HOUSE OF COMMONS

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: The Defence Command Paper 2023, HC 1804

Tuesday 5 September 2023

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 1 - 47

Witness

I: Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, Emeritus Professor of War Studies, King's College London.

Examination of witness

Witness: Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this Defence Committee hearing on Tuesday 5 September 2023, where we will be looking at the Defence Command Paper refresh. This session will examine the decisions made within the paper and the potential force structure and capability decisions that are likely to occur as a result.

To help us in our studies, I am really delighted to welcome Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, who is the emeritus professor of war studies at King's College London. Sir, Professor, welcome indeed. There is much to get through in the next 90 minutes or so.

Before we go into the detail of looking at the Defence Command Paper itself, I wondered whether you could share your thoughts on the direction of travel of where threats are going. I will just remark that the opening paragraph of this new report says, "We have gone from a competitive age to a contested and volatile world. Since March 2021, the threats and challenges we faced have manifested themselves, as have many of the technological advances predicted and our need to adapt faster to them if we are to continue outmatching our adversaries".

Of course, we remain on a peacetime budget of around 2.2%. What are your thoughts on where we have gone, on the last four to five years from a defence threat capability, to where we are going into the future?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: Maybe we have to go back a little further. At the start of this century, we believed that the main threats came from terrorism. There was a real threat from terrorism. That led us into Afghanistan and Iraq, both experiences that had their moments but turned out not to be quite as satisfactory in their conclusions. There was a sort of frustration developing with how you work out that sort of warfare when it moves from dealing with specific threats that may manifest themselves in atrocities in the UK and challenges of nation building that turn out to be much more substantial and longer term.

A strategic decision was made in the West that we really do not want to get involved in that much more. That does not mean to say that the threat issue from terrorism has gone, but the idea that we deal with it by helping to create different sorts of nations has gone. At the same time, you get this move back to thinking that the sorts of things that we used to worry about in defence—great power competition and rivalry—come back to the fore. I would say that the idea that Russia was returning as a challenge was pretty evident from 2007, when Putin made his speech decrying the West for enlargement and double standards.

Q2 **Chair:** Is this his Munich Security Conference speech?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: Yes, the speech at the Munich Security Conference in March 2007. It has been pretty clear from that point that there was trouble. At the Bucharest summit the next year,

NATO essentially fudged the question about enlargement. We have been on a track with Russia for some time. There are arguments about whether we could have dealt with it better diplomatically and whether we should have been tougher earlier, for example over Georgia or certainly over Ukraine in 2014, but this has been developing for some time.

What has taken people by surprise is not that Putin is taking a pretty hostile view of the West and its intentions, or that he has moved to rely more on the military instrument, because he relied on the military instrument in becoming President with Chechnya, but that he took such a reckless gamble in 2022. That was the surprise. Maybe he did not think that it was a reckless gamble. Maybe he thought that it would all be done and dusted in a few days. That is what has created a major sense of discontinuity. This is something quite different to what we had before.

Then, meanwhile, you have China coming more and more into view. At the time of the coalition Government, when it started, there was still some optimism that there would be chances for a pretty co-operative relationship with China. Since Xi took over, that optimism has slowly dissipated. A more realistic assessment of the challenge of dealing with China has taken over.

There has been a sort of shift; I would not say it is in the other direction to that with Russia, because the China concern is still high, but there is a greater awareness of the problems within China itself. The sense of inexorable growth taking us well past all western countries, even the US, no longer seems so clear. The dysfunctions in the Chinese system are more evident. There is a chance for a more balanced view of China, but with a much harsher view of Russia.

I have a final point. Of course, what is going on at the moment is that Russia is diminishing before our eyes as a substantial military power. At least in the land realm, it is going to take years for it to recover from all of this, whatever happens in Ukraine itself. Getting the measure of Russia now is quite difficult, because you have this incredible, almost ideological antagonism that anybody who spends any time looking at Russian media can see, combined with a sense that a lot of this that is directed towards us is becoming bluster, because they struggle to see it through. Meanwhile, of course, what they are doing in Ukraine is terrible. Getting the measure of these two big challenges is important. There is still Iran. There are still lots of other challenges around as well.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. There is lots of food for thought there.

