



HOUSE OF COMMONS

# Defence Sub-Committee

## Oral evidence: Cultural Defence Diplomacy, HC 792

Tuesday 25 April 2023

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

Questions 50 - 92

### Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence, and Air Vice-Marshal Mick Smeath, Director, Global Defence Network.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon. Ben Wallace MP and Air Vice-Marshal Michael Smeath.

Q50 **Chair:** Good afternoon. May I welcome you all to this final evidence session of the Defence Sub-Committee on cultural defence diplomacy? We are delighted to have you here this afternoon, Secretary of State—delighted that you are with us and have taken an interest in this Committee. Can I also welcome your colleague, Air Vice-Marshal Michael Smeath? You are very welcome here this afternoon as well.

Secretary of State, we are starting slightly earlier than planned and will be concluding slightly earlier than planned. As Chairman, I extend my deep appreciation for your continuing to make the time and keeping this commitment this afternoon, knowing all that is going on in the world, particularly in Sudan. Before we commence the substance of our Sub-Committee inquiry, it may be appropriate to offer you the opportunity to say a few words on the matter at hand.

**Mr Wallace:** Thank you, Mr Chairman. May I profoundly apologise for the change in time? I have a Cobra meeting at 3 pm. This is an incredibly important subject to Defence; it is a Cinderella of the Defence offering, so I wanted to give it a full amount of time. I apologise, and please do not take this to mean that I do not value the subject. I can try to find some more time in which I can come back on this, because it is really important to how we deliver for British interests. Hopefully you will get from our evidence how much importance we attach to this. I am sorry.

On Sudan, obviously we had the successful evacuation of the British diplomats and their dependants over—I have lost track of the days—the weekend, I think. As of 11 o'clock this morning, British time, the processing centre reception team from Border Force and the Foreign Office, on the airfield in Sudan, were up and running. They had been brought from the UK or Cyprus in the night by our forces. We now have approximately 120 British forces at the airfield, supporting the evacuation of nationals and dual nationals through the airports. The airfield is currently run by the German military. We stand ready to take over from them, should they decide that their evacuation is finished. There is obviously the 72-hour ceasefire, which is a window, but it is a volatile situation.

I want to place on record my thanks to the Sudanese armed forces, who are happy to host us at their airfield, and indeed at Port Sudan on the Red sea, which I have striven to make sure is available as an alternative location. While it is 500 miles away from Khartoum across the desert, it is a more benign environment, and it allows access to the Red sea and commercial airports in places such as Jeddah. That would give us space and time to process people there.

We already have people at Port Sudan. We put some people in from the Royal Marines to work alongside them, and to establish the safety of the



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area and any options. We are in a good position there, should we wish to increase support. I have already directed HMS Lancaster to sail to Port Sudan. The Bay-class ship, Cardigan Bay, will be making its way there at some stage, because it could well be that this stops being an evacuation and becomes a humanitarian crisis that we have to deal with.

The challenge on the ground in Sudan, as a result of the conflict, is food and water access. Cardigan Bay and that type of Bay-class ship are absolutely suited to humanitarian support. Should that be required, Cardigan Bay, which is already based in the Red sea, will be there on call. Then we will consider next steps; that is my next planning. I am keeping Port Sudan up our sleeve for contingencies. If the airfield were to close, it would be one of the few options left.

**Chair:** Thank you, Secretary of State. I think that our substantive Chair wishes to ask you a question.

Q51 **Mr Ellwood:** I am grateful, Chair. Secretary of State, we understand that you are very busy indeed, but it is appropriate for us to ask a couple of questions on this before we get to the main focus of today's session. As you say, the situation is fast-moving. This ceasefire is for 72 hours; it could fold at any time, and we are conscious of that.

Can you say when Wadi Seidna airport will be in British hands and the Britons will start to be evacuated, bearing in mind that the French and, indeed, the Germans are ahead of us in that sense? Also, you mention the Port of Sudan. Many Britons, including people from my constituency, have headed that way. Is there a clear assembly point where people rally to, knowing that they can then be picked up, processed and brought back to the UK?

**Mr Wallace:** I think that the recce team is there to establish whether that is needed. The British nationals we have already seen arrive there have done so either through the UN convoy or under their own steam. It is a functioning port—in a sense, at peace—with commercial ferries across to Jeddah on the Red Sea. What we have seen is that a lot of British people have just made their own way. It isn't an evacuation under crisis when they get there; it's basically just their ability to—they have been making their own way, but we are always happy to help and facilitate. We have pre-positioned some assets should that become different.

Of course, one of the lessons that I took away from Kabul is that the challenge is not the British passport holder; nor is it the dependant with a third-nation passport but with a leave to remain visa. It is dependants with no passports and no identity papers. That is the challenge, and those people could be very young or very vulnerable—

**Mr Ellwood:** Sorry, Secretary of State—

**Mr Wallace:** My point is that what could happen in Port Sudan and the airfield is—that's why the Home Office are out there: to process those people who are immediate, like the children of those people.



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**Q52 Mr Ellwood:** Just to stress the point, my constituent doesn't know where to go. If it was possible to have a clear British flag, a locality, a grid reference of where they need to go to, that would be helpful. But I repeat the question: when do you start; when do you believe that we will start to evacuate those people—

**Mr Wallace:** If and when the Germans leave.

**Q53 Mr Ellwood:** Sorry?

**Mr Wallace:** The Germans are running the airfield at the moment, so if and when the Germans leave.

**Q54 Mr Ellwood:** And that will be today or tomorrow?

**Mr Wallace:** I can't speculate on the Germans, simply because they are responding to the condition of the flow of their citizens and their nationals, and if those national citizens start to completely drop off and, indeed, they view it as there being no—

**Q55 Mr Ellwood:** This is my final question, because I know we want to get going. You mentioned dual nationals. Dual nationals and monos are being invited to then come to the airport as well?

