

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: The Integrated Review Refresh, HC 1246

Tuesday 18 April 2023

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

Questions 1-61

Witnesses

I: Professor Michael Clarke Distinguished Fellow, RUSI, and Professor Malcolm Chalmers Deputy Director-General, RUSI.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Michael Clarke and Professor Malcolm Chalmers.

Chair: Welcome to the Defence Committee hearing on Tuesday 18 April 2023. We are delighted to welcome Professor Michael Clarke and Professor Malcolm Chalmers here today. You will be very familiar with our set-up. Indeed, I note with interest, Michael, that you once worked for the Committee; it is good to have you back, albeit in a more formal capacity. You are both well-established commentators on Integrated Reviews. I'm sure you have seen a few come and go in the past. Here we are again, and this time we are looking at a refresh of a review as well. The purpose of this hearing is to examine what the Government is going to do, given the consequences of the situation in Ukraine, in updating its defence posture that came out a couple of years ago. To place it in context, we are expecting the Ministry of Defence to come out with its own defence Command Paper in June, but that won't prevent us from doing some analysis on whether our armed forces are fit for purpose given the threats that are coming over the hill.

With that introduction, may I thank you very much indeed for your time this morning and invite Kevan Jones to start the questions off?

Q1 **Mr Jones:** One commentator has described the Integrated Review refresh of 2023 as "Everything Everywhere All at Once". Would you agree with that assessment?

Professor Clarke: Yes, in a way. The refresh doesn't pull back on any of the commitments or aspirations that the original Integrated Review expressed. It expresses them more conservatively—in a more restrained way. Some of the rhetoric seems to have been dialled down quite a lot. But the idea that Britain should have a series of multiple roles that it can perform in the world and that it has high aspirations to a significant place in world politics, at a time of darkening international relations, is still there. There are some respects in which the refresh doesn't seem to have taken as much account of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as some of us expected it to. That would be my opening idea.

Professor Chalmers: To add to that, I have read Paul Cornish's piece with some interest, and he has a lot of interesting and useful things to say. What I would say is that the function of this Integrated Review refresh—and, indeed, of the last one—should be seen primarily in terms of establishing a strategic narrative. It's an overarching narrative, trying to articulate the UK's broad foreign and security policy objectives. In that sense, you shouldn't see it like a Budget statement—full of very specific suggestions. That is left, as the refresh makes very clear, to the very many sub-strategies—such as the defence Command Paper—which articulate specifics.



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So, in so far as the refresh has value, it has value more in terms of narrative and as something with which the whole of Government can understand where they fit within the overall picture. Maybe that tendency is reinforced by the fact that it wasn't associated with a comprehensive spending review, although of course, in the case of defence, it was associated with those specific announcements in the Budget. When we come to the defence Command Paper, we will understand a lot more in terms of priorities, but we already understand a little bit in terms of those specific spending announcements.

Having said all that, I think it is striking—here I do agree with Paul—that even to the extent, in terms of the previous IR, that it could have been criticised for being very geographically and thematically ambitious and not having a very strong sense of prioritisation, it has probably moved further in that direction in this case. In terms of geographical prioritisation, there is clearly increased visibility to Europe's neighbourhoods than there was before. But I wouldn't read too much into that, in terms of it actually changing what the UK Government does rather than being a rearticulation in response to perhaps some of the criticism that the previous review had.

- Q2 Mr Jones:** Malcolm, I accept that in terms of setting a strategic overview. Michael, you said the rhetoric had been turned down, but what understanding do you think Government and particularly Ministers have of the difference between what you have just described as the overarching strategic picture and what it means in practice? Was it this weekend that we heard the idea that one of the aircraft carriers will be permanently based in the South China sea area of south-east Asia? We will come to money in a minute. You say that the rhetoric has been turned down, but—this worries me—what understanding do you think Ministers across Government actually have regarding the difference between the broad strategic picture and what is practically possible for a nation of our size?

Professor Chalmers: As many of you will know from your previous experience in Government, Whitehall was characterised by a constant struggle between Departments and the centre—for grasping policy day to day, month by month—and that does not end when you have a review of this sort. Reviews of this sort are designed to create a centralised integrated narrative that everybody signs up to, and which is agreed interdepartmentally and so on. But in the example that you have given and many others, in practice, specific policy issues are relitigated or reargued between Departments and the centre, as you would expect.

The Integrated Review creates a narrative that the centre hopes gives it increased authority in those debates, because they can turn to it and say, "Look, we all agreed x and the Prime Minister has signed up to x, so we're going to have to do something consistent with that." The example that you gave is not a decision that has been made yet, but it is clearly something that some in Government wish to make, and you would expect that to continue.



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I am struck by the fact that one hears—even within the document and certainly in different descriptions of the document—different takes on what this means for the Indo-Pacific tilt. The two big procurement decisions of the last months are defence industrial partnerships with Indo-Pacific countries: Japan and Australia. In that sense, there is a bigger tilt towards the Indo-Pacific than in 2021. On the other hand, of course there is much more emphasis on European security in this document. There is a recognition that—for reasons to do with who was at the top of Government at the time—there was very little discussion of the European Union last time around, and that has been addressed under a different premier.

Professor Clarke: Both the Integrated Review and the refresh—both of which are very good essays on the state of world politics and what the country is facing; there is no question about that—raise a series of questions that will only be answered by practice. The documents do not provide the answers. As we go forward, as Malcolm says, we will answer the questions in practice. Whether that is a good way of doing it or not, that is where we are with these documents. When the defence Command Paper comes out in June, we will see a lot more on how these questions are beginning to be answered, but the refresh, as well as the original document, in a sense only raise the questions.

Q3 **Mr Jones:** I hear what Malcolm just said. Whether or not you call it the Pacific tilt, in terms of diplomacy, industrial partnerships and other things, I think there is ground to be had there. But if you have Ministers who think that we are now in post-withdrawal from east of Suez and going back to this global presence, one sets expectations that we will not be able to meet financially. Also in terms of being honest with our allies—especially within NATO, and we can provide in the NATO theatre and the High North—it is going to spread the jam very thinly, isn't it?

Professor Clarke: The refresh document is very careful in saying that the strategic, systemic challenge that China poses is best dealt with through partnerships. It is not that the UK somehow has to meet this challenge individually, of course, but that the sort of partnerships that are being developed in the Indo-Pacific now are constructive ways of creating, not an opposition, but a counterpoint to Chinese influence. That makes perfect sense, but when it comes to the specifics, how much defence resource should be put into those partnerships? That is one of the practical questions that will be answered in the next five years—I hope very consciously, but the danger is that we drift into an answer for other than strategic reasons.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you for that. It is interesting that you describe IR21 and IR23, as it has been called—this refresh—as good essays. The concern this Committee has, having done some inquiries into the size of our Navy, Army and Air Force, is that they are now too small for the duties we expect them to carry out.

I will quote one small paragraph from page 8 of the Integrated Review refresh: “There is a growing prospect that the international security environment will further deteriorate in the coming years, with state



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threats increasing and diversifying in Europe and beyond. The risk of escalation is greater than at any time in decades". Have you ever heard such profound, strong language in a Government document that suggests we are entering a very difficult decade?

Professor Clarke: No. If you think back on the five reviews that we have had in the last 10 years, until this one they have all been more equivocal about the nature of the international environment. The phrase is always "an age of uncertainty"—it is one of the great clichés of our era that we live in an age of uncertainty, as if every age isn't uncertain. This one is clearly written on the basis that the international environment is darkening quite rapidly, and I think that is acknowledged in the document—I found that. That was why I thought the refresh was a more restrained and sombre account of world politics than what emerged in 2021, after two years of work, on the basis of all the expressions of optimism in 2018-2019.

Q5 **Chair:** The concern we have, therefore, is that we are doing the homework and recognising and spelling out the threats, but we are not responding. If there is no extra funding, the armed forces—we have particular concern about this with the Army and land warfare capabilities—do not have the ability to expand. Would you agree with that?