Q3 **Derek Twigg:** Is the Defence Command Paper 2023 an appropriate and adequate response to a "more contested and volatile world", in particular following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. If not, what is missing?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It is difficult. It is not a plan of action. It has plans of action within it on looking after the human

dimension, the industrial side and so on. These are issues that have been around for some time. The actual strategy for dealing with Russia and Ukraine is already there. It is one that has to be worked out with allies.

Also, one has to say that there are not a lot of decisions in it as such. It is a long essay, or a series of long essays, about things that we would like to do and initiatives that we have taken, but without a clear sense of, necessarily, where it needs to end up. I had a feeling that it was a sort of interim thing. There was a sense that, because there was a refresh of the main integrated review, it needed a refresh of the defence side as well.

Q4 **Derek Twigg:** In terms of where the world is today, you talked quite eloquently about the history in China and Russia, the way things have changed, Putin's speech and so on. In terms of the way things are today and what has happened in Ukraine, is this an adequate response?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: The integrated review was more of a response, to be honest, than this. It is packed with interesting ideas and things to do, but it does not strike me as being strategic in the sense of "Here is an emergency. How do we deal with it?" It is realising that there are inadequacies in our system—the industrial one seems to be quite a major one—and things that have happened like AUKUS.

Q5 **Derek Twigg:** Can I take from what you are saying that the Government and/or Whitehall have not really got to grips with a changing world through this command White Paper. Is that being disingenuous?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: As I said, the integrated review is pretty good. Our difficulty is that our major adversary at the moment, which I would say is Russia, is fighting a country that is not an ally. That country that is not an ally is doing not a bad job in the circumstances, and we are supporting them with our allies. That said, if you are going to have a major discussion of options about Ukraine, this is not the place to do it. You are left wondering, and it is still in the air, what happens as the pieces fall into place with Ukraine.

I think that a lot of people, when they read it, were expecting something different, such as more on force structure, for example. It has kept the previous force structure. It is sort of the holding action until 2025, I would say. That was my feel for it when I read it.

Q6 **Gavin Robinson:** Good afternoon, Professor. An essay, or a series of essays, and not many decisions was what you shared in your first answer. It was promised in the IR23 that we would be sufficiently capable, resilient, deployable and adaptive to deter potential adversaries from engaging in conflict across a range of areas. Do you believe that the Command Paper 2023 will result in the UK's conventional, cyber and space forces delivering on that promise?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: You left out nuclear. That remains the main deterrent. If you watch some of the comments on Russian media, along with the Iranians, they seem to be the few people who

believe that the British still mastermind everything that goes wrong for them. They are constantly issuing threats and occasionally somebody reminds them that the UK is a nuclear power. That is not a change or a shift. We have been one for a long time. This is one of those periods when you see why it can be quite useful to be a nuclear power.

In that sense, the prospect of nuclear war, which has been put under strain, not particularly with us but generally over the last year and a half, still holds as a deterrent. Russia has made it clear what it thinks would be a red line. We have made it clear what we think would be a red line.

When you get to the conventional side, the UK is not going to be able to deter Russia by itself. It depends on decisions being taken by allies. Our contribution is substantial, a modest increase in the amount of GDP committed. There is a decision that was taken some time ago that, in effect, all of our contribution is going to be maritime, and that has not changed very much.

You have then got the issue that is still left hanging as to what extent the UK sees itself as a major participant in a land war in the middle of Europe. Even if we go back up to 82,000 or whatever, the numbers are still going to be relatively small. In that sense, it is significant but not that substantial and the UK is going to be a limited player on that side and in that aspect of the conflict.

The cyber was introduced as a big issue in 2010. The UK actually plays quite a good role on cyber. GCHQ is a pretty impressive outfit. GCHQ and others have played quite an important role on the Ukraine side as well. Space is a bit in its infancy. We will see how that develops. It is about contributions that we make, rather than, the UK being able to deter by itself, with the exception of the nuclear side.

Q7 **Sarah Atherton:** Both the Command Papers evolve the approach of a global campaigning response, which suggests that defence is moving towards the maritime rather than the land power. Would you agree with this? Would you concur? If so, or if not, what are the implications?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I found this term "campaigning" quite interesting. It suggests something more active and dynamic in policy, but it just sounds like project management. It is not quite clear exactly what it means.

