. In a sense, we know that structure, for them, is very important in the region. Perhaps we are fortunate that we are enjoying all the fruits of that very close relationship individually with these countries, and that benefits us. We want to look at options for perhaps closer practical co-operation with Quad members on our shared priorities. But that would be supplementing what I have already referred to—these important and already strong bilateral partnerships.

Q148 **Chair:** To pursue that a second, is the Indo-Pacific and the South China sea going to get more or less dangerous in the next 10 years?

Baroness Goldie: Probably it is going to get more tense. Whether that equates to becoming more dangerous is a different question.

Q149 **Chair:** Okay. I understand why you have to hesitate—you do not want to make headlines—but for everybody else watching this, analysing this and living and breathing this, the world as a whole is getting more dangerous, not less. You have President Xi visiting President Putin and providing tacit support for what Putin is doing in Ukraine. The whole reason for the Indo-Pacific tilt is that that neck of the woods is getting more dangerous, not less. In terms of the strategic thinking that we should be investing in—bringing together like-minded nations, particularly Japan and India, who are the big ones on the block, so to speak, and who are on our side, if you like—it would absolutely make sense, surely, to then advance the Quad and see Britain and France invited to join that alliance.

Baroness Goldie: I think I would respond, Mr Chairman, with the greatest respect, by refusing, or declining, to use the word “dangerous”. What the IR refresh made clear was that the Indo-Pacific is a theatre of growing geopolitical importance. It is also a theatre of growing economic importance. That is very material to our interests in the area. We have a very high value of trade passes through there; I think, from memory, that the figure is about \$220 billion—maybe someone can correct me on that.

Obviously, these trade routes are important for the world. I think 40% of trade goes through the Malacca strait. I think 20% of world trade goes through the South China sea. There are threats, as recognised by the integrated review refresh, but there are opportunities. What we are in the business of doing with all our relationships, whether they are through

some of these multilateral fora or whether they are some of these strong bilateral relationships, is working out how we can actually optimise our presence in that region. That optimum presence is designed partly to address geopolitical tensions, hopefully in a positive sense, but, also, the other side of that is to assist with keeping trade free flowing and keeping trade operating on a fluid basis without threat.

Q150 **Chair:** I think there is more agreement and alignment between what we are saying and what you are saying. The question is, what is the vehicle that gets us there? You absolutely want to keep the South China sea open and free, but that is not what we are seeing from China promoting its nine-dotted line. We are vulnerable and exposed because of our investment in globalisation. The world is being closed down somewhat because of what China is doing—perhaps exploiting the limits and our inability to patrol the international rules-based order, much of which is evident in the freedom on the seas itself. That is why I go back to the point of where NATO is for the South China sea. Where is the strategic thinking that brings together like-minded nations? The Quad seems to be the obvious alliance that is worth advancing and developing, bringing together India and Japan specifically with Australia, the United States and France, which has a huge investment in that area, and of course Britain because we are committed ourselves.

Baroness Goldie: It is an interesting point. I do accept, Chairman, that there is more that unites us than divides us. I am merely anxious to avoid any hostage to fortune. We are cultivating, generating, strengthening and deepening very important relationships in the area. As to whether a NATO equivalent will ever emerge in that area, I do not know. It may not because NATO exists—

Chair: Well, let's pursue those regional engagements a bit more. Derek, do you want to take us forward on that?

Q151 **Derek Twigg:** Could you maybe let the Committee know what the UK can specifically do to deter pressure and aggression from China on our regional partners?

Baroness Goldie: By standing up with our partners and allies in international fora like the United Nations to condemn activity that is completely unacceptable. For example, China has thought to appropriate parts of the South China sea by populating islands that have emerged and, indeed, militarily basing these islands. We find that unacceptable. We said we think that is a breach of the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, and we are not alone in calling that out.

Derek Twigg: But it went ahead anyway.