**Mr Wallace:** Where possible to communicate—because the communications are very patchy and very small—they are being called forward by the Foreign Office. But to get ahead of that—the Foreign Office realised the difficulties in communicating directly, so they produced more blanket conditions: "If this and this, then you should make your way to the airfield."

**Mr Ellwood:** Thank you, sir; I am very grateful.

**Chair:** Thank you, Secretary of State. It would have been incongruous not to have any question, but we recognise entirely that it is a moving picture, so thank you.

**Mr Wallace:** And if I get any updates while I'm here, I'll let you know.

**Chair:** Thank you; we appreciate that.

Now we move to cultural defence diplomacy. So far, Secretary of State, we have had a number of evidence sessions. We have heard from Buster Howes, from the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, and we have heard from Professors Jeremy Black and Greg Kennedy. We have looked at soft influence and relationship building throughout the world, through things like the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, and at the utilisation of defence assets and, when visiting ports for example, how they can be incorporated alongside other Government strategic interests. And of course, the third and an important arm of this inquiry is the defence attaché network and how best that could be utilised in the years to come. Thank you for attending; I am going to hand over to Richard Drax for our first question, please.

**Q56 Richard Drax:** Afternoon to you both. Thank goodness for the C-130! I



felt I just had to say that.

**Mr Wallace:** I've got a response if you'd like to hear it.

**Mr Ellwood:** You're keeping it?

**Mr Wallace:** It accounts for less than 10% of our volume lift. We have the greatest volume lift we have ever had in our history now. The A400 has a better performance, better lift carry, and we used it. I think in nearly every characteristic, the A400 is better, except, probably, one, which is how much fuel it uses when it is sitting on the ground.

**Richard Drax:** Thank you for answering the question.

**Mr Wallace:** So we could have done it—and all the other nations used A400s.

Q57 **Richard Drax:** Back to the issue now. How do the armed forces and the MoD contribute to the UK's soft power and diplomacy, and do you think the withdrawal, as it seems to me, of our military around the world is something that has to be reversed, bearing in mind that the military are a very good standard bearer for diplomacy, trade and so on?

**Mr Wallace:** Richard, I wouldn't characterise it as a withdrawal at all; in fact, we have done the opposite. We now have two battle groups rotating through Oman and Kenya each for four-month tours. When I took over this job, they were intermittently there for six weeks.

I took a view: in our day, when we were serving, we did four months—we did four months in Belize or whatever—and you can achieve a lot more in four months of presence. You can do your training; you can benefit the men and women of the armed forces, because they can do their adventure training properly, which was always part of the offer to our people; you can give them some down time; and you can do some exchanges or work with neighbouring countries and get out into the region—you don't necessarily just have to be in Kenya but can go and do training teams with neighbouring countries and be present.

You also have, indirectly, British presence for eight months of the year in the form of a battle group of one type or the other in those countries. That is a really important view. It was not accepted by everyone in the military—it is a very different armed forces; people do not like being away so much and all that—but presence matters. We are in Cyprus helping this air bridge because we are present in Cyprus, with two battalions and now the RAF regiment able to do those jobs.

The good thing about Air Vice-Marshal Smeath is that not only has he previously worked on the fifth floor, in the Chief of the Defence Staff's office, so he sees where soft power and hard power meet, but his last job was as a defence attaché. So I have a living and breathing former defence attaché, who can answer as to what it is like on the ground and how you do your business, but he is also now head of the new role.



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This advance, with more expansion in the world, relates to a global defence attaché network, which I thought was not particularly well led or well purposed. We have made a new appointment as the head of the global defence attaché network—that is Air Vice-Marshal Smeath—to make sure it is properly led. There are most posts. We are investing £60 million in expanding the defence network and spending more than £50 million to enhance their communications so that they have secret and above-secret comms, which are really important, because without that you cannot do your job properly, and we have done some reorganisation.

I would characterise us as actually expanding in the world and making sure that we intelligently apply our assets and our soft power to make the difference. In their mission, I reorganised in the Department so that defence attachés will be co-located in the organisation of the Department with defence intelligence. They will not be spooks—they will not be defence intelligence people—but they will be co-located and under the same overall command of the Chief of Defence Intelligence, with the single mission of “influence and understand”. They are there to understand our friends and our adversaries, and they are also there to influence, whether that is in commercial sales, in the direction of pro-western values and our international rules-based system, or in the development and experience in the reform of militaries, where that is needed.

I think the test is probably when you ask in two years’ time, “How’s it gone? How has it delivered?” But it has not been a contraction; it has actually been an expansion, including in the way we use our deployments of our people.

**Q58 Richard Drax:** With time tight, let me move on to the next question. The IR refresh mentioned the College for National Security and re-skilling diplomatic capability. What involvement does the MoD and its staff have in those endeavours?

**Mr Wallace:** I think it is a Foreign Office body, but I will ask Mick to answer.

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** Part of my role as a director is to professionalise and operationalise the network. It is professional and operational, but we want to take it into a different space. Expanding it is one of those things, but it is also about upskilling and making sure we have the right skills for the job.