On the maritime side, in effect, the carrier decisions made that for us. Once we committed to two big carriers, a lot followed. These decisions, as you know, were taken a long time ago. As it turns out, to the extent that foreign policy now leads us to think more globally—the Indo-Pacific as well as the Atlantic—the maritime dimension gives something to policy that might not otherwise be there. There are things you can do with ships, as we know, that you cannot do by other means. I am never quite sure how much trade follows ships and so on, but that is part of the argument.

The naval contribution is potentially now significant, plus AUKUS, which we really need to keep a focus on. It tends to get lost a bit in some of the commentary, but it is actually really very important over the long term. That ties the UK, US and Australia not just in the nuclear realm but also, potentially, in some other high technology realms. That seems to me pretty important.

In that sense, there is a dimension that was always there but narrowed down. If you go back to the Nott review in 1981, it was going in exactly the opposite direction. Everything we did was about the central front and NATO. The priority was to keep the AOR there and the Navy was cut. The Navy has been cut more than was envisaged then, but it is, I would argue, a higher-quality Navy. Of course, at that time the Royal Navy kept the carriers going by calling them something else, through-deck cruisers. Eventually they were revealed to be things that looked rather like carriers, but they were not of the size of the ones that we have now.

There has been a shift. It is done. You are not going to go back on that now. In the circumstances it probably makes sense because of the reasons I gave before. Our contribution to a land war would be significant but not decisive, whereas we probably can make more of a significant impact on the maritime side.

Q8 **Sarah Atherton:** Do you think that the delegation of financial authority to the commands has been a positive, or has it been to the detriment of a modernisation of a whole-force military?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I do not think that I am in a good position to judge that. If you are going to have a project management approach to these things, a campaigning approach, you have to give people financial latitude. They have to be able to make decisions without everything being checked all the time. It does not seem to me that that is, as far as I can tell, a decisive aspect at the moment.

Q9 **Sarah Atherton:** Can I ask one quick question? Do you think the field Army has lost out?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: The Army had a period when it was the centre, because it was fighting two big wars. It was not that long ago when it had Northern Ireland as well. It shrunk. Let us be clear: it had trouble recruiting even before the numbers were brought down. There is a question for the Army about its role.

I have a reasonably pragmatic view. There are always things that you will find you need the Army to do. As we have seen even with Ukraine, talking about training and so on, there are things for them to do. You do not have the lead role, running a headquarters in Afghanistan and things like that, or being in charge of MND South-East in Iraq. You do not have that sort of big role. You have the NATO headquarters and so on, but it is not quite the same. There are issues for the Army.

My view is that, because of what has happened to Russia, they have a bit of time to sort these things out and to try to think it through and find a role. You are going to need an Army. You are going to need something of this sort of size. What you do not have, which the Navy has and the Air Force will always have because you will always need airpower whatever you are doing, is a clear sense of how they fit into the wider foreign policy of the UK.

Q10 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Good afternoon, Professor. How effectively do you think that the commitments in the 2021 defence papers, so the DCP and the DSIS, have been implemented?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: For the last two years I have been totally preoccupied with Ukraine and before that I was preoccupied with Iraq, so I do not want to claim to be in a position to assess performance very sharply. The problem with these papers is that they set desiderata: "This is what we would like to see. These are things we are trying to achieve. These are the things we are doing". It is very hard to measure success because they do not actually give you KPIs. They do not say, "This is how you will know that we have succeeded". How do we know that this has been successful?

When you are saying, "We are aiming to deter", as long as nothing happens, you have been successful. It is quite hard to measure success. You can measure success in shipbuilding by whether there are delays or cost overruns. You can measure success in recruiting—how many people you have in place—but a lot of the other stuff is quite hard to measure because it is not put to the test.

The last couple of years have given an energy and a vigour to these debates that was not there before, because all of a sudden we see what a major war looks like in the middle of Europe. There is a seriousness about the situation that I hope is feeding itself through. I find it quite difficult to say, "They are doing exactly what they said", because what they said was, "We are aiming to do these things to meet these rather ill-defined objectives", because you are never quite sure what it would take for these objectives to be met, other than you would know that deterrence failed if you find yourself in the middle of a war. If you are not in the middle of a war, deterrence has not failed.

Q11 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I think that that is why it is sometimes difficult for our Committee to keep a check on things.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It is a problem with defence. It used to be described as an insurance policy, which always struck me as quite a bad analogy because it does not pay out in the same way, but it is in the sense that you are preparing for something that you hope will never happen. That makes it hard to judge. Going back to my original comments on the refresh document, I find it problematic that you do not have as part of it, after you have said, "These are the things we want to achieve. These are all the things we are doing", something that says,

"This is how you will know whether we are succeeding". I understand why Government Departments do not like to do that, because it is hostages to fortune.