Professor Clarke: Yes. We will talk about this later, but we have gone from the expectation of spending 2.5% of GDP on defence in the mid '20s—up to 3% by 2030—which has been ditched, and now it is 2.5% as and when circumstances allow. That does not represent a particularly big step forward in recapitalising our armed forces. I would certainly agree that all three branches of the services, in their own separate ways, are inadequate to the tasks that the refresh suggests they will undertake.

Q6 **Richard Drax:** How would you judge the effectiveness of the implementation of IR21, the 2021 defence Command Paper and the defence and security industrial strategy? Perhaps you would like to kick off with that, Professor Clarke.

Professor Clarke: On the general implementation, the Integrated Review—leaving aside the defence part of it for the moment—spoke a lot about soft power. It said we are a soft power superpower, and the Government have done almost nothing about that since 2021. Indeed, resources for soft power have been reallocated a little bit, but certainly not increased, and our soft power rating in the world is drifting downwards, as it might have done in any case.

On science and technology, we had an aspiration in 2021 to be a science and technology superpower. We did not say we were one; we had an aspiration to be one. That aspiration is that we should reach the average of OECD expenditure on science and technology by 2027—that is not particularly ambitious, it seems to me.

Foreign aid has been chaotic. Cuts to foreign aid were made in a chaotic way, which affects both our outreach and our soft power. That hasn't gone



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very well. The reorganisation of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is still a work in progress, and that is pretty fundamental to implementing so much of the non-military side of the 2021 review, not least the National Security Council's structure. The strategic structure at the top of Government is still somewhat uncertain and still needs to bed down in a new guise. That has not been implemented particularly vigorously.

I think the military side of the 2021 review is in progress, but that progress is very different for three armed services. It seems to me that all three armed services are on a transformation trajectory, but they are all on a different trajectory. They have all got their own problems and priorities, and it is hoped that they will somehow converge in 2030 to 2032 with the transformation they have achieved in these eight or nine years moving forward. That is going forward, but at different rates and on different bases. My concern over the implementation is not that the MoD is not doing something. The MoD, as usual with these things, is doing more than most other Departments, because they have big money to spend and to allocate, and big decisions to make that are very consequential to the rest of the economy. So, they are implementing, but they are not able to implement the '21 review as consistently between the three armed services and the central strategic command as we would have hoped they could.

Q7 Richard Drax: Would you agree that one of the problems is that all this new technology and new kit will arrive at the end of this decade, which everyone is talking about as being the most threatening?

Professor Clarke: Yes, I would agree. In 2021 there was the assumption that we had throughout the last decade and a half. We knew that we had to recapitalise all three armed services and had to have a new approach to the armed forces. Our weapon stocks, our war stocks, were running low; we had allowed them to get low. In a way, we thought, "It doesn't really matter, because it won't matter until about 2030". Well, it's a funny old thing; it matters now, because that is the nature of world politics. That implicit assumption—it was almost a 10-year rule—that we have got the rest of the decade to get this right is not actually borne out by the nature of world politics.

Q8 Richard Drax: It smells of the 1930s a bit, do you not think, Professor?

Professor Chalmers: Maybe I could add a bit. I think it is useful to think about how the 2021 IR defence Command Paper compares with its predecessors in 2015 and 2010. They were quite different in character in terms of their outcome and how spending took place. Of course, 2010 was very much part of a broader austerity Budget of very substantial reductions in spending and all of the capability cuts. At that time, doing precisely what Mike said, we were taking risks in the short term in order to preserve some key programmes for the long term. However, there were substantial risks and deletions in the short term, both in personnel and equipment. Quite a lot of money was saved as part of the general austerity of that period.



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Then it came to 2015, immediately after the annexation of Crimea and NATO's reinforcement of the 2% pledge, and the Government agreed to a modest but significant uplift in spending, which George Osborne announced not long after the election and before the review took place. The problem with 2015, however, was that the commitments made in the Budget exceeded the pretty modest extra money that was provided. So, there was a real-terms uptick but not a very big one.

By 2016-17, a succession of Secretaries of State found themselves with a budget that did not add up. You saw that with Gavin Williamson in particular. You had what felt like a continuous defence review that never got anywhere, which you will be familiar with; and the Treasury gave a little bit of money each year to top up, just to stave off a worse crisis. Essentially, though, for quite a long period—from 2016-17 up to 2020—the MoD was in significant crisis because its budget didn't add up. That was not resolved in that period.

Then you came to this review and the spending review that accompanied it—which actually announced quite a substantial change in MoD funding. It focused on the capital budget, which is reflected in the numbers of assets they actually turned out. If you look at the latest Budget statement, you will see that over the five years of this spending review, CDEL spending—capital spending—in real terms was increasing for the MoD by 57%. That was a very substantial increase, a bit more than was announced at the 2020 spending review; but RDEL spending—day to day spending—in real terms falls by 5%, using the latest inflation numbers and so on. That is very much in line with what was agreed at that time. There was a clear decision at that time, which was partly about focusing on the longer term, partly on the shorter term.

That was also driven by the awareness at the heart of the MoD that you could not go on with an equipment plan that was underfunded. There was a priority to get that right, and at least until the pandemic, increasing inflation and so on, it more or less succeeded in that objective. You had a funded equipment programme that was in balance. There are issues, of course, on the RDEL side, and I suspect that when we come to the defence Command Paper, we will see what measures the MoD has to take to make sure that it remains within that quite tight funding settlement on the RDEL side.

Q9 John Spellar: I want to move on from the general to the particular. The provision of equipment and munitions to Ukraine has highlighted serious deficiencies in both industrial and Government decision making around defence industrial production, capacity and stockpiling. Do you think that IR23 sufficiently acknowledges and addresses that?

Professor Chalmers: I don't think IR23 does, but I suspect that that is more a matter for the defence Command Paper, because that is a level of detail and defence specificity that you would expect the Command Paper to better address. There is, of course, the Budget announcement on significant extra money—another £2 billion over the next two years—in terms of munitions stockpiles and so on, which is on top of the £560



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million that the Government announced in response to the written question from Mark Francois in December. That is a significant extra amount of money.

What I do not have is any detail on what that is being spent on, but if that is spent wisely, it would make a difference. From the people I talk to, I suspect that quite a lot of the problems are simply about the capacity of industry to be mobilised, so one hopes—but this is no more than a hope—that over time those capacity issues can be addressed. That requires longer-term commitments in relation to munitions. Again, we will have to wait for the defence Command Paper, but certainly my understanding is that the commitments that we have just talked about, and in particular the £2 billion announced in the Budget and in the IR for munitions, will not necessarily be continued beyond 2024-25. So there is a real issue in terms of providing industry with greater certainty, which it will require.

- Q10 **John Spellar:** While the budget increases are clearly welcome, we must resolve the philosophical underlying assumptions in the Department. It has not—exactly your point—sustained ongoing industrial capacity, surge capacity and resilience. That is not just an implementation detail; it is an absolutely crucial underpinning of a successful strategy going forward.

Professor Chalmers: I am sure that is right. There is a drumbeat issue in every part of industry if we are reliant on UK suppliers, whether in shipbuilding, aerospace, land vehicles or other land systems. Also, sometimes it is an issue that, when contracts are let for particular bits of equipment, there is not necessarily provision in the contract for sustaining that equipment through its whole lifetime. That is something that is provided elsewhere, and therefore the capacity is lost. The broader issue for the UK—this links to AUKUS and GCAP—is in what sectors it is possible for the UK alone to have the capacity both to produce and sustain weapons, and to what extent you have to do that in collaboration with others, which again complicates the picture you are painting.

- Q11 **John Spellar:** Before Michael comes in, do you detect in the MoD, Treasury or Business Department any real understanding of the nature of this problem, and any real capacity for changing their behaviour to bring about necessary change?

Professor Chalmers: I certainly think that, in the MoD, there is quite a lot of appreciation of this. It is brought starkly home by the experience of Ukraine, and the difficulties that not only the UK but all allied nations, including even the United States, have in resupplying Ukraine at a level that you need to fight a war of this intensity. That awareness is pretty widespread. The problem is what you do about it—how you rebuild capacity collectively with allies, as well as domestically. That is not easy.