We are absolutely linked into that organisation. I sit, as the director of this network, on the three-star FCDO cross-Government network board. I am linked into that organisation and I am also linked into the FCDO’s language centre and all their training. What we are doing is sort of cross-decking the skills that we think we need for defence diplomacy and defence engagement writ large with what they need. Under the One HMG construct, I think that works quite well now. It is something that wasn’t there before, but we are truly linked in with them.

**Q59 Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Good afternoon to you both. This might go a bit wider



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than your remit, Secretary of State, but if you look at Brexit, aid cuts, Government churn, the economic shocks last year and plans to repeal the Human Rights Act, do you think they are impacting on our soft power and how people view us around the world?

**Mr Wallace:** Certainly, from a defence point of view—defence soft power—I don't think we have ever had so many requests for support and help around the world. People want us more than ever. They want us for our understanding and also for the international rules that we teach. Contrary to what you were saying about the Human Rights Act, we often are engaged in teaching people the Geneva conventions, the rule of law and how to be better soldiers and forces, because we all have experience that, actually, you get a detrimental effect by not following them and respecting human rights. It damages how a soldier can do his or her job on the ground if a population feels that their human rights are not respected. People never stop asking me for places at Sandhurst, places at Cranwell—"Can we have a training team? Can we have assistance?" Actually, the biggest challenge is: do we have enough resource to meet the demand?

Q60 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Do you accept that those things I have just listed, though, have had a negative impact?

**Mr Wallace:** Well, I've just said I have never seen a greater increase in the number of people requesting support, so I would say it is the reverse.

Q61 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Obviously, you will be aware that people do say this. More recently, when we were in Washington, in terms of the economic shocks last year, they said that an element of trust was gone because they had no warning that this was coming. Surely you must accept that there are reports out there and people who say these things do impact on our soft power and how the rest of the world views us.

**Mr Wallace:** I did 41 international visits last year. No one went, "That economic shock last year? I don't think I am going to have any British assistance"; it has been the complete opposite. What I would tell you is, from the perspective of my visits, Britain's leadership on Ukraine, which is about standing up for human rights, sovereignty and the rules-based system, is proper leadership. It is not passive; we have not just said it and done nothing. Most people, including in Washington, thank us for it, so I think it would be the opposite of the premise of your question.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** We will have to agree to disagree, Secretary of State. There are lots of reports out there that would say otherwise.

Q62 **Dave Doogan:** Secretary of State, the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo is an outstanding and world-leading celebration of military culture. How can we make better use of that event for cultural defence diplomacy?

**Mr Wallace:** Ultimately, Ministers and senior leadership should not be frightened of spending some taxpayers' money to use these events to further British interests. Everyone gets attacked and the media will often criticise. Sometimes that has a detrimental effect on all political parties wanting to showcase what Britain and Scotland have to offer.



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**Q63 Dave Doogan:** Just to be clear, do you mean spending taxpayers' money to capitalise on the event, which is happening without taxpayers' money already?

**Mr Wallace:** If I were to take five Defence Ministers to the Edinburgh tattoo, it would cost the taxpayer some money.

**Dave Doogan:** I just want to be clear that the tattoo does not get any taxpayer funding.

**Mr Wallace:** I didn't say that. I hosted the JEF—the Nordic Ministers—at Edinburgh castle. We had a dinner at the castle. We had a piper there. Then we went down to the Government's house in Edinburgh, and we hosted them there. Over the decades, there is a culture of constantly being criticised for being away or doing these things. We need to embrace our assets; whether that is Edinburgh castle or taking my colleagues to something different like a highland games, it is a benefit. Yes, it sometimes costs taxpayers' money to do that. The first thing is to encourage a culture among our political leadership, our Ministers and our military leadership not to be frightened of taking advantage of some of these amazing things.

**Q64 Dave Doogan:** I don't know about anybody else, but that sounds like a capital idea, Secretary of State. I urge you to go forward with that.

**Mr Wallace:** Yes, we will all be criticised by the *Daily Mail* for spending x or y, but ultimately Britain has a lot to offer in not just amazing events like the tattoo, but a whole load of events—air shows, the Queen's birthday parade, trooping the colour. I have invited one of my colleagues to the King's birthday parade. The Coldstream Guards are doing it this year.

**Richard Drax:** Quite right, too.

**Q65 Dave Doogan:** That sounds like an acknowledgment that there is more we could do for strategic gain by utilising events like the tattoo.

**Mr Wallace:** I think what the Defence Command Paper was trying to do was say, in many of these parts, that we should use our international defence diplomacy properly. We should take advantage of it. We should exploit it. We should use it deliberately. My point about Mick's appointment and the actual post was that what I inherited was a system where I go abroad and we have, really, three strands that deal with foreign partners. We have defence intelligence—obviously, as an intelligence organisation it has its function. We have the defence attaché network, and that links into country desks in the Department. I found that they were not joined up. I used to say to whatever defence attaché I would meet, "Who gives you the orders? What do you do on Monday? Who directs you to follow a plan?" It was pretty ad hoc. You would go to some countries and the defence attaché—

**Q66 Dave Doogan:** Just to bring it back to the tattoo, I and some others were there last week. It was genuinely outstanding. When was the last time that you enjoyed the Edinburgh Military Tattoo?



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**Mr Wallace:** I think I went as a punter 10 or 15 years ago—or maybe it was when I was in the Scottish Parliament. I cannot remember. It was a long time ago.