Q12 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Some have commented that the departure of the Secretary of State might reduce momentum in the MoD in implementing the DCP23. Do you share that view?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It would be impolitic for me to say. It is a bit early. It is about the fourth or fifth desk that he has been getting his feet under this year. It is a demanding job. Going back to what I was saying about the paper, there is a sense that this is a holding operation now until 2025 or whenever the next major review takes place.

To me, the key question is whether he will keep the focus that the previous Defence Secretary had on Ukraine, because that is the biggest challenge that we face. The biggest need we have at the moment is to crank up defence production and our training effort to help Ukraine. If we fail in that, if the alliance fails in that, all the other things we are talking about become much more serious.

Chair: We are letting the Defence Secretary get his feet under the table and then we will be inviting him to take your seat, where you are. We have defence questions on Monday, which will be interesting. We will get a flavour of what is going on then.

Q13 **Mr Francois:** Professor, you mentioned essays. It is a while since you had to mark mine. You seem to have survived the experience, so it is great to see you. We have the commitments in the people section of DCP23. Do you think that they are going to be enough to solve some of the recruitment and retention problems in the services? However much you spend on shiny kit, if you do not have enough suitably skilled personnel, at the end of the day you cannot use it.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I thought that it was a good section of the paper. I thought that it was realistic. It seemed to me to be trying to address some of the problems that we have been aware of for some time. It is a challenge because this economy does not move very fast but has labour shortages. People can get jobs. I do not know—I would be interested to know—what effect armed forces being in the news at the moment has. People are seeing the importance of armed force. I think that it is going to be a challenge.

Again, it is one of those things where you would have liked to have seen more targets, "This is what we hope to achieve by these numbers", so we can judge better how it is going. It was good that it came early on. That showed the right sort of commitment. It is a wider point, but the way that Governments sometimes talk about civil servants and the people who are working for them is not always helpful for morale. I thought it was good that you had an opening that recognised the importance not

just of the servicemen and servicewomen but also of the civil servants who find themselves in quite challenging situations.

Again, you have to look at implementation. In terms of all the things they say they are going to do in opening up, how well are they being enacted? What sort of response do they get? What adjustments will be made? We will see, but actually it was one of the stronger parts.

Q14 **Mr Francois:** To press you a bit, in terms of metrics, the Army has had a particular problem because, as this Committee has catalogued in the past, it has outsourced its recruiting to Capita, the results of which have been—I will choose my words carefully—distinctly sub-optimal. In the financial year 2022-23, the Army hit about 80% of its recruiting target, but it has been worse than that for quite a few years. The cumulative effect of that has been thinning out in a lot of the regiments.

You are absolutely right about relatively low unemployment and, by definition, many Armed Forces personnel have skills that are very marketable, not least in the defence industry. What really worries the Committee, in a nutshell, is that recruitment is falling across all three services now quite markedly, while outflow, people leaving, is going up quite markedly. If you project forward those trends four or five years, you end up with operational failure. I think that many of us think that this is going to be one of the biggest challenges that the new Secretary of State has when he takes up his post. Is that a fair comment?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It has been a problem, as you say, for a while. It has been hanging over the Army number debate all the way through. There is no point in saying that we want an Army of such-and-such a size if, in the end, you cannot get them through the door. It is not my field, so I would not care to say how effective the ideas will be. It is a problem.

GCHQ is an incredibly impressive organisation; it is competing with a pretty lucrative private sector a lot of the time, but it finds ways of making it still attractive. Maybe being in Cheltenham is part of it. You have to be pretty imaginative. The pay review body and so on is part of that, but we are going through a period when every pay review body is under stress. I cannot disagree with you that, if they do not make progress and reverse these trends, it is going to be awkward. It is one reason why I think that what success looks like would be quite an important part of the discussion.