Professor Clarke: Mr Spellar, you raise an important strategic point and, as you say, philosophical issue. British forces over the past 30 years have done a great deal of operating, but have not prepared for war fighting, and there is a big difference between operating efficiently and well, and preparing for war fighting. The Ukraine war has brought the spectre of

industrial warfare back to Europe in ways that have been relatively surprising, I think.

Russia is gearing up as a war economy, without question; notwithstanding sanctions, that is what it is doing. China is doing something similar. Europe is not, despite some common initiatives coming out of the European Commission and individual decisions that some European states have taken. The United States is beginning to, but in general we are facing a situation over the Ukraine war where one side has already begun to gear up for industrial warfare. That is a considerable challenge for all of us.

My own strategic sense is that, for all that the Europeans and the United States have announced what they are doing, there will be a real crisis towards the end of this year when they realise that all that they have announced is inadequate both to keep Ukraine going, if that is the nature of the problem by the end of the year, and to replace their own stocks to a level that keeps their forces credible in Europe. We face an across-the-board European challenge in the re-creation of sufficient stocks, given what I take to be the return of industrial warfare, or the prospect of it, in Europe.

Q12 John Spellar: Stocks and/or capacity. You said stocks, but it is also capacity.

Professor Clarke: Sorry, stocks and systems. We are deficient in so many systems—not all, but so many. It is not the number of platforms but sustainability that is almost always the issue.

Q13 Mr Francois: Professor Clarke, in a few minutes we will come on to your interesting reference to the 10-year rule—that is very important. Recently, the Committee returned from a visit to the United States. Among other people, we met a number of senior industrialists, and people on the hill and in the Pentagon, and there seemed to be a change in mindset in the US. For example, one senior industrialist told us that his instructions from the Pentagon were to “prepare for war”, so there has been a massive uplift in the plans to produce 155 mm ammunition in the US. The Americans are gearing up industrially, potentially, for an extended conflict, be that one in Europe relating to Ukraine or one in the Indo-Pacific relating to Taiwan. Do you see any sign at all that in the United Kingdom we are thinking in a similar way?

Professor Clarke: I see signs that we are thinking in a similar way, but at the moment it does not go beyond recognition of the problem. I am not aware of anything coming out of Government that would create a step-change in our provision of sustainment, or the sustainability that we would need for our forces and, if we are serious about supplying Ukraine, for the sort of stocks that it will need for a prolonged war that goes beyond the end of this year at its current intensity.

Q14 Mr Francois: General Dynamics, which makes 155 mm ammunition for the US army, has been told to increase its production rate from about 250,000 shells a year to 5 million a year over, I think, the next four years. That is a massive increase, but there is no sign that BAE, which



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does that here in the UK, has had any such instruction. Isn't one of the problems the fact that we have a great deal of theorising in the IR and the refresh, but we are simply not following through with practical action? You could say—to borrow a phrase from, I think, the first world war—that we are willing the end but not the means. Is that fair?

Professor Clarke: I don't think it is unfair. We don't know what the £2 billion will be spent on, in terms of stocks. We might have a better idea about that when the Defence paper comes out in June. My instinct is that almost certainly it will not be nearly enough. The problems we have across the board in creating precision weapons with Thales, Leonardo and BAE Systems is that they have had very small production runs for many years. It is quite difficult, with the best will in the world, for them to increase those production runs. I am not aware so far of any Government instructions for them to do so in a way that is comparable with what I am aware the United States Government has asked of General Dynamics. That is a dramatic change, and it indicates a depth of strategic thinking in the United States that I do not think exists here, although I should say that it is also driven by the United States' thinking about military competition with China over the next decade. That drives them at least as much as Ukraine does, more immediately.

- Q15 **Mr Jones:** This is not just about replacing stocks; it is about a change in mindset. You will have to change the way you procure certain systems. You need either large stockpiles, or spare capacity in industry, so that you can turn up the dial when you need to. As we all know, the mantra, not just in defence but across industry, has been just-in-time delivery. That means paying industry to have capability idle for certain periods, being able to turn on capability quite rapidly or having stockpiles that just sit there.

Professor Chalmers: That is absolutely right, but the Government has said that it has allocated £2.6 billion, which might not be enough, but it is a substantial sum to address these issues. The first question to ask is: what will that be spent on?

- Q16 **Mr Jones:** No, Malcolm, if you look at BAE Systems, for example, they plan to be in Washington, which is next to my constituency. They have not got the capacity there. If you look at the days when you had the Royal Ordnance factory at Birtley, it was a massive site. The new site, which is very efficient and very good, is quite small compared with what was there before. Trying to increase capacity there will be very difficult. Even if you have an opportunity to perhaps create spare capacity in the future, you will have to build new capacity.

Professor Clarke: These are real problems. Our defence industries over the last two or three decades have consolidated so much for efficiency reasons that there are now not many prime suppliers to European Governments and the United States. Those suppliers work with a very limited number of sub-primes to produce small numbers of units on an annual basis. Gearing that up, even if the Government was more assertive, would be difficult. It is very hard to see that happening in the

short term. The most optimistic element of this is the power of improvisation.

I was thinking about the ground-launched small diameter bomb that the United States has produced, which I think is based on a Boeing and Saab collaboration on a warhead, of which they have plenty, and a rocket, of which they have plenty. Putting them together has created an extremely useful smart artillery round, which is being produced for the Ukrainians and is now operating in Ukraine. There are lots of ways in which drone technology can be cheapened and adapted, as we have already seen. It has been a cottage industry so far, but there is no reason why that could not be geared up. In the next 12 to 18 months, I think we will see a great deal of improvisation and innovation in the provision of relatively large numbers of systems, but we will see it on the Russian side as well as on the Ukrainian side.

- Q17 **Mr Jones:** But that is dependent on what Mark was just saying: people having the foresight or urgency to actually do it. Is innovation taking place because of the problems that Ukraine has? Let's be honest: if it was left to the MoD, we would be here in five years' time looking into all this, rather than doing things very rapidly, as the Ukrainians are.

Professor Clarke: Yes. The war is now 15 or 16 months old. The fact that European security fundamentally changed on 24 February 2022 has taken a long time to filter through to Governments. Individuals understand it, but as corporate entities, Governments have come round to this much more reluctantly. Time is now of the essence, for all sorts of reasons that I could go into if you wanted, in terms of the offensive that we believe the Ukrainians are going to launch, and the need for that to be decisive. It is not good enough for them to just do well; they have to be decisive. There is the imminence of a degree of Ukrainian fatigue setting in in the west. For all those reasons, time has become a problem. The urgency with which Ukrainians need weapons is now overwhelming. That urgency also extends to our own sustainability, if we are to be credible in the way we offer the deterrence of NATO to the increasing instability of Europe.

Chair: Let's step back even further and look at the strategic picture.

- Q18 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** As you know, the refresh recognises Russia and China as foreign policy and national security priorities. Is the response urgent enough, and equivalent to the challenges posed?

Professor Chalmers: It is an important recognition of Russia and China. I was struck by the fact that the focus on China is considerable; maybe the focus on Russia is rather less so.

On one level, there is talk about NATO being the overwhelming priority, and recognition of that, and there is certainly the increased investment in defence that has been announced, but the things that the increased investment in defence is going on are very much in keeping with what you would have expected prior to the Russian invasion—AUKUS in particular, and the increased investment in the nuclear business. It is very much

focused on the long-term China threat. We have talked about munitions already, but that is a relatively small amount.

The difficulty with these issues is that we are always talking about what has happened over the last two years, since the last IR, and the big changes that have taken place. We have to realise that the world will continue to change in quite radical ways in the years to come. The nature of defence planning is that a lot of it is much longer in timescale than we can predict geopolitically. The prediction in which there is the greatest confidence is the idea that China will become increasingly a concern across every policy area.

