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Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Armed Forces Readiness, HC 1317

Wednesday 21 June 2023

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

Questions 112 - 183

Witness

I: General (Retd) Sir Nick Carter, Former Chief of Defence Staff (CDS).



Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Nick Carter.

Q112 **Chair:** Welcome to this Defence Committee hearing on Wednesday 21 June 2023. We will be continuing our study into the UK Armed Forces readiness. As a plug, this is the first of two sessions that we will be having today. There will be a Sub-Committee inquiry on the defence equipment and supply, chaired by Mark Francois, which will be at 1.30 pm.

Could I welcome General Sir Nick Carter, former head of the Armed Forces, to our inquiry here today? Thank you very much indeed for your time. I think that you have given evidence to a Lords Committee prior to this, but you have remained relatively quiet since your departure, so we are really grateful that you are sharing your thoughts.

Looking back at some of your speeches, you spoke in 2021, addressing RUSI, and talked about how our security outlook is more complex and dangerous than any time over the last 30 years; Russia's behaviour—this is prior to Ukraine, by the way—is a threat to our values and interests; Iran could soon join North Korea in posing a nuclear threat; and China is challenging international norms and behaviours. That was a couple of years ago. Maybe you can start off by setting the scene on how you see the next decade going and what is coming over not just the hill but the hill beyond that, and then beyond that.

General Sir Nick Carter: My judgment would be that, even before Mr Putin invaded Ukraine, one would say that the geopolitical context was complex, dynamic and, fundamentally, very unstable. Indeed, I would go further than that speech and say that we have probably not seen instability like this since the 1930s. You will recall that in the 1930s we did not have nuclear weapons. It is a very different world to the world that any of us have grown up in.

There are three prevailing reasons why that is the case. The first reason is that we have returned to an era of great power competition. We see a slightly more introspective US foreign policy, a foreign policy that is very focused on China and is perhaps, unlike it might have been at the end of the Cold War, in a position to want to police the world, if indeed the world wanted to be policed any longer by the United States.

Secondly, we see revisionist powers, particularly Russia, representing—I have said this repeatedly over the last five years—the acute threat to our country and way of life. Also, of course, there is China, which I would describe as a chronic challenge, not necessarily a threat. There are some areas where China is a threat, but it is very different in terms of how we see Russia. Of course, our relationship with China needs to be different to the relationship we have with Russia.

Increasingly, as the Ukraine war plays out, we are seeing the world breaking down into three groups of countries, as an international



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framework. You have those that are self-evidently pro-western. You have an anti-western alliance, if you like, led by China and Russia, but with other countries such as Iran in it. Then you have an increasing group of countries that I would describe not necessarily as non-aligned, but countries that are not going to go with either of those areas because they can see profit in playing two ends off against the middle. They can see profit in a geopolitics that is global. If you are pro-west or anti-west, you are going to be much more regionalised in your approach. Countries that sit in this area are countries, I suspect, such as India, Mexico, Indonesia, even Saudi Arabia, maybe Brazil, South Africa, interestingly, and so on and so forth.

The second reason why the world is as unstable as it is is that the multilateral system—the so-called rules-based structure that we all grew up with and that the United States founded with its allies from 1945 onwards—is being challenged by these revisionist powers, but also by the many global challenges that we now have. China wants more of a say. That is not to say that China should not have more of a say, but of course China is yet to put anything on the table that is a suitable alternative, either that confers legitimacy or, perhaps more importantly, that is attractive to others. That may change, but that is something that is playing out at the moment. The consequence is that the world is between orders and that leads to this instability.

The third reason, which I talked a lot about when I was Chief of the Defence Staff and head of the Army, is that rapid technological change and the pervasiveness of information are changing the character of politics and the character of warfare. We see that with populism, nationalism, the phenomenon of the strongman leader that we see in various countries in the world. We are seeing the character of warfare brought quite sharply into focus, not just in Ukraine but more broadly as well.

What has happened here is that the traditional distinctions between peace and war, foreign and domestic policy, state and non-state—look at Elon Musk's activities in Ukraine—and virtual and reality are all becoming blurred. That means that state or non-state actors that might wish to undermine our way of life have new tools, tactics and techniques with which to do that, whether that is disinformation, misinformation, cyber—you name it—proxies. We see it with the Wagner Group in Africa. These are challenges that are definitely threatening our way of life.

That context explains why, from a UK perspective, never have our alliances been more important to us. Never, I suspect, have we needed to look right across the piece, in terms of the full range of potential threats that could be made to us. These threats can really only be countered by the use of all of our national power. This is a defence problem, certainly, but it is much broader than defence. It is a really important question for us all to ask about what this means for the UK as



a national enterprise dealing with a world that is fundamentally different, whether that is our defence industry or whatever else it might be.

That is how I would characterise the world we are in at the moment. It is interesting that our friends and allies recognise this, particularly with the way that the Ukraine war has evolved, but to what extent they are genuinely mobilised and making themselves readier to deal with what will continue to be a challenge from Russia is an open question. That is probably where I would leave it in terms of the threat picture from my perspective at the moment. It is not, I am afraid, very cheerful, but all of you recognise exactly what I am talking about, I know.

Chair: Thank you. That was very helpful to place that into context.

Q113 **Mr Robinson:** Good morning, General. You ended there with an open question, so let us try to focus it a tad. We have this inquiry on Armed Forces readiness and it is immediately clear to all of us that there is a distinction between what some would consider to be readiness and what readiness means, as opposed to others. As we commence this session of our inquiry, what does readiness mean for you? Going from the conceptual to the practical, how do we measure or assess readiness?

General Sir Nick Carter: It is a really important question. We are not very good at distinguishing between what I would call strategic readiness and what I would call operational readiness. The Armed Forces traditionally have measured operational readiness on the basis of something called METS, which stands for “manpower, equipment, training and sustainability”. They have a system of colour-coding as to the extent to which units, battalions, ships, Air Force squadrons or whatever they might be, match up to some judgments about METS—manpower, equipment, training and sustainability.