Q15 **Sarah Atherton:** You are quite right: chapter 1 is all about people. It is very project management speak. I was just pulling out a few terms: "spectrum of service", "employment model", "surging talent across the whole force", "'zig-zag' or 'portfolio' careers". It is fantastic, incorporating a lot of the Haythornthwaite. Is the test not how this is going to be done and how quickly it is done? Is the Defence Command Paper refresh not a bit light on detail?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It refers to lots of activity. I once had to write these sorts of documents for a university. You were always wanting to be a bit careful about what you were promising. You want an analysis of the numbers. Going back to Mark's point, if you are talking about recruitment it would be good to see an analysis of where the problems are, rather than lots of, "In order to achieve this, we will do that". The analysis of the actual problem, and therefore how you would judge success, tends to be a bit lacking. That is a general problem across Government about the way these documents get written.

Q16 **Sarah Atherton:** Quite a few parliamentarians are very concerned about the reduction in Army numbers, but is it right? Is headcount an appropriate measure of size when we are looking at modernising the Army, digitalising, innovation and projections of force effect? Are we banging on the wrong drum?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It is the line that at some point quantity has a quality all of its own. The quality is important, clearly. Something that says that this is the smallest Navy or the smallest Army since whenever is not really helpful because the capabilities they have are quite different.

One of the big lessons from Ukraine will be about the role of autonomous vehicles, how much more you can do with drones and so on, where tasks that would have been given to people you do not give to people anymore. Over time, that will make a difference. It is true that just counting heads only takes you so far. There is also a point where, if you do not have the heads you cannot even do the other stuff, so there is a danger in that argument.

If you have come out and said, "These are the appropriate levels for the RAF, Navy and Army", presumably they are appropriate levels for a reason and if you are not meeting them you are going to have problems. Yes, do not get obsessed with headcounts, but, if you let the numbers fall too low, you are going to have ships in dock because you cannot man them.

Q17 **Derek Twigg:** You made the point and I agree with it, in terms of autonomous vehicles, UAVs and so forth, but one other big lesson we have learnt from Ukraine is that actually you need boots on the ground.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: Yes. If you are going to fight a war like this, these are total wars in that sense. Hundreds of thousands of people on both sides have been mobilised. That is not a war that we are prepared to fight at the moment, because we do not expect to be invaded and we expect to be supporting a country that has been with a number of other countries.

The lessons of Ukraine are really interesting, but you have to contextualise quite carefully. The lesson of Ukraine is that, if neither side has superiority in firepower, you end up with a sort of attritional conflict.

It is gruelling and will mean boots on the ground. Yes, if, at some point, we found ourselves engaged in a fight with the Russian Federation, or indeed anybody else, with numbers, we would need numbers of our own, but the UK would not be expected to, or could not, provide the bulk of those.

We do not really have a mobilisation strategy. We have reservists, but that is not quite the same thing. If that sort of situation developed, if you really found yourself in what looked like being a long conventional war, there would need to be a substantial rethink of almost all our assumptions about future warfare that there have been. We would not be the only ones having to engage in that rethink.

Q18 **Robert Courts:** Thank you very much indeed for the thoughts you have given us so far. I wanted to ask you about the reserves in particular and focus in on that. What the Command Paper says, again in an example of what my colleague has referred to as the management speak, is that the MoD commits to "address identified policy and process frustrations, and to tackle the cultural and resource issues our reservists face". Perhaps slightly more straightforwardly, Lord Houghton has told us that the lack of a properly functioning reserve is a national embarrassment. I wanted to get your views on that but particularly to see whether the DCP goes far enough to address the issues we have with the reserves, but also the strategic reserve.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I come back to the same point. You need an analysis of the problem rather than saying that there is a problem that we are trying to address. I do not think that that is there. I would certainly defer to Lord Houghton on the state.

I find it perplexing because it seems to me that reserves are a very obvious way for us to go. If you are having a struggle with recruitment for full-time service, I know a lot of people who enjoy the reserve, want to be part of it, both in the sense of it being personally satisfying and in the sense of service. You want to encourage that. There are also a lot more specialist areas where it is unrealistic to expect that you would get full-timers, or enough full-timers, but you could mobilise people quite quickly. I knew a lot of medics, for example, who spent time in Afghanistan.

I would make the reserves a pretty high priority. It requires the services to work out themselves their own attitudes towards the reservists and how they fit in. When I was doing the Iraq inquiry, it was pretty evident that a lot of the post-conflict problems—PTSD, mental health issues, drinking problems or whatever—were worse among the reservists because they did not have the community to give them the same sort of support. It is a challenge of not only a policy about wanting reserves and encouraging employers to recognise the importance and not having them hold back their civilian careers, but also for the services themselves to work out better how they integrate.