One of the descriptions I heard from one of those involved in the IR was that we shouldn't think of China as a chapter or an element of the IR; China pervades almost every policy theme in the IR, just as the United States does. We have got used to the United States being part of our mental picture on almost any issue we talk about. China is as well. In any particular area—on military security, foreign policy, economics or technology—China is part of the picture. That is the nature of the world that we live in. That realisation was not there five or 10 years ago, but it certainly is now, and I think that is enduring.

Where there is the biggest uncertainty, and where you need an approach that can cope with the volatility, is that I don't think we know how far China will rise. Certainly, maybe two or three years ago, the narrative was more of China overtaking the United States in GDP and becoming dominant by mid-century, in terms of having double the US's GDP and so on. In part because of international pressures and in part because of the inherent weaknesses in their system, Chinese economic growth has slowed quite significantly. They have some really quite severe economic problems, which may make them more prepared to take strategic risks rather than less.

There is really a lot of uncertainty about China's trajectory; it will impact all sorts of areas of policy, which we will just have to accept. There is even greater uncertainty about Russia's trajectory and the question of how far Russia is going to fall. Even if we can accept the broad, long-term proposition of Russia being a declining power in a number of different ways—and that may again partly explain what it did in relation to Ukraine, because time was not on its side—we don't know how far that is going to go. The invasion was a key turning point for European and global security, but the outcome of the conflict will also be a key turning point, and none of us has any idea how this is going to end. Maybe for the next review, whenever that takes place, we will know how it all turns out, but maybe we won't.

Finally, to complete the picture, the UK is a middle power trying to survive and prosper in a world with much more powerful states. The third big power, of course, is the United States. One thing that prevents our UK foreign defence policy discussion is whether the Americans will pivot, particularly in military terms, away from Europe. In some scenarios they might do, and you can have a discussion about American domestic politics



in that regard. We are trying to juggle uncertainty in relation to all three of those powers. For a middle power such as ours, we are bound to be trying to hedge and keep as many options as we can, maintaining a really close relationship with the United States and building a relationship with other middle powers in Europe and Asia. That is more or less a broad picture of what we are doing, but how exactly that plays out will depend on things outside our control.

Professor Clarke: On the China point in particular, the refresh was exactly right. In the non-military sense, it talked about domestic economic security and the need for economic resilience. The Government are taking resilience questions far more seriously than they ever did, although they have been talking about resilience since 2008, particularly in relation to China on cyber issues, semiconductors, rare earth elements and supply chain resilience. The idea of economic resilience is really important because we know that China retaliates economically against diplomacy that it does not like; we have seen that increasingly around the world in recent years.

The refresh was very realistic in pointing out that whatever we do in the defence business, our own economic resilience is one of the key security elements that we have to pursue for the future. The problem with that is how to operationalise it. Britain's critical national infrastructure is divided into 13 areas—communications, Government, health and so on. The vast majority of those areas—about eight of the 13—are predominantly private sector. This is not something that the Government alone can do, but the Government have to try to lead a greater understanding across our private sector of the need to make some sacrifices—maybe some efficiency sacrifices or some cost sacrifices—in order to build greater economic security and resilience.

Q19 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Is that likely?

Professor Clarke: We will see, but I at least give the review high marks for pointing it out. As we have said, the review, as the original document did in 2021, raises questions that will be answered in practice. I am more optimistic than I was a couple of years ago that we are more serious about making resilience happen than we have ever been before. I know we have only a resilience framework now instead of a resilience strategy. That framework is a bit more loose, but the reason the framework is more loose than the strategy was intended to be is that so much of our resilience lies in the private sector, and that requires political leadership over a long period.

Q20 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I will turn back to the point you made, Malcolm, about uncertainty and the finances. As you know, the extra £5 billion that was allocated for replenishing stockpiles and for subs is half of what the Secretary of State asked for, and it has been criticised by former Army chiefs. The 2.5% of GDP on defence remains an aspiration. Looking at our threats, is this enough investment to manage them?



Professor Chalmers: The MoD could always do with more, and it no doubt asks for more, but you have to look at the defence budget in the context of the wider trends in public spending and you have to ask about trade-offs. That's true within the MoD as well as between the MoD and other Departments.

The reality is that the UK's economic performance has been very poor. Over the spending review period—from 2019-20 over the five years, according to OBR numbers—UK GDP will increase at an average rate of 0.2% per annum, which is almost stagnant over the five-year spending review period. Total Government departmental spending over that period is due to increase by around 4% per annum in real terms, reflecting the quite generous spending settlements in Boris Johnson's first spending review. Spending by the MoD is due to increase over that period by around 2.2% per annum in real terms. As a result of that, the UK is going to increase the proportion of its GDP spent on defence from 2.06% at the beginning of the period to 2.27% by the end of it, or about 2.35% if you include Ukraine.

We are increasing the proportion of GDP being spent on defence, in large part because GDP is not increasing, but we are increasing the proportion of GDP spent on other parts of government, most of all the NHS, more sharply than that. That, in a way, encapsulates the problem that the Government and politicians will have to resolve. If you want to increase defence spending more, you certainly can do, and there is a very strong case for doing so, but then either you need to find economies in other parts of Government spending or you need to increase the burden of taxation to pay for it. Those are the trade-offs that the Chancellor and the Prime Minister were addressing in the recent statements.

Chair: Sarah, do you want to come in quickly?

- Q21 **Sarah Atherton:** Yes, please. We were slightly caught out by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but your general assessment of the Integrated Review refresh is accurate. Some commentators are saying that China will invade Taiwan in 2027. Do you have any observations on what we might see in the Command Paper refresh around the relationship and the trajectory of China and Taiwan?

Professor Clarke: On Taiwan, one of the things that is interesting is that the 2021 document did not mention Taiwan at all, and it is mentioned many times in the refresh document because attention is on it. Xi Jinping has said that he aims to resolve the Taiwan issue while he is still in power. That could still be a long time of course, but resolution could be through either political means or military means, or some combination of them.

My sense is that what we have seen in the last month is the way it will tend to be. The idea of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is hard to imagine at the moment. It certainly could not be conducted in any bolt-from-the-blue attack. The forces needed to invade across 100 miles of water, even though Taiwan has not been terribly well prepared until now to resist an invasion, and the logistical problems mean that a great deal of force would



have to be assembled and we would see it assembling, so it couldn't be done by surprise.

Much more likely is what some call the anaconda idea of, as it were, creating a blockade of Taiwan, which starts in a rather mild and intermittent way, but becomes stronger and stronger until Taiwan is effectively isolated. That would be a real challenge to the western world. At what point, if we saw this behaviour beginning—maybe we have already seen the beginning of it—would we say, "Enough. We will not tolerate this any longer"? It will be very difficult to arrive at that point if China keeps increasing, then standing down, forces that are capable of surrounding Taiwan, and eventually does it more often, more completely and with greater lethal intent.

That's the sort of military response that we might see during the decade, but it would go hand in hand with a political process. A military response and a political process might be antithetical, or China might think it could simply frighten the Taiwanese. China does not have a Kuomintang Government at the moment, but if a KMT Government suddenly felt enough carrot-and-stick pressure to come to some arrangement, maybe that would be the idea. Some combination of those is on the cards.

That is an issue for Europe—not in a direct sense but in the sense that we are holding on to the rules-based international order and the refresh says that that is one of the three great pillars of British policy for the future. It says that more clearly, I think, than was said in the '21 document, and for that reason what happens in Taiwan really matters not just to the status but to the reputation of the free world in maintaining the rules of the international system that have done us so well for the last 200 years.

Professor Chalmers: I would add that I think it is more likely than not that there will not be an invasion, but I think there is a significant possibility that there would be if China feels that things are moving in a direction where, if they do not act, they will lose forever the possibility of reunification. They have been prepared for a very long time to have that rhetorical commitment, which is very strongly felt in the Chinese Communist party. Nevertheless, it is for another day when they are stronger, where circumstances are greater. They may feel at some stage that Taiwan is moving further and further towards independence, they are just not prepared to tolerate it and they take the risk, just like Putin took the risk in relation to Ukraine.