Baroness Goldie: Well, they did it, and we called it out. What we have made clear is that we are very clear, as all our partners are, that we value the same respect for international law and that we do not expect trade to be obstructed. Fortunately, to date, trade continues to flow, even through these choke points I was referring to. I think one of the reasons for that is China is acutely aware that it has a reputation globally to seek to uphold,



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and it understands that the aggregate presence of all the like-minded nations we have in the area—some of them regional states in that geography, other friends and partners of these states—is a powerful presence. I think that is actually, in its own way, a very powerful signal to China that there is activity that we do not expect it to engage in, and we would not expect trade routes to be obstructed or disrupted.

Q152 Derek Twigg: What is it, practically, that we can do in the region, not just at international forums and by standing up and saying, “Your behaviour is poor. We don’t agree with this. That is very aggressive”? What actually, practically, can we do in the region to deter this sort of aggressive and pressurised approach that China is taking? We have seen what happened in Australia, for instance. We have seen the sort of things going on into Japan. Taiwan is always there in the background, of course. What is it, practically, that we can do in the region?

Baroness Goldie: That is a really good question, and I will give a general answer and then pass to my expert colleagues here. What we can do in the region is what we are already doing, and we know how welcome our increased activity has been to the states within the geography. We can show ourselves to be there as a country that values international law. We can show ourselves to be like-minded to many of the states in that region. We know they are drawing comfort from that, and we can endeavour to use our other partners, whether that is the United States or France, to work together in the region. We have a programme, and I am sure my colleagues can comment on this, for increased exercises in the region, so that we are working together and getting to know each other better. We have bases; we have Brunei, Singapore, the British Overseas Territories and Diego Garcia. There is a lot of concerted activity, which I think is a powerful and important reminder to any state—it could be China or someone else—that we are working together shoulder to shoulder to do the right thing and uphold the correct things. I think that sends a powerful message. I will ask my colleagues to comment in more detail.

Nick Gurr: Just to add a little bit to that, I think most countries in the region are concerned about the region remaining stable and open, so that commerce, shipping and trade can go through and there is not a situation where big countries can tell smaller countries what to do—so the whole rules-based international system. We agree with that and the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

In terms of what we do practically, we make deployments. We have already talked about the two OPVs. They are there permanently, but it is not just those deployments that we made. We had aircraft down in Australia at the end of last year. We have had land-based exercises, including one in Japan quite recently. We exercise with our allies and show that we can work together and are interoperable with them. We are developing a network of friendships and partnerships, some of them with the existing regional architecture, such as ASEAN, where we are now observers through their expert working groups.



As the integrated review refresh said, we will shortly be applying for membership of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus. That is a regional grouping we are looking to engage with. We obviously engage with the Five Power defence arrangements for more than 50 years now, which cover a number of like-minded countries in south-east Asia, and we are looking to modernise how to approach challenges. With smaller nations that are more vulnerable, if you like, to coercion by bigger countries, we are looking to help them build their resilience, whether that is through assistance with their response to natural disasters or helping them cope with illegal fishing in their waters. We have been helping them understand maritime law and what their rights are under things like UNCLOS.

Building on the previous Committee session, for many countries, particularly in the Pacific, if you ask them what the biggest threat they fear is they would not say China—they would say climate change. We believe we have an offer there, from a defence perspective, to work with some of the countries in the region to help them become more resilient to climate change and better able to cope with its effects. If you put all those things together, what I would say is we are working with a whole range of different actors—some bilaterally. We mentioned the treaty with Japan and the arrangements with the Koreans and others. So we are working bilaterally and multilaterally, basically to show that we are a constructive partner to countries in the region who we believe share similar values and objectives. That is what we are trying to do in the region.

Brigadier Reilly: I think that part of our appeal, and why we have been welcomed back, is that we are not militarising the Indo-Pacific in a way that would be very unwelcome and that, for some country states, would mean choices that would probably push them closer to China, because that is an inevitable outcome. I think this is light-touch. It goes back to the Chair's earlier comment about how you balance your Atlantic challenge with what it is that we do in the Indo-Pacific.