Q19 **Robert Courts:** Yes, it is about the integration and how they fit together, is it not? It has always seemed to me that we have had them very separate. You have had the Army and the Territorial Army historically and the Air Force and Auxiliary Air Force. In terms of integrating the two, other countries are much better at this, are they not, at seeing the reserves being much more a part of their armed forces than we have historically done? Your advice would be not just focusing on the numbers and getting more people through the doors but the integration.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: The integration is important, because then you get the benefit. That may require requiring more of the reserves and having them play a larger role. Of course, during the insurgency reservists often found themselves there quite a lot of the time. In the US, the reserves are very important in the structure.

Q20 **Mr Francois:** Can I follow on on one point? You have some former Territorial Army, Army Reserve officers on this Committee. We have struggled in recent years to maintain an Army reserve of around about 30,000 personnel. We have about 26,000 to 27,000 on the books, but not all of those attend their training sessions regularly. Not all of those qualify for their annual bounty. Have you heard the rumours that some of us on this Committee are hearing that the Army is shortly to announce that it is actually going to slash the Army reserve to under 15,000?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I have not. That does not mean to say that they are not true; it is just that I have not heard them. I would be disappointed if that was the case.

Mr Francois: We would be too.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: My view is that there is an awful lot you could do with the reserves at a time when you are finding it difficult to recruit the regulars. It is a cultural thing as much as anything else, but I have heard nothing of that.

Q21 **Mr Francois:** The only reason I raise it is because we have heard the mantra many times that, between the regular Army and the reserves, we could rapidly mobilise over 100,000 men and women in the Army. If we are going to reduce the regulars to about 73,000, because there was a very small add-back, and then cut the reserves to 15,000, by my maths that is fewer than 90,000 soldiers.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: Yes, you would struggle. Again, this is where the headcount question is different from the quality question. You can send people their papers and they can turn up, but, if they have not been actually doing their training and learning their trades, it is not necessarily going to be a great help. As I say, my preference would be to go stronger on reserves, but I honestly do not know what Government thinking is.

Mr Francois: We will wait to see whether the rumours are true.

Q22 **Robert Courts:** Can I pin you down slightly more on that point though? There is a distinction between Government thinking and Armed Forces thinking. Am I understanding you correctly? You are saying that the Armed Forces themselves, i.e. operationally, need to think through what they do with reserves rather than looking at the MoD itself.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: Yes. If you are going through a career in the forces, you will be working with the same cohort through your career. You will know them and you will know your regiment and so on. People who just appear now and again are not going to be seen in the same way, so there is a challenge. That is why I would put more stress on making the reserve function more demanding, so that they are there more and are actually deploying much more. If it is just a weekend thing, it is not going to work as well.

Q23 **Chair:** On recruitment and retention, is there something fundamentally wrong, given that you spelled out a picture of rising threats, that our Army is reducing its total strength from 82,000 to 72,000? Surely we are placing ever more burden on those people who are required to do the jobs. Operationally, duties are only going to increase.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: We come back to the problem that we can say we need more, but, if you cannot recruit them, you cannot recruit them and you have a problem. The Army needs to think through its role and identity after the insurgencies. Ukraine helps a bit in that. It gives an understanding of modern war that the Army is best placed to digest and understand. The training role it has played has been important.

When these issues have been discussed in the past, my view has always been that you will always need the numbers at some point, even if they are dealing with domestic crises, environmental disasters or whatever. You will need the numbers at some point.

Incidentally, there is often a squeamishness in defence debates about acknowledging the role that the Armed Forces play when they are really the only people who can manage the big challenges, whether it is foot and mouth, pandemics or whatever. They are good at that. They are good at logistics. They are good at that sort of thing. I do not think that one should see it as somehow improper that the military is used for those roles. Again, I remind you that it is all stress. It all adds to the demands.

The Army needs to think it through a bit more. I know that it has a big programme under way trying to bring in all of their experience in the insurgencies, now the experience of Ukraine and some of the new technologies. It has to think it through a bit more. You can always make a case for more numbers but, as we have just been discussing, we are having enough trouble getting the numbers we already—

Q24 **Mr Francois:** To follow the Chair's point, within Whitehall the MoD is often known as the Department of last resort. When you have a natural

disaster, what tends to happen is that other Departments scream for military assistance but do not want to pay for it. We have all seen that ourselves.