If they were to do so and if the US were to respond militarily, as I think is likely, we would be in a much more dangerous position for global security than we are in relation to Ukraine. In relation to Ukraine, in the end we have managed to limit the escalation so that there is not a direct military confrontation between two major nuclear-armed powers. In the case of Taiwan, it is much more likely than with Ukraine that you would have direct military confrontation, with fighting, for the first time since the beginning of the nuclear age, between two nuclear superpowers. If that conflict lasted more than a few days, it is hard to imagine it not involving the territory of mainland China and, therefore, probably all major western



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allies, such as Japan and the United States itself. This is a whole order of magnitude, so we should be really worried about this, even if we do not think, in the end, it is as likely as not. Deterrence or prevention of this is understandably a top American priority, and it should be one of ours, too.

Chair: Thank you. I think that this big clash between these two superpowers—China and the United States—could end up defining the 21st century. On that positive note, I turn to Mark.

- Q22 **Mr Francois:** Professor Clarke, you mentioned earlier, very interestingly, the 10-year rule that came in after the end of the first world war. For the record, just very quickly, can you summarise what that meant?

Professor Clarke: It was an explicit planning assumption for the British armed forces, originally on a rolling basis in the early '20s, that there would be no war for 10 years. Because the 10 years were calculated every year—in other words, it was 10 years from this year, 10 years from next year, 10 years from the year after—that meant that nothing was spent on the armed forces in that particular case; I think it was from 1920 to 1924. That was because 10 years was always rolling further away. That 10-year rule was based on an attempt to match the estimation of the fear of another war in Europe against resources. In the early '20s, that fear seemed quite a long way away and it was not until the late '20s that the prospect of conflict in Europe really became realistic again.

- Q23 **Mr Francois:** From memory, the rule was only officially rescinded in the mid-1930s, was it not?

Professor Clarke: It was.

- Q24 **Mr Francois:** So for almost a decade and a half, the official policy of His Majesty's Government was that there would not be another war for 10 years.

Professor Clarke: Yes.

- Q25 **Mr Francois:** Fast forward to 2010, when the incoming coalition Government established a National Security Council, loosely based on the American model, to make our Government more joined up in security terms. In 2011, the NSC produced a national security strategy, which said that there was no existential threat to the security of the United Kingdom.

Professor Clarke: Correct.

- Q26 **Mr Francois:** By the time you get to 2015, we are talking about "competitors", and then we get to the Integrated Review. But even now we are not using the word "threat". In the 2021 Integrated Review, before the Ukraine war, a lot of decisions were taken to withdraw capability early on—for example, with the AWACS early warning aircraft and the C-130 Hercules—in order to provide investment much later on in the decade, so that we end up with extremely capable armed forces, as you said, by about 2032. In a nutshell, that is what the IR proposed. When you look at the refresh, that has not changed very much at all, has



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it?

Professor Clarke: No. The refresh talks about the need to develop innovation at pace. The phrase “at pace” comes through again, as it did in the 2021 document, but there is no indication of a big reprioritisation from the refresh on any of the systems that were talked about in the original document. We may see evidence of that when we see the defence Command Paper in June. But the refresh itself still maintains that essential assumption that the security of the United Kingdom is not at issue.

As you said, going back to 2010, the phrase then—which was ingenious, really—was to the effect of, “What is at stake in British security is our way of life and the ability of the British public to go about their business freely and with confidence.” That implied going about their business both in the UK and in the world. It was a conception of security that was a very postmodern, globalisation conception of security, not based on the territorial integrity of the country.

Q27 **Mr Francois:** A lot of that was based on the idea of terrorist threats and asymmetric threats. It certainly was not based on the idea of major state-on-state conflict, was it?

Professor Clarke: Correct.

Q28 **Mr Francois:** At the risk of putting words in the witness’s mouth, would it be fair to say that, at least up until the invasion of Ukraine last year, in terms of our defence policy we have effectively been operating a 10-year rule since 2010?

Professor Clarke: I think there has been an implicit 10-year rule running for the last 20 years through our forces as we have looked at generational modernisation. We have known from 2001 onwards that we needed to rework our forces. Our forces were bent out of shape by the terrorist threat and the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. We always knew that we had to get back into a better shape, but we thought we had time. The idea of state-based threats, as they are now called, has only re-emerged in the refresh document fairly strongly—and it is strong.

Q29 **Mr Francois:** This is not just an esoteric point; it is absolutely fundamental to our defence policy. Your view is that, whereas in the ’20s and early ’30s we explicitly had a 10-year rule—that was the official policy—we have implicitly had a 10-year rule, but it has just not been the official policy of the Government.

Professor Clarke: I would call it an implicit assumption. If you call it a rule it makes it sound as if it was something that was agreed in secret.

Q30 **Mr Francois:** We are not trying to trip you up with words.

Professor Clarke: It was a prevailing assumption.

Q31 **Mr Francois:** Professor Chalmers, what is your view?

Professor Chalmers: I would just add a couple of points. First, I would emphasise that the 10-year rule was always in relation to major war. It



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was not in relation to no war. Indeed, the '20s and '30s saw British armed forces involved quite extensively in colonial wars. If we come to the current period, then the focus of successive reviews, from 1998 through to 2010 and 2015, was a lot on conflict and potential wars—the UK was involved in conflicts in all those periods—but it was non-major power war. That is a very important distinction.

We can look at the last integrated operating concept, or the last defence Command Paper from only a couple of years ago. I was reading it again yesterday, and it is striking how much emphasis there was on conflict with non-major power actors with persistent engagement in all parts of the world. It is very much a continuation of the posture we had had during the large-scale interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. It will be very interesting to see whether the defence Command Paper coming out in June downplays that element or simply says, "We are going to do a lot more in relation to major power conflict, but we are not going to do any less elsewhere."

- Q32 **Mr Francois:** Mr Jones wants to come in, and I have an eye on the clock, so just quickly: yes, this didn't exclude so-called wars of choice like Iraq and Afghanistan, but it certainly excluded so-called wars of necessity on a major state-on-state level. We are all waiting for the DCP. Do you think that, at the moment, we are still effectively operating the 10-year rule?

Professor Chalmers: I certainly hope not. There are two points I would make. The first is that a very important exception to the supposed unspoken 10-year rule would be in relation to the nuclear deterrent, where continuous at-sea deterrence was based on the possibility that you would face a serious nuclear threat from a nuclear armed power at relatively short notice—certainly nothing like 10 years. That is a very important exception. There are probably others as well.

Personally, I would say that the thing we should worry most about in the next five years is the possibility that escalation—deliberate or inadvertent—from a limited conflict could, at relatively short notice, involve the UK and its vital interests in a conventional conflict, and we need to be prepared for that now. I would actually inverse the assumption that we can take risks in the short term to invest in the long term and think about it the other way around. If you were to make that assumption in the UK defence posture, it would have really quite profound effects on defence priorities.

- Q33 **Mr Francois:** Absolutely. If we had to fight a so-called come-as-you-are war—where you fight with what you've got, or what you can immediately regenerate—we are not ready for that, are we?

Professor Chalmers: We would have to be ready for that. We would fight with what we had, as countries have always done in history.

Mr Francois: Yes, but we are not as ready as we should be.

Professor Chalmers: No, but in order to do that—if resources are not ready tomorrow, but will be ready in a year or two years' time, because



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this threat is not going to go away, I suspect—you would be spending scarce resource, which includes people and systems, as well as money, very differently from what you are doing now. Why are we continuing to have forces deployed in Syria, for example, if the RAF's priority is homeland defence? There are all sorts of practical things like that you would have to think about.

Chair: I am conscious of time because we have a series of questions still to get through; I am conscious that you are up against the clock a bit as well. Kevan, you wanted to come in on this point.

- Q34 **Mr Jones:** On the spending that has been announced over the last period, there has clearly been an increase in the CDEL budgets, but on these figures, RDEL is still hugely under pressure. I remember that in 2010, when we had the defence review, Liam Fox, the then Defence Secretary, said that we would never see a situation where we had Russian tanks going across the north German plains. I think that has been a bit unpicked in terms of what we are facing now.