That is fine if you want to take a deep-dive look at particular ingredients of the Armed Forces, but actually it is strategic readiness that is the big calculation that we need to make. I would define strategic readiness as the ability to build, maintain and balance warfighting capabilities and competitive advantage to achieve strategic objectives across the threats, but also across time horizons. We might think about readiness as being a problem for today. It is also a problem for 10 years, 15 years and 20 years. Let us broaden the definition to strategic and operational readiness and be really clear about the difference between the two.

If we are talking about strategic readiness, that would then focus on 10 different areas. One is clearly sustainment in the broadest possible sense. That means that you would have a really good look at industry and the demand signals that we are giving to industry to be able to provide us with genuine resilience. We might want to come back to that.

The second is modernisation. What the Armed Forces, those who lead them and Ministers have to do is to make judgments about what is needed for today versus what is needed for tomorrow. I have read some



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of the people you have had in front of you in this inquiry already. By the way, it is a really important inquiry that you are doing. I should have said that at the beginning. It is quite obvious from what you have heard already that there is this distinction between aiming for the Armed Forces you want in 10 years' time versus aiming for the Armed Forces you need today. There will be trade-offs in that, but that was the judgment I was always trying to make when I was the Chief of the Defence Staff and when I was head of the Army. One does not always get it right, but it is a judgment that you have to try to make.

Next, it is about allies and partners. That is strategic readiness. It is about boring things such as your business systems and your organisational effectiveness. It is about human capital. Here, it not just the regular force. We need to really understand what is going on with our reserves and our strategic reserve—those people who have served in the past. It is about your global posture. Are you forward-based on Russia's borders? Do you sit in Singapore? What do you do? It is clearly about force structure and resilience. It is about operational readiness as well, because the aggregate of that gives you some answers.

Then it is about your ability to mobilise and how quickly you do that. If I look back at some of the things I used to say in the past, to me, this business of mobilisation is important. Readiness is about speed of recognition of a problem. It is then about speed of decision making. Then it is about the speed of assembly to meet that threat. Those ingredients need to be analysed when one wants to look at the bigger picture in terms of readiness.

The other person who has written quite sensibly about this is an American called Professor Richard Betts, who teaches at Columbia University. He says that the fundamental questions you need to ask are about ready for what, ready for when and what needs to be ready. I do not think that we are necessarily particularly good at doing that. It is a strategic conversation that one needs to be doing the whole time.

Fundamentally, getting this right balance between current operational readiness and future modernisation is really important. That is where this Committee has a really important role to play. You would be able to analyse the extent to which the trade-offs have been taken and risk has been taken, against either the future or the present, in order to make those judgments.

Q114 John Spellar: General, it is very nice to see you again. You mentioned the role of industry, then about METS and possibly the overfocus on platforms compared with munitions. Surely the Ukraine conflict has shown the deficiency in terms of both stocks and the ability for industrial resupply. Going back, NATO exercises over the last decade or more have shown that, if we were in any serious conflict in central Europe, we would run out of munitions in about five days. We have neither the stocks nor the industrial capacity to resupply. Why did we get that so wrong?



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General Sir Nick Carter: It is a very interesting question. You will remember that, when the integrated review was being put together in 2019 and 2020, the then Prime Minister, Mr Johnson, sitting in front of this very Committee saying that there will never be a requirement for tanks again. Somebody presumably put him up to say that—not his military adviser, I hasten to add. Here we are, two or three years on, seeing industrial warfare playing out again. We are not good at predicting the future.

That tremendous gentleman, Professor Sir Michael Howard, who sadly is no longer with us, always used to say that the one thing you can be confident about when it comes to the future is that you will not predict it accurately. You need to be as adaptable as you possibly can in order to play catch-up when something like this happens.

The difficulty is that we have also lived through an era where it has always been about efficiency and really slick supply chains. It has never been about resilience. Things such as stockpiles were dirty words and they were words where programmers and bureaucrats could take risk, could they not? They never conceived that we would have a future like the future that has played out over the last 18 months. Your question is a really good question. I do not have an answer to it. I fear that it is human nature and, if we went back into history, we would find other examples of where that has occurred.

Q115 **John Spellar:** Even if you did not have stockpiles, that re-emphasises the need for continuous running, even if at lower level, production lines in order to resupply. We did not do either of those.

General Sir Nick Carter: No, we did not. It was done for reasons of efficiency. The trouble with the defence industry is that it does not report to Government. It reports to its shareholders. The consequence of that is that you have different incentivisation mechanisms and different behaviours being driven. Ultimately, Government, as the final assurer of our national security, need to give an indication to the defence industry that they want it to include resilience in its business model, not just simply efficiency and value for money.

Q116 **Richard Drax:** General, good morning. It is nice to see you again. To what extent is the readiness of the UK Armed Forces integral to its deterrent posture? Does the secrecy around readiness aid or harm the UK's ability to deter?

General Sir Nick Carter: It is a very interesting question. First and foremost, of course, the readiness of our Armed Forces absolutely plays to deterrence. I remember making a speech in January 2018 when I was the head of the Army and I was forecasting slightly what Russia has now done. I said that we need to demonstrate our preparedness to commit. We need to demonstrate our preparedness, frankly, to be able to commit with the sorts of capabilities that would genuinely frighten an opponent, so it is fundamental.



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The extent to which one wants to demonstrate that very clearly to people is an open question. Deterrence is fundamentally based on three Cs. It is about communication, capability and commitment.¹ You also want to have a bit of mystery in there, I suspect, because you want people not necessarily to really know what you might do. You want a little bit of ambiguity.

It is about getting the right balance between the two. There are some things we really need to demonstrate and make absolutely clear, but there are some things we might want to hold in reserve and perhaps send slightly conflicting and ambiguous messages about. Getting that balance right is a judgment, and that judgment needs to be made at the heart of Government by the right people.

Q117 **Richard Drax:** On that very point, do you think that public and parliamentary scrutiny of our Armed Forces and the rest of it is about right? Should there be more or less? You were hinting that we do not want to tell them everything. If we do, warts and all, they might like what they hear.

General Sir Nick Carter: On this Committee, you are all cleared to do this. You should be given private and confidential briefings to see what is going on. I am sure that that is the right thing to do. Ultimately, the role of this Committee is to hold Government to account.

Chair: We will take that up.