This doesn't take huge numbers; this takes relationships. This takes the multiple networks that create a rich access. I am thinking back to the ideas around Operation Orbital. That would have been seen probably as not that significant a number of years ago, but it is now paying real dividend as a long-term relationship. It is about small numbers and investing in the things that matter to the nations at the far side. Digital hardening, institutional reforms, training activities, capability developments and all of that creates a much richer combination of people working together for security aims around the region itself. There is quite a lot that seems to be derived from quite a little input to the whole thing. Therefore, it is easy to question, "Is this working?" It feels like it to us at the moment.

Q153 **Chair:** Can I turn to our relationship with the United States specifically? They obviously have a huge presence in the Indo-Pacific. Their own national security review saw them tilt quite specifically to the area and this actually started during the Obama time. Can you just say what we



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are doing then to match—what we are doing to work with our closest security ally in the region?

Baroness Goldie: Yes, certainly. Can I just correct the record? When I mentioned the volume of trade the UK carries out, I underestimated it; it is \$250 billion. So, added reason for us wanting to—as my colleagues were indicating—get this right.

The United States is quite simply our most important strategic ally and we have a very deep relationship. That extends from intelligence to military and diplomatic co-ordination. And I think the inaugural deployment of the carrier strike group and the USS The Sullivans was a unique demonstration of our interoperability with the US.

The US is vital for partners if we are going to retain our collective technological edge in this new area of strategic competition. I think the AUKUS agreement illustrates our resolve to deepen integration on the development of joint capabilities and technology sharing as close allies. However, we are also working bilaterally with the US in developing next-generation capabilities to maintain that technological edge over our adversaries.

In the Indo-Pacific, we have got an ambitious exercise programme with the US. That ranges from exercise-specific partnership alongside the US Navy and Coastguard in the Philippines to participation in a huge, vast multilateral exercise; that is the Rim of the Pacific Exercise, or RIMPAC, in the Pacific. And our relationship with the United States Indo-Pacific Command, or USINDOPACOM, has evolved and matured to meet the challenges to us engaging in the Indo-Pacific region. I think the US is very important to that.

However, my colleagues may again be able to provide more detail.

Nick Gurr: I think that largely covers it, Minister. Chair, I am sure you will not be surprised to hear that we talk to the Americans at all levels about the Indo-Pacific region all of the time, whether it is at the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls or COCOM level with USINDOPACOM, or at the Pentagon level. No discussion gets very far with the US without getting on to this subject.

Brigadier Reilly: We have gone from the business of co-ordinating activities with US forces in the region to now having UK elements under US command and UK personnel embedded in US headquarters. So the interaction is really deepening.

Q154 **Chair:** That is really good to hear. We mentioned the carrier many times. I mean, it was profound—there is no doubt about it. It had a huge impact. The concern is that it was just a one-off. You mentioned HMS Spey and HMS Tamar. I mean, these are river-class patrol vessels; they are not—again—going to change China's behaviour.

Nobody underestimates the strength of the relationship we have with the United States. And I declare an interest here; I am a dual national. So I



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am aware of how closely we work. The question is this: are we prepared for what is actually coming over the hill, because the US has published its own national security strategy and identified China as the only nation with the intent and power to reshape the world order? That is why they are investing extra energy, not only into AUKUS but into the Quad itself.

I do not want to go back over old ground. I simply make the point again that I hope this is something, Minister, that you will take away—that this is worth exploring. Strategically, it would make sense for us to join that alliance, but also recognising, as stated by the United States, that they have huge concerns over China's coercive behaviour in the region. And we should stop pussyfooting around the wording that we use and call China out for what they are actually doing. At the moment, we seem to be too hesitant, simply because they command one fifth of the world's economy, but they are doing so on their own terms. And the real concern is that they are creating, with Russia, a post-West world order. That is why, in my personal view, President Xi is actually in Moscow at the time.

So the question is: what more can we do? Will it have an impact, perhaps on our maritime capabilities, as we look to the next 10 or 15 years? Type 31s—do we need to have more of these, in order to have permanent presence, working more closely with our US allies, in the Pacific?