**Dave Doogan:** I would urge you to get back.

**Mr Wallace:** I will. Actually, I think it was since I left the Scottish Parliament and since I have been in Parliament, but yes, I will. I will be delighted to go.

Q67 **Chair:** I think the point being made in evidence in an earlier session was that, while the three armed services use it incredibly well and host evenings, as you know, on a rotational basis, Whitehall does not. The Scottish Government do, but Whitehall does not. I think the message, if we can press it upon you and colleagues, is to spread the wealth. Let people know that it is available, and it is a good opportunity to use.

**Mr Wallace:** In terms of what I have experienced, Lancaster House, where some of you will have been to receptions, is the Government's hospitality house next to St James's Palace. In all the Departments I have been in, some Departments never went near it. I don't know whether that was money or whatever, but they never went near it. Defence uses it and the Foreign Office uses it, but some of the Departments would not go near any of these things. They were like, "Oh, we don't do that."

I think soft power is broader than the traditional. It is not just the Foreign Office's business and it is not just Defence. It is about Science, Trade and everything. We should take advantage of all these events and all the hospitality locations we have, whether that is Chequers, Lancaster House or Chevening, which the Foreign Secretary has. Those sorts of things are important.

I have not done it, but how about taking someone to a football match, if all they have ever wanted to do is see Chelsea versus whoever? That is my point about being a bit braver. It is about keeping our friends close and working at relationships. Some people, if they want to buy British, for example, want to know that we are not going to disappear in 20 years' time. They want us to be long-term partners, and friendships matter.

Q68 **Sarah Atherton:** Secretary of State, defence diplomacy is value for money in my book, but does not come cheap. The UK spends £184 million, whereas Germany spends £478 million on soft power agencies. You just mentioned the Defence Command Paper refresh; are we likely to see more around defence diplomacy and engagement in that?

**Mr Wallace:** What we will hopefully see—since the Defence Command Paper had my instruction to professionalise the defence network, which is important, and to make sure that we are putting the right officers and the right support in the right jobs, because that is important—is better training for longer, to make sure that the course they do prepares them to be a professional defence attaché. It should include language, commercial, intelligence, security—all those modules. It should be a professional option



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for an officer, or even a warrant officer, for example, to join that loop, and in doing so it can be a career all the way up.

What we have seen too many times in the past is it being an afterthought or a secondary career. It should be a prime, premier career for someone in the armed forces to decide, "You know what? I'm going to be an attaché. I'm not going to be a field commander, commanding a tank division, but I am going to be an expert in the middle east. I'm going to start junior and I'm going to do 20 years in the middle east, then into the Foreign Office, into the Department. I'll know all the people in the region. I'll know Arabic." At the end of their career, they could be a two-star or a one-star.

What has often happened is that someone has done a two or three-year posting in a middle eastern country. The next thing you know, you find them on the other side of the world, in the Philippines or somewhere. We have put all that value into you—all that training—and we want you to be a diplomat for defence in a region. That is the first point.

The big two challenges are professionalising the network and then leading the network, which is what Air Vice-Marshal Mick Smeath is here to do: lead it and utilise it. What that produces will unlock even more funding later on. If you gave me another £50 million tomorrow, I am not sure I would be able to spend it, because we have to recruit and train—we have to do the homework here—but we have a commitment to expand our posts and we have already increased our posts in a number of areas.

**Q69 Mr Ellwood:** Soft power is about influence and it is also to do with relationships and individual personalities. I am sure that, as Defence Secretary, you lean on some of the bonds, relationships and friendships that you created in your time as Security Minister, which I think you did for a little while. You can now benefit from those. In the same way—you touched on this—we bring people here to Sandhurst, Dartmouth and Cranwell, and often they are coming from countries where, one day, they are going to end up either leading on the Foreign Office side or, indeed, the military side.

We went to West Point in the United States. There is an incredible operation there. They offer a degree: you walk away with a degree. Should we be advancing our offering for the Army, Air Force and Navy, to provide something that really leans out to welcome foreign students to come here? I appreciate absolutely that we do take some, but what we can do is limited. Should we further embrace this, bearing in mind the soft power, so that we are then encapsulating, befriending and anglicising—if you like—the next generation of leaders, by their coming to the UK to do their training rather than going elsewhere?

**Mr Wallace:** We can get the Committee the numbers of how many we have at staff college, and not just the Sandhurst or Dartmouth offering. We are training overseas cadets at Brecon as well, on the special to army infantry training, and I need to find out whether we are doing non-



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commissioned officers as well. We have a lot. I do not think we have put it together to tell you exactly where they are; that is something for us to do.

I could not agree more, though, that it is the best value for money going. If you are worried about Chinese and Russian influence in Africa, one of the ways to challenge that is to take the next generation of African leaders and make sure they have attended your institutions. When I say “your institutions”, I do not just mean military institutions; it could be your universities or your civil service colleges. That is the way. When I talk to the Australians and the United States, that is what we talk about. We currently fund 50% of the courses in our British military institutions. There is always a bit of a trade-off about how many places are at Sandhurst, full stop. If you give up over 100-and-something a year to overseas cadets, obviously there is a capacity issue.

**Q70 Mr Ellwood:** I hear what you are saying. I appreciated it; you and I both went to Sandhurst, and I think we very much welcomed the input from the overseas cadets. I am saying let’s triple it—let us make this a thing that we do. If you want to go to a school of international diplomacy, you do not come to the UK for that. You might do—there are a few schools that can do it, such as Oxford, tied in with the FCDO—but you actually go to Vienna. Vienna has the international reputation: if you want any student to become a diplomat, you send them to Vienna to get their basic training. We could advance that—triple it.