Q118 **Robert Courts:** You spoke about deterrence and the things you need for deterrence. Would you say a word or two about layered deterrence and the importance of that? The concern I have is that we have a very high-level nuclear deterrent, but it is the bit in the middle. Without the bit in the middle providing layers, the top level is not effective either. Could you comment on that?

General Sir Nick Carter: I would vehemently agree with you. I always used to worry, as the Chief of the Defence Staff, that the nuclear programme was taking up so much of our resource that we were diminishing our conventional deterrence as a consequence. The key point in the modern world is that you have to be able to offer graduated responses. To your point, that means you have to be able to scale up and down.

There are some really good questions about Russia's land capability in the light of what we have seen play out over the last 18 months, which we might come back to. If you look at its ability to be able to manage escalation up and down levels of effort, it is much better than what we in the west have.

Q119 **Robert Courts:** The logical end point of that, presumably, would be that, if our conventional deterrence in that mid-layer, for want of a better

¹ The witness later clarified he had intended to say credibility rather than commitment.



phrase, is not effective, you do not really have the top layer either.

General Sir Nick Carter: No, you do not. You do not. You end up having to graduate far too quickly to a position you really do not want to get to.

Q120 **Dave Doogan:** Thank you, General. On one of your comments a second ago, do you see any evidence in the here and now that the financial pressure of the nuclear enterprise is any less demanding on the defence budget, in terms of opportunity, not just financial cost?

General Sir Nick Carter: I do not know. I am obviously 18 months out of touch on this.

Q121 **Dave Doogan:** They have just had an extra £3 billion.

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, indeed. What that was needed for and where it has gone to, I do not know. My own judgment is that we were always having to make trade-offs between the amount of money we had to invest for the purposes of the nuclear deterrent and what it meant to our graduated responses in conventional deterrence.

Q122 **Dave Doogan:** I welcome your reinforcement that members of this Committee, both collectively and individually as MPs, should have the ability to access important information that would allow us to properly scrutinise defence and its actions within the United Kingdom. I am frustrated as an MP that I occasionally ask some very straightforward questions and I am told that I cannot be answered on the grounds of national security and/or commercial considerations.

I am worried that it is a convenient excuse for Ministers to use those very legitimate provisos, when used in the right circumstance and sparingly. I am concerned that they use them not sparingly and in inappropriate circumstances to hide what is a lack of readiness, preparedness and investment. Am I wrong? Is it your opinion that there is room for that behaviour, or am I just being paranoid?

General Sir Nick Carter: No, I do not think that you are being paranoid. Going back to my point about the distinction between operational readiness, which is relatively easy to scrutinise, and strategic readiness, the great value of a parliamentary Committee such as this is that it has the wherewithal to look holistically across strategic readiness. That is a really important function for this Committee to be able to perform.

Yes, some of it will be confidential, top secret and all the other stuff that goes with that. That is fine, but even by asking the right question you will make people think hard about whether they are giving you accurate answers.

Q123 **Dave Doogan:** Accepting your limitations on currency, 18 months hence, what would be your assessment on the scope of our strategic opponents'—so, Russia and China—knowledge of our readiness? My assessment is that they are fully aware of what we are able to do and, crucially, what we are not able to do.



General Sir Nick Carter: It is interesting. We clearly did not appreciate how hollow the Russian army was before the Ukraine war started. Maybe we were guilty of bigging it up for obvious reasons. Equally, hollowness is quite hard to judge. I wonder how well it knows what our strategic readiness really looks like and how hollow it is.

That is not to say that they are not masters at testing our strategic readiness. We see that with their air force having a go at our airspace on a regular basis. We see it in our waters. We see it in sub-surface and seabed warfare things. They are probably more tolerant of testing our readiness than we are of testing theirs, I suspect. They have more of an appetite to do it.

My judgment is that they probably know what our weaknesses are. They will know, for example, that we do not have any anti-missile defence for this country. They will know those sorts of things. They will know that they have some options as a consequence of that.

Q124 **Sarah Atherton:** General, is the concept and need for readiness adequately recognised by MoD Ministers and across Whitehall, given the threat that we face?

General Sir Nick Carter: Again, as you know, I am 18 months out of date. One thing that I initiated when I was Chief of the Defence Staff was an exercise called Exercise Agile Stance. This was going to play out, and still is playing out, over a five-year period. I was delighted to discover yesterday that it is still going.

There are people in this room who are definitely old enough to remember the sorts of exercises we did during the Cold War. You will remember Exercise Active Edge. If you were based on the inner German border, you were at four hours' notice to move. An exercise called Active Edge tested your ability to leave your barracks, get into a forest and hide yourself. It exercised the ability of RAF squadrons to leave their bases in Germany and go and park themselves on the autobahn, in cover.

I wanted to return to a system where we exercised that regularly. For example, Brize Norton, where every single logistic Air Force egg is in the same basket, had to disperse to—I do not know—an airport in Leeds or wherever it might be. Coningsby should be able to empty itself and send the F-35s on to the M1, whatever it may be. It is the same with the Navy getting out of the three big ports we have. That was the idea behind this and some people embraced this; others did not.

The extent to which Ministers felt that it really mattered is an open question. Bandwidth is limited. People have their own priorities. For me, as the Chief of the Defence Staff, and before that as the CGS, the idea behind Agile Stance was to up our game in terms of what our readiness looked like and be realistic about it. The reality is that the Cold War ended in 1989. You have to be as old as me, Richard, or Mark to remember what Active Edge was like. We need to relearn this. That is



also an issue for Ministers, who are probably younger, have not done it and did not appreciate what it is like. We need to be honest in holding people to account to recognise that that is what true readiness looked like.

- Q125 **Sarah Atherton:** It is fully understood across the MoD that the state of readiness is impacted on and influenced by its personnel. You have referred to it as operational manpower. Given the evidence that we received in the women in the armed forces report and subsequent high-profile sexual abuse cases in the Red Arrows, the Submarine Service and Sandhurst, which all happened or continued on your watch, do you regret encouraging laddish behaviour in the military?

General Sir Nick Carter: I do not think that I encouraged laddish behaviour. I think that we had a conversation here when I was CDS. Frankly, I got twisted. You will know that I won the UK's gender champion award in 2017. You will also recall that many of the speeches I made as CGS were about trying to discourage laddish behaviour and create an environment in which things were genuinely inclusive. I always argued that inclusive teams were better teams.