Baroness Goldie: I think the answer has to be predicated on the overall HM Government strategy in the region and the specific contribution by MoD in helping to deliver that strategy. As you have said, Chairman, it is the case that Tamar and Spey are offshore patrol vessels, but it would be quite wrong to diminish the effect they have had in the region. They have been regarded by many of our bilateral friends and partners in the region as immensely important, and they have actually been doing, in their own way, some very heavy lifting. They are not obviously muscular, military-armed seacraft—that is not why they are out there—but the net effect of what they are achieving is quite extraordinary.

All I am saying is that we in MoD attempt to support the UK Government strategy for the region, which also involves trade and engagement with technology, research and STEM skills—all of that. We are a part of that, so we are endeavouring, within our capabilities and with our particular skills and attributes, to support that endeavour. I think we are making a good fist of doing that. Of course, there will always be the lurking question of whether there is more we should do or need to do, but that is why we engage so closely with our allies, and there is no closer ally than the United States.

Chair: Absolutely.

Nick Gurr: May I add one point, which I think is quite important? I know this evidence session is focused on the Indo-Pacific region, but it is very important to say for the record that China is not just a challenge in the Indo-Pacific region. It is a global challenge, and the conversation that we have been having about how we consider it and how we work with allies applies to Africa, Latin America and the rest of the world.

Chair: It is a point that is very well made indeed, and thank you for addressing this. Let's turn from one close security ally to another that has received a bit of a renaissance in our friendship. John, over to you.

Q155 **John Spellar:** I think this is a useful final question. This Committee, as you are probably aware, has been working very well and very effectively with our French counterparts, and we have a better understanding of the depth of the military and defence co-operation that is undertaken, particularly military to military between ourselves and France. Do you think we could make more use of working with French assets in the region, given their established territorial presence?

Baroness Goldie: I welcome the Committee's engagement with your counterparts in France. I think that is a very positive development and, certainly from an MoD perspective, we have always valued our relationship with France. We have found that even when relationships were perhaps slightly strained at diplomatic level, we still managed to maintain a very strong, professional military-to-military relationship, and it is worth just mentioning that, because we have huge respect for the French defence capability.

That security and defence partnership with France is obviously underpinned by the Lancaster House treaties, and it is exemplified by our combined joint expeditionary force. The recent March summit was a very warm and cordial engagement between the President of France and our Prime Minister, and I think our co-operation has greatly improved. That includes establishing the basis of a permanent European maritime presence in the region through co-ordinated carrier deployment.

You ask a very good question, Mr Spellar. I think there is more we can do, because France, culturally, obviously has an affinity with various countries in the region. I think that matters. It is a good basis on which to build relationships, and there probably is more we can do. We are exploring opportunities, but I will defer to my colleagues on either side of me to comment further.

Nick Gurr: Again, the Minister has covered most of it. I think we all know—the French Government was quite clear about this—that the initial AUKUS agreement did not go down particularly well in Paris and led to a certain loss of appetite to work collaboratively in various parts of the world. The Indo-Pacific was not immune to that, but what we are now seeing is both ourselves and France recognising the opportunity that the French presence there, our own increased presence, the network of partnerships that France has, and the one that we are building—how we can develop those together. I very much expect to see that as being something that continues to grow over time.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I echo John's comments about what we are doing to strengthen our relationship with France. Since the Windsor framework, there has been a huge opportunity for us to rekindle an important bilateral relationship, given the threats that we are facing in Europe but also the concerns that we have been addressing today in the



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Indo-Pacific.

If there are no further questions from my colleagues, that brings us to the end of this second panel for this morning's session. Minister, thank you for your endurance. Thank you for staying with us throughout the morning. Thank you also to Nick Gurr, Brigadier Adrian Reilly and Shimon Fhima for your time this morning. That brings this Defence Committee hearing this morning to a conclusion. Thank you to colleagues and staff.