Thursday war games, which the Navy runs, is another example that you will be familiar with. We could double the size of that. When I ask why we don’t do that, to test the navies, it is, “Because nobody has told us to do that.” That is a money-making thing that we could do, but it also adds soft power. Even the Americans come and use the Thursday war games; they have a fantastic reputation. If that is what we are good at, let us really leverage it and double the capability.

**Mr Wallace:** Certainly on the Sandhurst thing, I agree. I am happy to direct more. I do not know the maximum capacity at Sandhurst.

**Q71 Mr Ellwood:** You would have to advance it out and rebuild. I think it has shrunk in size, but the estate is huge so you could easily do it.

**Mr Wallace:** In principle we agree. Everything has a maximum capacity, though; the question is how much capital you want to spend on increasing that, how many instructors and so on. It is a brand that people want; you and I know that. Remember, we have overseas students on ACSE and at the Royal College of Defence Studies. If you go on any of those courses—I haven’t been, but some of our colleagues here did. Did you go to—

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** Both.

**Mr Wallace:** You’ll find lots of overseas students on those courses. Could we do more? Yes, of course we could do more, and I am happy to. I am hoping that Mick’s appointment—were you appointed three months ago?

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** Three months ago.



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**Mr Wallace:** I hope that will really help to drive. It has some leadership now and some focus. It has the support of the Department to intelligently apply our needs. The reform of the Department is to make sure that the network is asking the right questions and we are influencing the right people.

You have heard me talk before about being “threat-orientated”. When I started at the Department, I said “Let’s look at a map of Africa. Where do China, Russia, terrorism all sit?” It is not hard to overlay all those on British interests and work out where you want to focus. Focus, lead, direct, use to influence, use to understand, and feed into the system. You will know from your own time that that did not really happen.

**Mr Ellwood:** There is an interesting list of leaders—premiers—from around the world who attended Sandhurst. I should say that they are not all good, but we will not go down that path.

Q72 **Sarah Atherton:** I have a supplementary question. Secretary of State, can I urge you to talent scout within the junior ranks as well, and pull out good attributes and skills that junior ranks also have? I am making a pitch there.

**Mr Wallace:** Part of the reform to the Army is that the Army is more than the armoured brigade. It is about developing careers across all the specialities that we need and encouraging people. I remember going to Morocco when I was Security Minister and meeting an amazing lady. She was from the AG Corps, or the Royal Logistic Corps, and she was doing a six-month temporary attachment as a junior MA in Morocco. She loved it and I hope that she is still doing that as a career somewhere. It is about getting people out to try or explore that. As you say, it does not matter whether they are officers or not. There should be lots and lots of opportunity.

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** If I may say, I was enlisted—I was the lowest rank in the Air Force originally, 37 years ago—so I have a vested interest in the same.

**Sarah Atherton:** Grand; thanks.

Q73 **Mr Ellwood:** The next subject is defence attachés. Somebody I was at Sandhurst with, Mike Thornton, ended up as a colonel. He came up through the ranks, did the Arabic course and ended up as our defence attaché in Bahrain. His next posting was doing smart missile procurement back in London—something he knew not a lot about. He wanted to go back and do the defence attaché work in the Middle East. That was a few years ago; has the machine changed a little bit, such that we now embrace those who want to do this job and are good at it, rather than it sometimes being looked at as one of the last postings that you do before you then retire?

**Mr Wallace:** That is exactly the problem I have tried to fix. Maybe because of our age, Tobias, we meet our contemporaries, or people we know, who are in that space. That is exactly what Mick is here to fix,



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bringing his professionalism. Mick is a high-flying officer, not only in the Air Force—no pun intended—but in defence. He was defence attaché in the United States, which is a significant job.

It is improving, but it is not where I want it to be. One of the things I say to myself is that when I leave, I want this to have been done. That is why the qualification and the training courses need to be better, longer, more professional, and we need to look at the postings. It is a waste of taxpayers' money otherwise. What is the point in loading up your friend with Arabic, knowledge and contacts and then pinging him over to Bristol to do missiles when his next posting should probably have been Qatar or Oman?

**Q74 Mr Ellwood:** The thing is that he then quit. He said, "This wasn't for me; I don't like smart missile procurement."

**Mr Wallace:** But that is my point: the Army doesn't begin and then stop at an armoured brigade. If an army cared about that skillset, it would have made sure it kept him.

**Q75 Mr Ellwood:** On the defence attaché, which is such critical work from the soft power perspective, at what rank do you now then show an interest? Can you then stay in that arc of interests?

**Mr Wallace:** I've seen assistant DAs—MAs—at majors, and some of them really are fantastic. Sometimes it gets a bit embarrassing; sometimes you go to a post and the assistant MA is fluent in the language—much better than the attaché—and the host nation is saying, "We want this person. We want them to stay." But that is what we are going to do: we are going to professionalise that network. We are on it, but as you know, changing people—the people part of the Department—is probably the hardest bit.