It was a comment that was made in a rather curious way, maybe even in this very room, but certainly I have always been somebody who would fundamentally discourage laddish behaviour. I have not changed my view at all. When I look back on my record, I was someone who advocated very strongly for the sobriquet "maximising talent" to create inclusive teams and genuinely to make it possible for us to improve our combat effectiveness through that notion of inclusive teams.

- Q126 **Derek Twigg:** Part of our readiness and ability to strike if necessary depends on the resources that we have, whether it is manpower, assets, platforms, et cetera. Today, you have General Sir Tim Radford, who is the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, saying that the Army is too small and we are just about hanging on with our influence in NATO. Is it too small? Are the Armed Forces too small?

To add a separate question to that, because you were around at the time, when Mr Johnson, the then Prime Minister, announced in 2020 the much-quoted additional resources, I am assuming you made some representations prior to that. Was that not just catch-up and not really additional resources to deal with the threats we face today?

General Sir Nick Carter: Perhaps to a degree, but I also remember being quite proud, as the Chief of the Defence Staff, to be able to get £25 billion-odd from the Government at that time. It was a very remarkable moment.

- Q127 **Derek Twigg:** Was that just catch-up?

General Sir Nick Carter: I am just coming on to answer that, if you would let me finish. The answer is that it was catch-up in certain things, definitely, but it also gave us some headroom to be able to modernise.



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Yes, we had to make some trade-offs. You will recall that I talked about the distinction between sunrise capabilities and sunset capabilities. We had to take some difficult decisions. People were quizzical, for example, about why the C-130 was taken out of service. In doing that, the money that we had gave us an opportunity to look forwards 10 years, we felt, to have some stability in the defence programme and therefore to be able to conduct modernisation programmes, which do not happen overnight.

It was an uplift that did two things. Yes, it put a finger in a dyke of an ever more challenging defence context, but it also gave us some headroom to be able to look to the future.

Q128 **Derek Twigg:** Is the Army still too small then?

General Sir Nick Carter: I am in no doubt that that was a trade-off I would have preferred us not to have taken at that point.

Q129 **Derek Twigg:** You had to trade the size of the Army and its abilities to do things.

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes. I would have preferred to have retained the Army at 82,000. Of course, I have previous on this. I was the architect of Army 2020, which created an Army of 82,000. It had to, because that was the resource that was made available to us.

Also—and this is a really important point that I hope the Committee will take—we invested significantly in the Army's Reserve. We wanted to try to create an Army that was a mixture of Regulars and Reserves. It used to be called one Army or whatever one wants to think about it, but it was genuinely getting back into a proper investment in the Reserve.

Q130 **Derek Twigg:** Are there not now concerns about the ability to deploy and use those Reserves?

General Sir Nick Carter: I do not know. I am 18 months out of date, but I would agree with you. The thing about the reserve is, if you do not constantly lead it and help it, it will wither. You have to work at it. Yes, I think that the Army 2020 proposition finely wired a regular Army at 82,000. If you take another 10,000, or whatever the figure was, out of it, you are going to upset that fine wiring and you actually probably have to redesign it again. I was not an advocate of seeing it cut from 82,000, because it affected the design and the design was based upon this idea of a warfighting division.

Q131 **Derek Twigg:** So we are clear, much of that extra money was for the catch-up purpose. One of the trade-offs was the size of the Army.

General Sir Nick Carter: It was one of the trade-offs, yes.

Q132 **Chair:** You mentioned Brize Norton. We visited Portsmouth. It was a very useful visit. There are an awful lot of ships in one particular geographic location with civilian access as well. When you left as head of the Armed Forces, was there a dispersal plan in place for Brize Norton if there was,



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as you implied, a threat to Brize and indeed Portsmouth?

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, certainly for Brize Norton. The effect of Exercise Agile Stance was to get the Air Force to think about how it would disperse from various centralised bases, such as Brize Norton.

Chair: Thinking about it and having an airport to disperse to—

General Sir Nick Carter: To be fair, they had got stuck into talking to civilian airports to see where they could redeploy assets to if the balloon went up.

Chair: I know that Robert Courts is probably edging to ask a question on this. He represents that particular neck of the woods. I am sure that we can pursue that later.

Q133 **Mr Jones:** Before I ask my question, General, can I ask about the figure you just quoted? Many of us at the time asked where the 82,000 came from and whether it was what the Army needed or the resources. I remember seeing General Wall after he had retired. He said that it was quite clear that it was what was available in terms of resources. Was that the case?

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, absolutely. We were given a financial envelope and asked to go and construct an Army that would fit the financial envelope.

Q134 **Mr Jones:** There was no strategic thinking.

General Sir Nick Carter: That is slightly unfair. One took that as the prevailing factor. What one then did was to do quite a lot of science and analysis to learn and assimilate a lot of the lessons that we had learned over the previous 10 to 15 years and design an Army that would fit within the resource envelope, but also meet up to its NATO commitments and the way that we thought the world was evolving over the following decade.

Q135 **Mr Jones:** That is very helpful. Derek has just raised the issue around this ability to deliver a divisional force. I am personally very concerned about the Army because it is in danger of being squeezed between various louder voices. Also, in terms of being realistic about what we are asking it to do, do you think it is now time to define, especially in the Command Paper, what we expect the Army to do and really get away from this idea that we are, for example, on NATO, going to be able to deliver a division?

General Sir Nick Carter: One thing that I felt very strongly about when I became Chief of the Defence Staff was a quote from Omar Bradley, who was the first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and eminent Second World War general. I will paraphrase what he said. He said that American military strength is only as strong as its weakest service. I would suggest that the Army is now too weak to be able to pull its weight in the sort of world that we now find ourselves in.



Q136 **Mr Jones:** I do not think that they have done a very good job themselves in terms of articulating what they want to do. Do you think that it is now time to, in the Command Paper, define, "This is what we want the Army to do", in terms of, for example, NATO commitment? We can provide a very capable commitment to NATO. We have been blindsided in terms of the IR into thinking that we are going to have this global presence everywhere. Practically, we are not, unless you are going to increase the defence budget hugely.