But is there not a fundamental problem? If you have structured your defence budget basically on this never-never land of putting money into capital—and you are going to get the capability you want in, say, 2030—but at the same time, you are reducing day-to-day expenditure, which is people and the actual armed forces, then yes: you are going to get a disconnect between the two. We actually do still need mass now, in terms of people. The MoD's thinking is still based on delivering a divisional capability, which it can't deliver with the numbers of people we have at the moment, can it?

Professor Chalmers: There were two or three questions in there, so let me try to unpick them, if I can. The reality, I think, is that, given the total amount of money available, if you had not had that significant increase in the CDEL budget and you had spent it on RDEL instead, you would have had to delete some significant capital programmes.

- Q35 **Mr Jones:** Yes, but that has been the problem since 2010, hasn't it? They all have their sacred cows, which they have never actually taken to the slaughter. They have come very close on occasions, but never actually done it. That has been the real issue around the defence procurement budget. You have a whole wish list of things, where what was needed really, halfway through the 2015 era, would have been to say, "Right—we're not doing that. We're not doing this," and take money out.

Professor Chalmers: That certainly was an option. It is easier to say it as a general principle. It is a lot harder to get agreement on what particular capability you want to take out.

- Q36 **Mr Jones:** No, I agree it's difficult, but that is the problem. We now have a situation where we have lots of programmes that we are going to be funding but the actual capability in terms of manpower—certainly Ukraine's share of that in terms of manpower is still going to be very important—will keep going down from this base, won't it?



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Professor Chalmers: The long-term trend with UK service personnel numbers—our civilian personnel numbers—is a significant reduction in numbers over time. I think the assumption is that that is going to continue, and the assumption in the defence Command Paper is that there will be some further reduction in personnel numbers. But in actual fact, one of the things that has saved the MoD from a more substantial reduction in personnel numbers is that wage increases have not kept pace with inflation for much of this period, as in the rest of the public sector. Whether that will continue to be the case in the future remains to be seen, but that would be an increased cost pressure.

Q37 **Mr Jones:** Therefore, the assumption still there in the MoD that we can deliver this divisional capability is nonsense.

Professor Chalmers: That is a separate question. It is very challenging, but I do not think that the biggest constraint on the UK meeting its NATO commitment in relation to an armoured division is personnel numbers in the Army; it is the equipment and the logistics to support it, which is not being provided. We would struggle to provide a brigade, never mind a division, in that regard. Some of the issues around personnel in relation to the Army are about the breadth of their commitments, not simply about that specific one.

Q38 **Gavin Robinson:** Good morning, gentlemen. Michael, I think in the exchange with Mark Francois you mentioned that you did not see an indication of a big reprioritisation in the IR. The previous Command Paper in 2021 placed emphasis on grey zone activity. I was wondering whether you, Michael, and then Malcolm, feel that that emphasis still pertains in the IR23, and whether it should.

Professor Clarke: Yes. What the refresh said is that the grey zone activity, which we used to think was the most dangerous part of our security environment, is still there, even though other more dangerous things have emerged in recent years. By grey zone we mean challenges below the conventional threshold level—challenges that are difficult to respond to, such as, as we were discussing, the idea of an effective on-off blockade of Taiwan. That becomes a grey zone activity since it can be justified as defending fishing grounds and all sorts of things. At what point do you actually take it on as an explicit challenge? There is also grey zone activity from non-state actors and the use by states of non-state actors to create cyber-insecurity, and so on.

What the Ukraine war is showing us is that security requires attention to the full spectrum. That war is in space, in cyber-space, in the narrative competition on all sides, as well as in first world war-style trenches outside Bakhmut or Avdiivka. The grey zone is something that we have to accept. It is not conceptually at all new, but we got used to multiple challenges to our society, particularly in an era of social media, whereby our will to act could be undermined in all sorts of new ways that would not have existed 30 or 40 years ago. We have to take that on, along with all of the other challenges. Again, I think the refresh is quite explicit about that. The

refresh is quite good on the way in which it describes the grey zone challenge.

There could be a reprioritisation away from quite such a concentration on grey zones towards more explicit challenges, because the explicit challenges have become much more immediate. That is possible, but effectively you have to try to address the whole thing. That is the message that I take away from the review. Security is a more multidimensional business than ever before in my analytical lifetime. It is harder to grasp now than it has ever been in my own intellectual journey.

Professor Chalmers: Maybe I could add to that. I and my RUSI colleagues, who have published quite a bit on this issue, would say that the integrated operating concept and the associated defence Command Paper fundamentally got it wrong in relation to their emphasis on grey zone and political warfare, and the proposition that the old distinction between peace and war is totally out of date. We have seen in Ukraine over the past year what war means, and it is something very different from the absence of war.

The absence of war is not the absence of conflict. It is not the absence of political contestation and propaganda and cyber-attacks, but it is different. When you have hundreds of thousands of young men and women being killed and cities being bombed, that is a war. We should maintain that distinction, because it really matters. It matters for clarity about escalation control and for deterrence.

The fundamental role of our armed forces should be to deter and, if necessary, to fight wars, as normally defined. I think we got it wrong in 2021. I very much hope that the statements we see in the defence Command Paper reintroduce a degree of clarity, because we really need that clarity, if we are to achieve our fundamental objectives in this regard. It is a success if you manage to keep conflict below the threshold of war. I wish we could have done so last year, but we failed to do so.

- Q39 **Gavin Robinson:** From that, I suppose the quest to try to capture everything in this new and emerging threat—hybrid, grey, non-state actor and so on—is to dilute and diminish the importance of conventional methods and techniques.

Professor Chalmers: I think that is right. That is not to say that those sorts of things are not important, but the dilution is a real problem if you don't keep coming back and saying conventional warfare is at the heart of the armed forces mission.

- Q40 **Gavin Robinson:** Are you convinced, in your understanding and discussions since the publication of the refresh, that that danger has been recognised?

Professor Chalmers: We'll have to see.

- Q41 **Gavin Robinson:** You'll have to see. You're not convinced yet.

Professor Chalmers: We'll have to see in the paper.



Professor Clarke: Again, it goes back to the old thing. The review raises the question but does not answer it. It quite rightly raises the issue, which is why both reviews are good expressions of the situation in which we find ourselves. The answers will have to be articulated through practice over the next three or four years.

- Q42 **Chair:** Can I ask something on the grey zone? It does move us a little bit away from the traditional focus of the Ministry of Defence, into wider Whitehall capability. Briefly, do you think the UK National Security Council is utilised in bringing together capabilities, decision making and providing the necessary advice for the Prime Minister, particularly in this area of grey zone threats?

Professor Chalmers: I think it is trying. It is very difficult. It comes back to the first answer that I gave in this presentation—getting different Departments to work to the same objective is really hard. There is a lot of activity that I am aware of across Whitehall addressing these issues, and in some areas that is pretty successful. There is a lot of work being done in relation to sanctions, for example. Our capability in relation to sanctions implementation, as well as design, is a lot greater. That is also true in quite a lot of other areas.

- Q43 **Chair:** Before you come back, Professor Clarke, I hear that the National Security Council does not meet as regularly as perhaps you would anticipate, given where we are with Ukraine. Previous to that, other committees were formed to deal with covid, rather than utilising an existing structure.

Professor Chalmers: I think the issues here are not so much the big decisions of the sorts that are best dealt with by a committee of hard-pressed Cabinet Ministers. It is more about implementation and delivery at an official level, so my answer is really in relation to the National Security Council machinery, rather than to the NSC itself.

Professor Clarke: My point is that the NSC machinery has gone through a complete circle since the first Integrated Review, in that we are now more or less back where we began in terms of the basic structure. We will just have to see how well, as Malcolm says, the sub-structures of the NSC are able to develop synergy within Whitehall.