**Q76 Mr Ellwood:** But you are embracing this and trying to change it, are you?

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** I have had conversations with the three principal personnel officers from each of the services. We are trying to spot talent at captain level, initially, for those that want to be defence attachés, or any form of attaché. We are looking at sergeant level for those that go to support those organisations. That is ongoing. I think we are significantly better than we were in your day, and my early days. I think we are not where we need to be, though, but we are a lot closer to it than we were before. The three services are very forward leading on it. The skills that you get working in the global defence network, interestingly, are the skills that you need at two-star, three-star and four-star. They are now being recognised as a lot more important. You could argue that you could use these skills at all levels and all ranks. I could have used them at the lowest rank.

**Mr Wallace:** Where I want to get to—I will be honest; it is not easy internally in the established services to change them—is that you do not become a one-star or two-star in the diplomatic defence attaché network unless you have done a separate course, not the ACSC but this enhanced course, and that is where you get promoted. That will be attractive to



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people to make a choice. What we have seen in the past is a sort of consolation prize—Joe Bloggs did not get an armoured brigade, so give him defence attaché for country X, although he can't even speak the language. I want it to be a fine career, professionalised, understanding that the skills of influence and all those things are just as important. I have been able to do stuff on Sudan through ministerial connections quicker than through the formal system. I needed to forward-base some Chinooks, so I texted a counterpart in a country and—bang—I got it in 24 hours. That is just because in some of those countries, it is run by one person, and you have to just do that.

**Q77 Mr Ellwood:** My final point takes us back to West Point, and that is a degree course, as I stressed. I think it is really interesting that you have come away with that. You learn a language there as well. Maybe this is a radical change—that you start to learn basic Chinese, basic Arabic or basic Russian. These are skillsets that might be useful, given where the world is.

**Mr Wallace:** The American system is better joined up, if you want my view. The Green Berets are very highly trained and tough soldiers. They are also highly trained in language. Every Green Beret does a six-month language course. They pick a language and they do a six-month language course. They are the link between a defence attaché soft power network—as the soft power migrates to hard power, they are right there in the middle. Not only have they been in a training team, but they can accompany and also speak the language and really understand the culture of where they are. Ultimately, the ambition for the Rangers would be that we have Rangers who are good at languages.

Britain has always slightly taken the mickey out of the Americans in their awareness and international knowledge, but I think they show us up when it comes to languages. The US military embraces the training of language much more than we do. If you are going to seamlessly move from soft to medium to hard power, language is a key component.

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** On your point about going off to missile procurement, what we want is a defence attaché who would work in, say, Bahrain, but then would come back to maybe the single service, maybe to work in policy and operations, to reinvest that back into the home base. They would then be talent-managed and taken back out to go and work in the middle east, but they would not be finishing Bahrain knowing that there was only one more tour left. That is what we are trying to get away from.

**Mr Ellwood:** We need an MoD camel corps, really, don't we?

**Q78 Derek Twigg:** Secretary of State, can I just clarify something, because I am not 100% clear? We are talking about having a defence diplomacy career, but are we then excluding it as part of a career pathway for someone going to the very top—becoming a three or four-star, or maybe head of the Army or the Air Force? Is it both, or is it one or the other? I am not quite clear on that one.



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**Mr Wallace:** I want it to be a career path that, if you are successful at it and committed to it, can get you promoted to some of the highest levels. At the moment, it is less likely that you will make it to a two-star major general or brigadier level through the defence attaché network, partly because of some of the cohort they have been choosing, but partly because, to become a two-star or a one-star, I think you have to do an ACSC—do you?

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath** indicated assent.

**Mr Wallace:** So currently you have to do the Shrivenham course, which is really designed for a mixture of leadership, but not particularly defence attachés, so it imposes a ceiling on to defence attachés, because unless you've done that course, you are not going to be, predominantly, a senior defence attaché—but you might therefore not have done any defence attaché-ing until you become a senior one. So the course, in my view, gets in the way. It means that people choose to try and follow one career—and when that doesn't work, over to the other—and that is not the best way to run anyone's career. I think that's the first thing.

I think the second thing is getting the armed forces to really value what these guys can do. Different posts will have different weightings. Some might be an intelligence post and it will be very important for them to understand the adversary, because they're based in that country. For others, they might need to be much better at commercial, because it may be one of our most important export markets. So the defence attachés in those countries will really need to understand that—actually, they might need to understand the missiles, because they might be the commercial offering, and, because those countries are allies, there will be much less requirement to understand them to do that.

So it's not an either/or; it's to create a parallel career structure that gets these people—

Q79 **Derek Twigg:** So just be clear, someone who did some time in defence diplomacy could still literally end up being head of the Army or Air Force? That could still happen?

**Mr Wallace:** Not at the moment it couldn't.

Q80 **Derek Twigg:** Is that what you are moving towards?

**Mr Wallace:** Ultimately, I think the heads of the services no longer have to be a field commander in the way they might have done 20 years ago. The head of Strategic Command, General Jim Hockenhull, is an Intelligence Corps officer. He's not only the Intelligence Corps' first three-star officer; he is actually the Intelligence Corps' first four-star officer. Ultimately, the point is that there are definitely places for high-flying and successful defence attachés to continue their career in the armed forces to a higher level. General Cavoli is currently SACEUR, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. A huge amount of his career was in US defence engagement, and he is now the most senior general in Europe.



Q81 **Derek Twigg:** So at the moment that is something you are looking at to do.

**Mr Wallace:** The point is to try and value the career, and that means you recognise that, if they can show all those skills, they should be able to go through those rank structures and be in the mix for some of the top jobs in the armed forces. Let's put it that way.

Q82 **Chair:** I wonder, Air Vice-Marshal, if I could ask you about your view on the current use of defence attachés and the challenges you face in the role that you now assume.