General Sir Nick Carter: You are touching on a very interesting and nice point. The reason that the Army feels strongly about the divisional level of command is that it is the first level where all the capabilities represented in the land environment come together. The trouble with it is that it is easy to define what a Type 45 destroyer looks like. It is relatively easy to describe what a RAF squadron of F-35s looks like. When you get into a division, those bean-counters in the centre of defence, or indeed in the other two services, will take a look at this and say, "Hang on, that is an open cheque."

It is jolly difficult and I used to struggle with this repeatedly, whether I was running the Army's resources and programmes or when I was CGS. It would be very helpful for the Army if the Government were really clear about what they wanted it to deliver. It would be very helpful, if one could ever persuade the Ministry of Defence to allow that to happen.

Q137 **Mr Jones:** Can I suggest to your colleagues that are still there in the Army that they might want to start articulating that to people?

General Sir Nick Carter: We have articulated it many times. It is there. Just pull it off the shelf again. The point about all the capability you need for modern combined arms warfare being contained at the divisional level is a very good starting point.

Q138 **Mr Jones:** Saying that, though, General, when I was there you were very good at hiding money. I remember sending a team down to headquarters to find where you had the money stashed. We will not go there though. Can I ask about the reporting systems in the MoD? One of the important things is to know what the state of readiness is. How relevant are they and are they adaptable for different scenarios as they arise?

General Sir Nick Carter: Going back to my opening remarks, there is a good reporting mechanism for operational readiness, the manpower, equipment, training and sustainability model. I do not think that there is as good a reporting mechanism for strategic readiness and the 10 criteria that I described as a minimum. You might want to calculate. While the Defence Board meets regularly, I wonder how often people think, "Gosh, that needs attention and we are actually going to throw money at it or continue to make an argument based upon that".

Q139 **Mr Jones:** In terms of your experience, for example, you have the tactical evaluation process. How over this are chiefs, in terms of reviewing it when they have their Army or Navy board meetings? Are



they actually over this in terms of, on current information, where we are at, and, like you say, highlighting issues that perhaps need attention?

General Sir Nick Carter: There is a well-defined risk management process. As part of that, some of the ingredients of readiness are routinely looked at and used as argumentation to try to get the resources or the trade-offs necessary to mitigate the problem. Again, it comes back to having a proper, holistic definition of readiness. If I was still the Chief of the Defence Staff, I would be asking some questions about how holistically we define readiness and how that plays, more importantly, into national security as a whole.

Q140 **Mr Jones:** In terms of the current reporting system, how fit for purpose is it?

General Sir Nick Carter: It is good in parts, as per the curate's egg. It is timely to have a holistic review. The 10 criteria I mentioned at the beginning might be a good starting point for the Committee to consider asking questions on those particular criteria.

Q141 **Mr Jones:** Coming back to Sarah's point, in terms of the visibility of that to Ministers or, for example, the National Security Council, how does that work? Are there ways you could change it to make sure that there is more visibility politically, in terms of what readiness is?

General Sir Nick Carter: In an ideal world, part of our national security strategy, and therefore what the National Security Council got behind and looked at on a routine and regular basis, would include this as an ingredient.

Q142 **Robert Courts:** Could I return to the point you were just discussing about Brize Norton, or more broadly about the main operating base? I have a personal interest, not only because I am the local MP but because, as the Committee will know, I was the UK's Civil Aviation Minister for a couple of years. I pushed hard on it from that side of the table as well, so I have an interest in this. It bothers me, as has been outlined in a recent RUSI paper, that we have all these assets concentrated in one place.

You have referred to Agile Stance and the work that is going on around dispersal, which is one aspect; there are things such as hardened aircraft shelters for fast jets, for example, as well. How well advanced is that work, with the caveat understood that you are 18 months out of date?

General Sir Nick Carter: I suspect that it is behind where I would have hoped it would have been when we initiated Agile Stance, not least because people will have been distracted by Ukraine and the other problems that we have had since then. I suspect that it is behind. The extent to which a sense of urgency got behind that is a debatable question.

Q143 **Robert Courts:** That is very helpful. You have referred as well to the holistic readiness or the definition of readiness. I suppose that is the key thing. If you are asking whether a service is ready, "Ready for what?" is



obviously the question.

I wanted to ask about your assessment, in a bit more granular detail, of how ready each service is. For example, we heard at the beginning of our session that the RAF is currently capable of responding at high readiness, so at very short notice, to requirements to deploy forces for presence, signalling or, essentially, non-contested operations. Professor Bronk, when he was in front of us, noted that discretionary operations have meant that the RAF's readiness for warfighting has been reduced. There is high readiness for non-contested, but not so ready for peer-to-peer conflict that we may have. What is your assessment of the RAF and then the Army and Navy?

General Sir Nick Carter: The RAF, like both the other two services, has significant deficiencies in term of strategic readiness in relation to the nature of the threats we see today, from a peer-to-peer warfighting basis. There is no question. There are significant deficiencies.

Q144 **Robert Courts:** I have reasonable understanding of that from the quotation I have just given you for the Royal Air Force. What about from the Army's perspective? How would you crystallise that? What has it been concentrating on doing where it now needs to look at doing less on that and more on the peer-to-peer side of things?

General Sir Nick Carter: There are a number of capability areas where the Army has weakness, probably because it starts with the first capability deficiency, which I would say is air defence. We have always had the luxury, in what we have done for the last 25 to 30 years, of establishing air supremacy very early on. What we have established from a number of the conflicts we have seen recently, particularly in Ukraine, is that that is a dangerous assumption to make. Air defence is a really important capability, not just for the Army; it is for the Air Force and the nation as a whole.

Q145 **Robert Courts:** Could you give a little bit more detail on that? Are you referring to ground-based air defence in particular. I am conscious that, in my point about layered defence earlier, I was talking about it in a strategic context. That is equally true in terms of air defence, is it not?

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, definitely. The extent to which we have a counter-missile defence system is debatable. Arguably, the Type 45 is the only capability that the country has that can deal with that sort of problem. In terms of counter-missile defence, the sort of Patriot-type system being used now in Kyiv, it is that sort of capability.