I lament the fact that we have had to go through that, because the NSC, as established in 2010, was doing a pretty good job. It developed and evolved, and it then became somewhat moribund. It has been reorganised twice, and we are now starting a new generation of the NSC, instead of building on what we had originally, which I regret. Also, as an analyst, you can read statements all day long, but ultimately, follow the money.

Chair: Very true.

- Q44 **Mr Jones:** Can I come on to our allies' perception of the Integrated Review 2023? One US commentator said it is "long on ambition, but under-resourced". Could you give us a flavour of what you think our allies, particularly the US, are thinking about the Integrated Review?



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Professor Clarke: Let me start on that. I have made only intermittent studies since 2020 on attitudes towards the review process; I have ducked in and out of it for particular purposes. But like everybody, I have impressions of how the foreign press deal with defence policy, what sorts of attitudes they take, and what elite opinion seems to be.

There is a lot of curiosity about Britain. A lot of our allies—our partners in Europe, and our allies in the United States and Canada—are watching two or three different things. They are watching how Brexit Britain evolves, so they are interested in the direction that Britain takes as a result of Brexit and to what degree Brexit has affected the decisions that we make.

They are very interested in that, but they are interested particularly in transformation. What they see is a medium power with a significant defence budget trying, with very small numbers, to maintain transformational forces across all domains of warfare. They see that as a rather interesting experiment. If we can do it, others could do it. If we fail, or if our forces simply lack all credibility in six or eight years' time—in the worst possible scenarios—they would draw their conclusions from that. There is a very interesting aspect of international opinion, which is watching Britain carefully because we have placed ourselves in a relatively unique position and we are being very ambitious with what we are trying to do in a period of economic stringency.

There are two other things I would say about the way the rest of the world is viewing us. One is that the future of the Army has a bigger effect on global opinion than the future of the Navy or the Air Force, because, for whatever reason, Congressmen and parliamentarians in other parts of Europe see Army numbers and Army capabilities as a more obvious index of military capacity, rather than Navy or Air Force numbers or capabilities. I am not quite sure why that should be, but one's army tends to be the metric by which a nation's military power is judged, at least in the more popular mind.

The other element I would mention is that I pick up a sense—particularly in the United States, because of what I have just said about the Army—that Britain is moving, de facto, to a more maritime strategy. We have not decided to do this, and we have not said we are doing this, but—

Chair: It's a reality.

Professor Clarke: The direction in which we are moving is towards a maritime strategy to deal with our environment in which we do not allow ourselves to be fully capable of warfighting on land in an organic way. We cannot produce a combat division convincingly at the moment, but we can convincingly produce maritime power. Our Air Force is relatively small and can only do a certain number of things, even though it does them pretty well. The area of strength that we have is in the maritime sphere, and it is increasingly likely to be there, however well or badly we use it. I do not know if that is anything like a true version of what the MoD thinks, but I know that it is what a number of our American friends think is actually happening.



- Q45 **Mr Jones:** We have been there before, haven't we? Before the first world war we had great Navy Dreadnought capability but a small field Army for being able to deploy to France, for example. I have real concerns about the Army. I agree with your analysis. The question is: what is the Army for? I do not think that fundamental question has been asked in the MoD, or even in the Army.

Professor Chalmers: I agree with what Michael said about the Army. I think the UK has done itself a lot of good over the last year in terms of the role it has played in relation to Ukraine. It has done itself a lot of good in Washington and indeed in other European capitals, and that is a big plus. Also, the whole issue about the Northern Ireland protocol was a sore in relations with our allies for some time, and with the Windsor framework that now seems to be resolved, which is a very big step forward. On that issue, the fact that the Integrated Review has filled the Europe-shaped hole in the previous IR is again taken positively, especially by our European allies, but also, I think, by the United States. That is all very positive.

People are asking questions about spending levels, but I think that people are looking at that in the context of the much bigger questions about spending levels in relation to Germany and a number of other west European allies, so that is diluted. The one exception to that is exactly what Mike said: the UK's failure to meet its declared NATO targets in relationship to armour.

- Q46 **Mr Jones:** Our NATO commitments will have to be addressed if we are to be taken seriously in terms of our contribution to NATO on the land sphere, but I do not get the impression that there is a great deal of focus on that yet.

Professor Chalmers: I think there is a lot of discussion. It is an ongoing issue in relation to how we deal with NATO and other allies—

- Q47 **Mr Jones:** Malcolm, you mentioned heavy armour. Depending on who you talk to and how you crunch the figures, on Challenger, for example, we have relatively few deployable Challengers, don't we?

Professor Chalmers: Yes.

- Q48 **Mr Jones:** What it might say on the packet is very different from what is actually inside in practice, isn't it?

Professor Chalmers: I don't disagree.

Professor Clarke: General Sanders, the Chief of the General Staff, has declared Operation Mobilise to be the Army's main focus. That is the ability to put an Army on to the continent that would be capable of war fighting at something above brigade level—division or combat division level. He has said—

Mr Jones: That sounds very much like 1914, doesn't it?

Professor Clarke: At a RUSI conference, he said that, undoubtedly, if we



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had to fight, we would be “outnumbered” and we would have to fight “like hell”, but that is the task that we have to try to accomplish. He has made that the centrepiece of his period as Chief of the General Staff, and Operation Mobilise has exposed how difficult it is for the Army to do what he requires it to do.

- Q49 **Mr Francois:** On that point, no one who knows CGS doubts his absolute commitment to do that. But, Professor Chalmers, you said that we would struggle to provide a war fighting brigade—those were your words—and I think that is true, partly because of all the equipment problems we have in the Army, which the Committee have gone into in forensic depth in the past. One of the worrying things about the IR refresh is that it did not really give any clear indication of how those fundamental flaws would be addressed, did it?

Professor Chalmers: I think that’s right. What I think people in the MoD would say in response to that question would be that IR21 allocated a significant additional amount of money to the Army capital programme, but it will take quite a number of years for the full fruits of that to come out.

- Q50 **Mr Francois:** Boxer does not come in until 2025, and there is a squadron of Challenger 3s in 2027. Meanwhile, the Russians are murdering civilians as we speak. It is all years away. Would you agree that one of the fundamental questions that the defence Command Paper due in June must now address is how we will recapitalise the Army quickly, so that we can field that warfighting division at speed and relevance, i.e. far quicker than the end of the decade?

Professor Chalmers: That is a question that the defence Command Paper should address, but I am not entirely confident that they will do so.

Mr Francois: Thank you.

Professor Clarke: I would like to point out, if I may, that the 2021 review was very unspecific about what Army recapitalisation might look like. It laid out a series of requirements: the Army requires more deep fires and more digital integration. It laid out a rather vague set of requirements without any obvious idea of what the systems would be. There was not even an architecture; it was just a series of relatively abstract requirements.

In a way, the Air Force and Navy know what they are doing for various reasons. They know what their capitalisation looks like and how they have got to try to integrate more in the next 10 years. The Army is one stage behind that, still working out what equipment it really needs to achieve—

- Q51 **Mr Francois:** Without drowning in programmatics—to save time, very quickly, we have some idea. We have Boxer from 2025; Ajax, we are now told, from the second half of 2025—well, good luck with that; and at least one Challenger 3 squadron from 2027. It is still all years away, and there is a war on right now.

One of the things that the whole Committee gets frustrated about is this



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complete lack of sense of urgency—not from the Army and CGS, but the centre—to address these fundamental problems. You will not deter Vladimir Putin with a bunch of armoured vehicles that are years away, will you?

Professor Clarke: I don't disagree.

Mr Francois: Thank you.

Chair: Richard, you wanted to come in quickly.

- Q52 **Richard Drax:** Professor Chalmers, you said earlier that the Army was likely to get smaller; I think you implied that. Where does the fault lie in this false belief—I believe, having been a soldier myself—that mass is no longer important?

We are often referred to what is going on in Ukraine. Well, if we believe the figures, the Ukrainians have lost 80,000 to 100,000 dead, and the Russians 200,000 or more. That 100,000 is 30,000 more than the whole of our Army put together, and you are saying we must prepare for the sort of war we are now seeing back in Europe. I just do not understand—perhaps you can help me—the thinking up there that keeps on saying, “We don't need mass”, when clearly we do.