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** There are two parts to it: the professionalisation and the operationalisation. On the professionalisation side, the language training needs to be looked at. I don't think it is quite where it needs to be, so the language training is one aspect of it. In some countries, you absolutely need to speak the language. In other countries, realistically, unless you started at a very young age, you are not going to get to the standard that you would need to get to; therefore, you can probably take some risk there.

On the professionalisation side, and also on the talent management side, as the Secretary of State said, we have to identify early. We need to make sure that we actually map out people's careers. I am somebody who has been very lucky: mine has been mapped out. There are opportunities at three-star and four-star for somebody like me who gets to this type of position, but getting to that position is tricky—I have been lucky. That is something I am working with the three services to do.

On the operationalisation side, resources are always a challenge. To implement the integrated operating concept, we want persistent engagement. Persistent engagement costs money, and we need to make sure we use that money as well as we can for defence. But critically, we need to match it to defence objectives, which is matched to the wider national objectives. Part of that is the 1HMG concept—or 1HMG ideal, I should say—because being part of that is important, albeit protecting our own equities at the same time. Getting that right is probably the key to unlocking some efficiencies, and just using what we have better to then operationalise. Everything is there; we just need to look at it in a slightly different and more innovative way, but the opportunities abound. There are sunny uplands; that is for sure.

Q83 **Chair:** Whenever I attended RCDS, there was a range of civil servants from other Departments—nothing to do with Defence whatever. That cross-fertilisation was good for them. Do defence attachés benefit from that cross-fertilisation in the other direction? Is your language provision, for example, pooled with the FCDO? Do you do a lot with the FCDO?

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** Language provision is not pooled with the FCDO at the moment, although I visited the FCDO language organisation or school the other day. We are looking at some initiatives there.



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We absolutely do train with the FCDO. The FCDO has quite a big input into the course as it stands at the moment, and that is a change from before our current Secretary of State for Defence. That is good. On the exercises that they have, the FCDO and other agencies and Departments take part in that. That is a new thing for our training, but you are right; they absolutely do because, when you get out to post, if you are in Washington DC as I was, predominantly, there are more non-military than there are military. The embassy is huge, and we are quite a small part of that.

**Q84 Mr Ellwood:** Might you consider merging the courses? Because it is not only about learning the language; you are also befriending and making contacts with the FCDO as well. Why not utilise their language training, which is already there?

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** In terms of language training, I think there are three schools across government, and we are looking at the moment at how to better utilise that.

**Chair:** Derek, do you want to ask about expanding the network?

**Q85 Derek Twigg:** The Defence Command Paper, which was published in March 2021, committed to “a larger, professionalised cadre of permanently deployed personnel” and so on. The figures we had from your annual reports and accounts from ’21-22 said that the UK had 164 defence attachés, which was up from 149 the previous year. There are around 288 lone service personnel in 15 countries and 86 embedded officers in eight countries.

**Mr Wallace:** Eighty-six defence attachés.

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** Covering 136 countries.

**Derek Twigg:** Yes. I just wondered about the tangible benefit that you want to get from that. Is there anything that you have come across that is obvious so far that you have seen from having that increase? You obviously desire to increase it further.

**Mr Wallace:** In some areas, the benefit was in places like Ukraine, actually, by chance, and obviously in Australia—we have expanded there—and obviously AUKUS. We have seen the benefit in that, as workload has increased, we have had some people in the right place at the right time. I think it has been very important to do so. To the earlier point—do people still want Britain?—we have actually seen an increase in our demand. People are asking for us. Of course, we have always got finite resources, but I think the most tangible thing is that Britain is viewed to be forward-leaning and out showing leadership.

I think the DAs are managing to deliver that. I am off to Poland, tomorrow I think, furthering a contract of air defence missiles. That may or may not be defence attachés, but it is all part of the offering and the influence and the growing work there. We have definitely seen that.



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I appointed a new head of Defence Intelligence, Adrian Bird. He wasn't from the military, but he has a history in the J2 world—the intelligence world. That ability to use and understand what is going on is vital. I give the example of Sudan and hearing from those defence attachés—I think there are eight in the region or something—about what is going on in the neighbours. The neighbours are just as important as the country—really useful. But we still have some work to do, and we still need to give—

Q86 **Derek Twigg:** So you're pleased with the progress so far.

**Mr Wallace:** Yes. I don't know how long I have in this job, but I really do want the professionalism of the career to be finished, and I really want the roll-out of the secure comms, because if we cannot speak to each other securely, that is a challenge. The final piece of the jigsaw is that Mick is there to do the better commanding of them and the direction of them, but we need to populate that network. I think we have 86, when we should have 90 at the moment, so we need to make sure we have the right number. I think there is still a little bit of a way to go.

Q87 **Derek Twigg:** Do you think comms is one of the biggest challenges in developing a global network?

**Mr Wallace:** It's the biggest challenge, full stop. Whether you are in Defence or something else, secure comms are important. Looking back over the last seven years, one of my experiences as Security Minister and in this job is that a lot of your limiting factor is the ability to speak to your fellow Ministers, your fellow military or, indeed, allies at a secure level. It is amazing how much that dictates your outcomes, and if we could have Defence-secure comms in more locations and at a better level than they are now, we would, first, not have to rely on others. Secondly, we could use that network even more.

Q88 **Derek Twigg:** What is the timescale for getting to that point?

**Mr Wallace:** I got the money last year—I found the money for it. We then have to design, but we have already chosen the top 16 posts that we will put in.