Robert Courts: Short, medium and long-range—

General Sir Nick Carter: It is the whole thing. It is layered. It is having adequate protection in all the layers to be able to do it. That is something that we understood in the Cold War, when we could not guarantee air supremacy, but we have become slightly complacent about the nature of the air environment as a result of the last 25 years of campaigning.



Q146 **Robert Courts:** The assumptions are, of course, generated by the history that we have had over the course of the last couple of decades. You are absolutely right: we have had this extraordinary period of air supremacy as part of the west. Ukraine, presumably, gives us a very good example of what happens where you do not have air supremacy. The Russian Air Force is very capable on paper, but does not have the ability to operate at will over Ukraine because of air defence. Is that a cautionary lesson for us?

General Sir Nick Carter: It is also missiles and uncrewed platforms, but yes, it is. It is a very important lesson. Again, it comes down to that point I made that Richard Betts makes: ready for what? We need to be absolutely clear in this. If we are going to match ourselves against our peer opponents, these are the capability deficiencies that we have.

If we are going to match ourselves as an individual nation, that is different from how we might share collective responsibility within NATO. It needs to be considered in relation to allies and partners, but there will be a bottom line about what we absolutely need to have for ourselves.

Q147 **Robert Courts:** There is something to be said for some specialisation. We will concentrate on being good at one thing and a NATO partner will concentrate on another.

General Sir Nick Carter: Against the sort of threat that Russia represents, probably yes, because you can be assured that the NATO alliance would respond.

Q148 **Robert Courts:** Yes, in an Article 5 scenario, but in a more discretionary scenario you may find that you have a hole. That is the downside.

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, exactly. Specialisation is obviously a risk, but, as we were saying earlier, these things are about trade-offs. You may need to invest in that because you fear that others might not mitigate it for you.

Q149 **Robert Courts:** You mentioned capability. Having the capability on paper is one thing, but whether it can actually be sustained is another. You have to look at things such as parts, ammunition, spares and all of those things. Ukraine has clearly been a wake-up call for that. Are we where we need to be on that granular aspect of capability?

General Sir Nick Carter: No, probably not. I am sure that members of the Committee will have heard this before. There is a thing called TEPID OIL. TEPID OIL is the initials of words that underpin capability: T standing for "training", E for "equipment", P for "personnel" and so on. The answer is that all these particular headings need to be properly pulled together to give you real capability. Often we think about a platform. We do not then think about the training solution, the sustainability solution, the doctrine that is going to underpin it, the extent to which the defence industry is capable of delivering it and so on and so forth.



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Q150 **Robert Courts:** All of that is a radical sea change from the world in which we have lived.

General Sir Nick Carter: It is a wake-up call. People will regard the last 75 years as being a historical blip, probably.

Q151 **Chair:** What a pleasant thought that is. To pursue some of those things a bit further, on the vulnerability of the UK, are you saying, as things stand now, if a Shahed kamikaze Iranian-made drone was launched against Britain by a non-state actor to target a tower, there is no anti-air to protect us.

General Sir Nick Carter: Up to a point. The fact of the matter is that the RAF has well tried and tested readiness mechanisms and aircraft at very high readiness to be able to deal with that particular threat you have described and indeed the threat of a 9/11-type issue occurring. It becomes more challenging if you have a mass of interlopers in terms of the threat, whether that is missiles, uncrewed platforms or whatever else it might be.

Q152 **Chair:** You are saying that the RAF response would be a manned aircraft to take out a drone, rather than an anti-air missile capability, as we are seeing being quite effective in Ukraine.

General Sir Nick Carter: At the moment, yes. If we changed our posture and raised our readiness, there are some ground-based air defence systems that could be used.

Q153 **Chair:** You are saying that this is something that we need to look into, given where threats are then going.

General Sir Nick Carter: If we felt that the threat was becoming much more imminent and that the country's survival was threatened by Russia, it would be absolutely vital for us to think about what air defence and counter-missile systems we needed to be able to match that Russian threat. The judgment that is being taken at the moment, presumably, is that that is not an imminent, clear and present threat.

Q154 **Chair:** As you were saying, you cannot predict what is going to happen. We are training Ukrainians on Salisbury Plain. Looking at what is happening in Ukraine, do you see that, with the advance of technology being incorporated very swiftly indeed, there are lessons for us to learn on the changing character of warfare?

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, I do. What we are seeing playing out in Ukraine is the first example of—I have used this term a bit in speeches—data-driven combat. When you look at the way in which companies such as Helsing are providing the Ukrainians with artificial intelligence to analyse, interpret and draw rapid deductions from Elon Musk's satellite system and other sensors to dynamically target their artillery in the right place, that is data-driven combat.



It is quite obvious to military practitioners that that is the level that we all need to aspire to if we are going to maximise the limited resources on the battlefield that we will have to apply to the targeting process. You are going to need artificial intelligence to be able to do it rapidly for you.

Q155 **Chair:** You served in Iraq and during that time I think we had a ground combat capability of 400 in battle tanks. The decision was made to take that down to 156. General Patrick Sanders has made it clear that you cannot cyber your way across a river. Are you concerned by the demise of our land warfare capability?

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes. Kevan was asking the right question. We need to be clear about what capability we want our Army to produce and then we need to find a way of resourcing it.

Q156 **Chair:** Does that mean that we should be looking more at specific tasks that we can do very well, rather than being very generalised, or working out who we work with in alignment with our allies?

General Sir Nick Carter: It could be a combination of both. We have always had very good partnerships in NATO where we shared capabilities with countries such as Italy, for example, and, on the nuclear, biological and chemical warfare side, the Czech Republic. It is about identifying partners that can perhaps fill capability shortfalls that we do not want to invest in. We can complement them with other capabilities. It is also about being really clear about what the minimum that we think we should be delivering to NATO is. That is to your point.

Q157 **Mr Francois:** General, the thing about Armed Forces is that they have to plan for a very wide spectrum of operations, so everything from helping out with floods to all-out war. As you say, you have to take risk and you cannot cover everything as widely as you would want.

In the 1920s, after the end of the First World War, the official policy of the Government after the horrors of the trenches and lots of economic challenges was that we brought in the 10-year rule, which was a rolling 10 year, and said that there will be no major war for 10 years. In 2010, the National Security Council was formed and then in 2011 there was the national security strategy, which famously said that there is no military threat to the United Kingdom. Have we effectively been operating an unofficial 10-year rule in defence planning for years?