Professor Chalmers: I hesitate to try to be the person who can interpret Government Ministers' views. You should obviously ask them directly yourself—

Mr Francois: We will, but while you're here—

- Q53 **Richard Drax:** We do that frequently, and we get the same answer. I am just trying to ask what you think.

Professor Chalmers: I think that all these questions, whether they relate to the Army, Navy, Air Force or whatever, must be addressed in an alliance context. We are a middle power: we cannot match Russia or China in terms of our mass or levels of spending, but the great bonus of our strategic posture since 1941 is that we work very closely with allies. Therefore, the question is what contribution can the UK best make to alliance capability?

- Q54 **Chair:** We have convening power. That, perhaps, would not do all the heavy lifting, but the ability to have enough hard power that we can be an exemplar and step forward—

Professor Chalmers: Absolutely, I agree; the question is then how will you fit best in ways that promote the UK national interest? The view is taken—this really relates to what Mike said earlier about a maritime power. I am not sure I would go quite as far as he said, but there is certainly a sense that, partly for geographical and historical reasons, and partly because of the momentum of particular programmes, we are moving into a situation in which we give a relatively lower priority to our Army than most of our allies. Under a limited budget, you are prioritising other areas. The big increase in defence spending in this recent



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announcement was on nuclear and submarines, not on the Army. That was a deliberate choice—

Q55 **Chair:** And on replenishing—

Professor Chalmers: They could have chosen the other direction. They chose not to do so.

Q56 **Sarah Atherton:** Mark has touched on capabilities in terms of equipment. We are all struggling, and agree with Richard that we cannot understand the logic behind the numbers, particularly what we are seeing in Ukraine. The MoD states that its finest asset is its people, yet there is feeling of demoralisation. They are overstretched, recruitment and retention have gone sluggish and the reserve force is not where it should be to support the regular Army. The Haythornthwaite review into incentivisation terms and conditions of service personnel is due now. That was referenced in the current defence Command Paper and is due springtime. Does the MoD give enough weighting to the finest asset, which backs up all these strategies, refreshes, future armies and Future Soldier programme? If it does not, do you expect to see further reference to service personnel in the defence Command Paper refresh?

Professor Clarke: I would certainly be looking for that in the defence White Paper. I have observed many times in every defence review I have read over the last 20, 30 years that the importance of our people is always mentioned in the foreword and then it is normally chapter 9 or chapter 10 in an 11-chapter paper, because equipment and the equipment programme tend to dominate people's thinking. The MoD has never really been able to give the priority to its most important asset—people—as it thinks it should. There are many, many reasons for that and they vary across the three services and for civilians as well, but I do not disagree with anything that you say or imply in your question and I would be looking in the defence White Paper when it appears to see if the personnel element is raised from my hypothetical chapter 9 to chapter 1.

Professor Chalmers: One thing I would add to what Mike said is, in terms of delivery of many of the commitments that are being made, notably on the nuclear and submarine area, it is critically important that you have the people available with the skills being prepared to go to the right places to deliver that, on the industrial side as well as on the service side. We are talking about a major investment in Barrow and elsewhere and in the Army warfighting experiment, and that requires people we are not currently able to recruit and retain in sufficient numbers. It is not a separate issue. People are not separate from all the other commitments; they are absolutely integral to it.

Q57 **Chair:** Can I just ask about the multi-domain integration? I think you touched on it before. We are given a lot of presentations that show a platoon commander with laser lines going up to an F-35, a Wedgetail, a P-8, another one going to a Type 45, all interlinked and able to communicate through this digital backbone. Is it coming over the horizon? Do you see it emerging any time soon, this co-operation, this



capability, this communication link-up between the three services?

Professor Chalmers: I think what I would say is that while it is a very worthwhile aspiration, in practice you always have to talk about trade-offs: where investment is best placed and where it is not worth the candle. You have to talk about redundancy. If you are talking about a war like the one going on right now in Ukraine, whatever network you have for linking up sensors and shooters and what have you, the enemy will try to destroy the critical nodes. So you have to have many different ways of communicating and you have to make sure that your forces are not so reliant on those networks that you are left vulnerable. There is a slight sense sometimes that some of the more ambitious ideas of multi-domain integration may be appropriate in the sort of wars we have been fighting in the last 20 years, where the enemy is not able to disrupt our system to the extent that they are now. There are some areas of integration that are much more important than others. If I were asking people in the MoD about multi-domain integration, I would ask, "What are the most important elements of cross-domain integration and how are you ensuring that those are robust against enemies who, if they can see where you are, will take you out and, if they can see where your communication nodes are, will take them out?"

Q58 **Chair:** When I visited Sandhurst last, I did check that they were still teaching how to use the basic compass, given that everybody is so reliant on GPS, because of course that is the great example, when you don't have that ability to communicate—

Professor Clarke: I think that's a really important point, Chairman. By and large, Britain has been more successful than many other countries over many years. In so far as multi-domain integration is possible, Britain has done it. We have been better than most at fighting in a more joint way. But that is based on personnel—on people—on the training and on improvising as and when you need it. We are now moving towards an aspiration to take it above the level of good training, good practice and joint thinking, to something that is much more digitised, and that's fine, but we see more aspiration than reality. The danger is that multi-domain integration slows down the development of systems because there is so much to try to get right in the early stages of a project. We hear a lot about the potential of the Tempest programme, say, or the Ajax programme; we don't see at the moment a great deal of delivery of that.

Q59 **Chair:** They over-complicated it. They were going for 100%, and the bar was so high that they never procured the actual piece of equipment.

Professor Clarke: And the best becomes the enemy of the good.

Q60 **Mr Francois:** At the heart of the integrated operating concept—this informs the wider IR—is the idea that you can have smaller armed forces if they are much better joined-up; you get a force multiplier effect and at the end you get a greater effect on the enemy, even though there are fewer of them. That's fine provided that you have all this wonderful, wizard kit, but we don't have it in many cases. Ajax is years late; it's a basket case, even if they finally get it to work. Morpheus, the new comms



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system to replace Bowman, the brain that Ajax would cover, that all the Army's vehicles would have in order to—it's a bunch of PowerPoint slides. We have spent over £1 billion so far. There is no Morpheus comms radio. You can't show me one. It doesn't exist yet. So isn't it another fundamental problem that the IR is a brilliant piece of theoretical engineering but we haven't yet developed the systems in order to give it effect?

Sarah Atherton: We've also cut the troop numbers on the back of the PowerPoints.

Mr Francois: Yes. We are still going to reduce the Army—in theory, to rely on these fantastic bits of kit that as yet don't actually exist. You could argue that's a weakness, couldn't you?

Professor Clarke: Yes; I wouldn't disagree with that at all—not at all—

Q61 **Mr Francois:** At all? Thank you.

Professor Clarke: No, I wouldn't disagree at all with the thrust of your question and that multi-domain integration is the philosopher's stone of battle management. Every army seeks multi-domain integration, and in the past we have been better at it than most, but we are now trying to do it in a way that is so far proving time-consuming and expensive to implement.

Professor Chalmers: All I would say is that I agree entirely with the Chair that the best can be the enemy of the good, but good is important and we need to continue to invest in digitalisation, in the increasing role of AI—the role of drones, of so many types, is developing every month in the Ukraine theatre. There is a lot we can do there; there are lots of areas of investment we do need to carry out—

Mr Francois: Malcolm, we're not averse to that, but there is the small matter of making the stuff work.

Professor Chalmers: Absolutely.

Chair: This has been a fascinating session and a very informative one indeed, so I thank very much indeed Professor Michael Clarke and Professor Malcolm Chalmers for your contributions today. No doubt we will be returning to this matter when the Ministry of Defence Command Paper comes out—in June, we hope. I thank you very much indeed for your contributions today and I thank the Committee members and, indeed, the staff. That brings our session to a conclusion.