**Derek Twigg:** Sixteen?

**Mr Wallace:** Sixteen, and there will be another 30 posts that are lower classifications. We then have to negotiate with the embassies to put in Defence assets, but we are working through that, so we will get there.

**Derek Twigg:** You smile.

**Mr Wallace:** It's just because, in a sense—

Q89 **Derek Twigg:** So they're not quite as co-operative as they should be?

**Mr Wallace:** You can't just walk in and take over somebody's embassy.

Q90 **Derek Twigg:** So we've got a joined-up Government.



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**Mr Wallace:** We've got a joined-up Government, but it is the ambassadors' estate and we have to respect that. We'll get there—don't worry.

Q91 **Chair:** We are just coming to a conclusion, Secretary of State, but it was mentioned in one of our earlier sessions that there is an issue with rank and that, for certain countries and for relationships of significance, you need to be of sufficient rank to be taken seriously or to have doors opened as a defence attaché. Is that something that you are considering or have considered—how best you can ensure that your young, bright and rising star within this career path is taken seriously where rank is all-important?

**Mr Ellwood:** So that you can have acting local rank.

**Mr Wallace:** I'll let Mick say how he would get around that problem, because he would have to deliver it.

**Air Vice-Marshal Smeath:** Some countries are very hierarchical, and you absolutely need to be of the right rank. That is taken into account when we select for those countries. Some countries see competence and experience associated directly with rank. Of course, as we know, that is not necessarily always the case, but those countries do see it that way. Because of that, we cut our rank cloth to that. I would suggest there are enough major, lieutenant-colonel, colonel and one-star—if I use Army ranks—posts across the network that, actually, we can cater for that talent. For example, there are 54 full colonels, or equivalents from other services, in the network, so we can manage it. But we absolutely take that into account on the selection.

Q92 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Secretary of State, when we embarked on this Sub-Committee inquiry—I was pushing for it for some time—little did we know that there was significant interest within the Department, and within your office, about these issues. I suppose that we get so consumed at times with issues around procurement, geopolitics and various theatres that this is the sort of thing that does not get much attention within our Committee. As part of your request and your collective endeavour on these issues, it sounds as if there are some levels of resistance and there is still work to be done, but we will be formulating an inquiry report and therefore turning our minds to recommendations. What are the key challenges you face that need to be addressed?

**Mr Wallace:** The resistance is that, if you take an HR policy of a single armed force, they do not like changing it. If you say, "There are the people; you need to change who you value. This is how you are going to value them, and this is how you are going to promote them," they do not like that change, because they are deeply small c conservative organisations. That is the experience that I think a lot of us have had at one stage—and it is an oil tanker. I do not think that it is necessarily a deliberate resistance; it just like, "Well, we've always done it this way."

For what it is worth, I think that raising the profile of defence diplomacy helps the recruitment of people to come into it. However, it is also the Cinderella of defence funding. It is incredibly useful and actually incredibly



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powerful if you get it right. It is also one of the contributors towards avoiding conflict. If you have good defence diplomacy and good soft power, you often end up helping a country's resilience to its own threats, and if it can stand the threats that it faces, it does not end up in a war that you then have to go and fight with it.

I therefore think it is really key. It is not an add-on, nor a discretion; it is a key function of defence, which is often overlooked and often not talked about. I therefore thank you for this inquiry because it is often not talked about. Maybe that is because other people do diplomacy and we shouldn't be doing that, or—I don't know. However, I think it makes a difference, and many of you will have met defence attaches on your visits. I am just keen that we reward the effort, but also make it as professional as possible, task it properly and recognise that it is an integral part of how we operate in the 21st century, and I think the penny is dropping.

Ministers are also part of it. That is the other thing: they're not add-ons; Ministers can be played into the country strategies. Ministers can be, and are often, the defence diplomats, although not always—again, it depends on the hierarchy of the country and on who is running the organisation. They are, absolutely. People sometimes forget that the Minister is sometimes the deliverer as well as the oversighter. The person who can close a deal or say, "We really do value you," is the Minister; they are not always the man in uniform or the woman in uniform. Absolutely, from top to bottom, defence diplomacy should go that way.

**Chair:** Secretary of State, I know that I promised a hard stop, but I think that Mr Francois has one very quick contribution to make.

**Mr Francois:** Apologies for being late, Secretary of State; this will be very quick. We recently had a very successful trip to Washington, and we saw what good looks like, in terms of defence attachés. Your rear admiral and his team there were excellent—I use that word deliberately—and he hosted a very good reception. A whole bunch of senior American three-stars were present. That is what good looks like and, as a Committee, we saw for ourselves how very important that network is. So while you are here, I thought that we should put on record our thanks. You should know that your network in Washington is a very good one.

**Mr Wallace:** Thank you. I want that to be mirrored elsewhere.

**Chair:** Secretary of State, we understand the time constraints today and the pressure that you are under. We wish you well regarding those endeavours, and we greatly appreciate you retaining this commitment today. Thank you for coming. Thank you, also, to Air Vice-Marshal Michael Smeath and to colleagues all for working with the moveable feast that has been organising today. Secretary of State, thank you.

**Mr Wallace:** Can I just clarify, on the German point—the point I made about when we take over there—we will take over the airfield if the Germans leave, but we can start our evacuations now while the Germans are running the airfield. I think that that is what I did say, but—



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**Richard Drax:** You did.

***Mr Wallace:*** Good, thank you.