General Sir Nick Carter: I do not think that it was unofficial. When I was the director of the Army's resource and programme, between 2007 and 2009, our readiness and warning assessment on Russia was 10 plus two.

Q158 **Mr Francois:** What do you mean when you say 10 plus two?

General Sir Nick Carter: 10 years' readiness and two years' warning.

Q159 **Mr Francois:** A 12-year rule, in effect.



General Sir Nick Carter: In effect, yes. The idea was that you would get two years of notice before you began to see them mobilise.

Q160 **Mr Francois:** The reason that I think this is important—I think you will understand the point I am seeking to make—is that, in the 1920s, that was an explicit policy. It was in Government Command Papers. There was no doubt about it. For years, some of us would argue, that has been the same, save that it has never really been written down in an official Government document. Are you saying that, in reality, in terms of defence planning, that is what was going on?

General Sir Nick Carter: It was.

Q161 **Mr Francois:** Do you think that it still is?

General Sir Nick Carter: No, I do not. There is this moment where people have gone, “Oh blimey, we have a problem now, have we not?”

Q162 **Mr Francois:** When was the “Oh blimey” moment?

General Sir Nick Carter: It depends. I remember people thinking that I had gone mad in January 2018 when I made a speech, which you came to, in RUSI as CGS, when I said that the clear and present threat is Russia. I ran through that threat and showed some video and all the rest of it. About two months later, we had the Skripal affair and there was another “Oh blimey” moment. We have been playing catch up ever since.

I can remember, in my first week as CDS, having to go and see Prime Minister May and Chancellor Hammond, with Gavin Williamson, who was then the Defence Secretary, to make an argument to put another financial finger in the dyke that year as we were about to go bankrupt. The way I won the argument was on the basis of showing that our stockpiles were very limited.

Q163 **Derek Twigg:** Did you say that that was 2018?

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes.

Q164 **Mr Francois:** Nick Houghton said yesterday, in terms of defence funding, that he characterised as the Government keeping giving dollops of money in order to buy out particular risks to individual programmes. He never used these words, but it was almost a sticking plaster solution. Have we got away from that, or is that basically what we are still doing?

General Sir Nick Carter: The moment in the integrated review where we got £25 billion was a moment where, yes, there was some sticking plaster, to Derek’s point, but there was also an opportunity to do some investment. That was the first time that I can recall that happening probably in a generation. I worry now that we are back into sticking plaster mode though, given the other financial challenges the Government are having to deal with.

Q165 **Mr Francois:** Have we moved away from the unofficial 10-year rule now?



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General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, definitely.

Mr Francois: We are not doing that, but we are still applying sticking plasters.

Q166 **Robert Courts:** This is perhaps the most important and the trickiest question. What do you think is the biggest gap in readiness?

General Sir Nick Carter: Do you mean across the Armed Forces?

Q167 **Robert Courts:** I mean both, so for each individual service but also on an overall level. If you had to pick one thing, what would that be?

General Sir Nick Carter: All of our Armed Forces have become too small. I do not think that we have the resilience in them to be able to be confident that, if a peer-on-peer war broke out, we would have any capability after the first couple of months of the engagement. Mass and scale is a serious predicament for us.

Q168 **Robert Courts:** Mass is a capability in and of its own.

General Sir Nick Carter: Definitely, yes. I guess that it was ever thus. I think that, if you looked at 1914 and 1940, the Regular Army was always given a mauling at the beginning, was it not? You then had to play catch-up with your strategic reserves and all the rest of it. That is what Ukraine has discovered as well. It probably was ever thus.

Q169 **Robert Courts:** In both 1914 and 1940, there were those strategic reserves and depth reserves you could call in for all services.

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, and throughout the Cold War there were as well. That was partly what our Agile Stance was designed to get behind. It was also about, "RAF, how are you going to mobilise ex-RAF pilots to be able to backfill those that get killed in round one?"

Q170 **Robert Courts:** To what extent has that worked? Has that developed over the course of the last few years?

General Sir Nick Carter: It has probably moved forward. As I say, I am 18 months out of date. I am pleased that it is still going. I do not know enough to know whether it has had the effect that I hoped it would have.

Q171 **Mr Francois:** Is the problem not that, even if you do that, even if you mobilise the people, there just are not enough platforms for them to man. The RAF has no combat reserve at all. Even if we could field this famous, mythical warfighting division, which we know we cannot, if it got chewed up in the first two weeks, there is nothing behind it in terms of kit. Is that not one of our fundamental weaknesses now, which is allied to readiness? We have such little mass that, in a prolonged conflict with Russia, there is nothing to fall back on if it takes three years to build a fighter aircraft or a year to build a tank. Are we not really vulnerable there?



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General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, we are. You have to judge mass across TEPID OIL and you are exactly right. It is not just people. It is the full enchilada. It is the kit, the defence industry's ability to be able to sustain it and stockpiles. It is the whole enchilada.

Q172 **Robert Courts:** It is not just the resilience though, is it, in terms of what would happen in the first few weeks? It is whether you would ever dare to do that anyway. If you have so little, do you actually have the options that you think you do?

General Sir Nick Carter: Maybe not. When your eggs are so much in one basket, you are pretty careful about protecting them. You remember the fuss that was made when the Prince of Wales and another ship went down in 1941 off the Singapore coast.

Q173 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Good morning, General. In response to my colleague's question there, you had said that they have all become too small, there is not enough resilience there, and mass and scale is a problem. Do you see the Government and the MoD actively doing anything, and at the pace necessary, to address this? Do they have any proper planning in place or is it just, going back to Mark's point, a lot of sticking plaster solutions?

General Sir Nick Carter: We are all eagerly waiting to see what the defence Command Paper looks like and whether it will address some of our collective concerns.

Q174 **Derek Twigg:** You have covered quite a wide range of things and made some very interesting comments. I am trying to pin down what you would lose more sleep over in terms of our readiness ability.

General Sir Nick Carter: It is partly the answer to the previous question about the lack of resilience, scale and mass, but it also comes back to the Army. At the moment, the Army is the weakest service.

Q175 **Derek Twigg:** That is your overriding concern.

General Sir Nick Carter: There are a number of things that keep one awake at night, but that would definitely be on the list.

Q176 **Derek Twigg:** For the record, it is an obvious question, but why?

General Sir Nick Carter: We just described the Army as being too small. It has significant capability deficiencies that would fall below what I think would be Kevan's minimum requirement. It is those sorts of issues that bother me.

Q177 **Derek Twigg:** Does the adoption of a multidomain integration approach to warfighting mean that readiness will be harder to achieve?

General Sir Nick Carter: It might be harder to measure, but no. The answer is that we have to head towards something that brings all the domains together, whether that is land, air, maritime or, particularly, cyber and space. You have to do that. We are seeing that playing out in



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Ukraine, where you are seeing a combination of space and cyber being integrated with the other domains, particularly the land domain, to be able to achieve effect.

Q178 **Chair:** An interesting comment that was made on our visit to the Royal Navy, when we were discussing the wider package of this, is that ministerial oversight has changed in your time. There was once a Minister for the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. Do you think that we should stay as we currently are? Do you think that this works or do we need the scrutiny that could be required and the backing, if you like?

General Sir Nick Carter: I do not know. There is always a risk, is there not, that, if you do that, you will end up making the tri-service competition even more competitive?

Q179 **Chair:** The budgets themselves have returned to the single services.

General Sir Nick Carter: They have. If you put a Minister over each single service and gave that Minister specific responsibility, as one probably would do, for the capability of that particular service, you would probably end up reinforcing an environment where there was too much tri-service challenge going on. Having a Minister for the Armed Forces who sits over all three of them and the other domains as well, and has therefore a bit more responsibility for trying to make sure that they can collaborate in a joint way, is probably the right answer.

Chair: It is always important to keep asking these questions to make sure that we have the correct and necessary capability and scrutiny.

Q180 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** In relation to your response to one of my colleagues, you were saying that Army is right now the weakest service. That has not happened overnight. That has been a result of decisions being made. If, as a Committee, we want to say, "This is because this decision was made and that decision was made," who is accountable for that? I suppose that that is what I am getting at. If that is now the weakest service, who is to blame for that? Who has made those decisions?

General Sir Nick Carter: It is a multitude of factors. First and foremost, it is the context in which the Army has fought and operated for the last 15 to 20 years. It was very focused on the post-9/11 campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it was well-resourced to fight those campaigns eventually. Some of the capabilities that I think you presided over that were brought into service, which were necessary, were very effective capabilities.

What then happened was that that character of warfare evolved into what we now see, which is a peer-on-peer problem. The answer is that 15 or 20 years of a lack of investment in that sort of activity has led to a position where the Army now has an urgent requirement to recapitalise to have capability to be able to deal with a peer-on-peer threat. I do not think that you can blame anybody particularly for that. That was an inevitable consequence of being involved in the post-9/11 campaigns.



Q181 **Mr Francois:** General, on that point, you can partly blame the politicians for the resources, and I accept that, but is the truth of it not that it is partly the Army's fault? We published a report called *Obsolescent and outgunned* in March 2021, just before the integrated review came out, that went into exquisite detail about the Army's armoured fighting vehicle programmes. You will have seen the Sheldon report from last week.

Is it not true that one of the problems was that the Army kept changing its mind about what it wanted? Because of that, up to 2021, we had not brought a new major AFV into service for 20 years. In fact, it is now 22 years, is it not? For the record, it was partly the Army's fault as well, was it not?

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, it was. From the 1990s onwards, there was a realisation that all the rather good stuff that Ginge Bagnall had overseen that had come in, whether that was Challenger tank, attack helicopter, Warrior or whatever else, was going to be rather dated in 10 to 15 to 20 years' time. I am ashamed to say that I have not read your report, although I have heard lots of good things about it. I have no doubt that it talked about FRES.

Mr Francois: It is Sheldon's report. He is the KC who was brought in to look at Ajax. I am sorry; you are talking about the Committee's report.

General Sir Nick Carter: FRES was a classic example of the Army as a service vacillating between requirements. Did we want a bit of kit that you could stick on the back of a C-130? Did we want a bit of kit that could go head to head?

Q182 **Mr Francois:** There was TRACER before it.

General Sir Nick Carter: There was TRACER and whatever Boxer has become. The Army definitely has some responsibility for that. One thing that I tried to do as CGS was to recreate the general staff. I felt that some of the tribal dynamics that underpinned the way the Army did its thinking were at the heart of an argument between the armoured corps and the infantry about what the requirement was.

The one thing I really remember being proud of was the fact that we got the requirement for Boxer over the line—if only we had done that 15 years previously, when we were involved in that programme, and created it with our German allies.

Q183 **Mr Francois:** We are looking at procurement this afternoon and unfortunately we do not have the benefit of your company then, but I will ask it now. Is one big lesson that comes out of all this not that, if you keep endlessly fiddling with requirements, the risk is that you end up with nothing?

General Sir Nick Carter: Yes, definitely. The beauty of Boxer and the reason it will enter service I guess a year late, sadly, but nonetheless, is that we were ruthless about the requirement. You are exactly right.



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When I took over as CGS, I remember looking at the requirement for the attack helicopter—the echo version to replace the delta version—with the then chief executive of the DE&S. The Army had put 22 additional requirements into it. He said to me, “This is ridiculous.” He said, “We should be buying this off the shelf.” In the end, the only additional requirement we were allowed to have on that piece of aviation was a windscreen wiper, because it was going to have to be marinised to go on the aircraft carrier. We removed the other 21.

Mr Francois: We put 1,200 additional requirements on Ajax.

Chair: We are still waiting for a medium-lift helicopter. General, in the integrated review refresh, the striking line that jumps out at me is that the risk of escalation is greater than at any time in decades, as an increasing number of threats and advanced weapon systems are being developed on the battlefield. The finances have been set, though, by the spending review, so we wait to see what the command paper comes out with, but our hopes at the moment are not too high.

Can I thank you for your time this morning? It has been very helpful indeed. We will then recommence this afternoon, under the leadership of Mark Francois, but thanks for today’s session. That brings this Committee hearing to a conclusion.