During the Cold War, when we had three divisions in Germany and another one in the UK ready to reinforce it, we were absolutely renowned for maintaining our NATO commitments. The outgoing Secretary of State admitted at the Dispatch Box a few months ago that we cannot meet our core NATO commitment to provide a warfighting division. Within the number of years that you have been looking at defence, have you ever seen anything quite like this before?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I have in the 1970s. I have been doing it a long time. You absolutely had this sense in the mid-1970s of forces that were hollowed out. A lot of it was being done just for show. If push had come to shove, they would be in serious trouble. I do not think that this is new.

You now have some areas, the Navy and so on. The Air Force has its programmes. The Army has had trouble with its equipment programmes as well. It is something that is a concern. As I say, we need to think hard with our allies about where this is all going. It is quite hard at the moment because, if things turn out badly in Ukraine—I hope that they will not and I do not think that they will—we are in a much more serious situation.

Q25 **Derek Twigg:** Just to be clear, you said about the 1970s. Are you saying that in the 1970s we could not field a warfighting division?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: We would have had real trouble. We would have had a division there, which we said would be suitable for warfighting, but it was hollowed out. The equipment was old. Training and exercises were often cut.

Q26 **Robert Courts:** We might have had the numbers but not the kit and the training.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: We had the numbers. That is what led to the 1981 review.

Q27 **Derek Twigg:** We had a number of divisions in the 1970s.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It was not the numbers.

Derek Twigg: I am talking about numbers.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It was how well they would have performed.

Q28 **Mr Francois:** The fairest way to characterise that—tell me if you agree—is that, in the mid-1970s, the British Army of the Rhine had three armoured divisions in Germany and another division back in the UK to reinforce it, much of which was Army reserve. It is probably true to say that they were badly hollowed out. In other words, we had three

armoured divisions on paper, but whether we could have fielded three on the day was another matter.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: Just look at what happened in 1990 and 1991 with Desert Storm. We sent all the armoured division off to fight and we had to cannibalise tanks in order to make up the numbers. There were debates that I came into, in a sense, in the mid-1970s, which lasted really until the Falklands, assumed that we were trying to do too much and that something had to give. Was it BAOR? Was it the number of ships? Was it the RAF? Something had to give and John Nott bought into that, which led to the 1981 review.

Q29 **Mr Francois:** Does something have to give now?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I do not think so. I do not think that something has to give in that sense because we have slimmed down. The problem, which I think the Chair was alluding to, is whether, in the situation we are in at the moment, it is enough. The policies that we have can probably be sustained. There is the issue of recruitment that you have mentioned.

My concerns would still be that the cupboard is a bit bare because of what we have given to Ukraine. It is for good use but, nonetheless, there is an awful lot to be made up, so I am very concerned on the production side. Again, it is part of the current Government's policy, but a very high priority is to crank up the industrial base so that we have got the stocks even just to sustain Ukraine in the current war, never mind to fill in the backlog that we have.

Chair: I have not gone to my substantive question yet, but I do not mind that because it has actually generated a really important discussion, which I am keen to keep going.

Q30 **John Spellar:** Taking your point about something having to give or not, with the increasing pressures in central and eastern Europe and Euro-Atlantic and increasing commitments in Indo-Pacific, unless there is a change in resourcing in both the material and manpower, are we not in fact overstretched?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I do not think so at the moment. The Indo-Pacific is largely maritime and it is very much a secondary role. I am all in favour of us taking an active interest and role in the Indo-Pacific, but we are not going to be doing an awful lot independently there. AUKUS is very important. In some ways, it extends our capabilities because the Australians are paying for some of it. That said, that part of it does not bother me.

With regard to Europe, I am not too bothered at the moment but would become very bothered indeed if things went badly in Ukraine, because then the alliance would get itself in quite a state, correctly. That would put a lot of stress on all our systems.

The third factor, which we have not mentioned, is this underlying concern of what happens in the US presidential election and if there is a shift in US policy towards cutting off alliance commitments. I am not as pessimistic about that as others, but it is foolish to disregard it. That would be a major shock. It would be a major shock to the UK probably more than any other European country because we are so integrated in so much of what we do with the United States, in so many of our programmes. That is something that could make a big difference.

While Russia is bogged down in Ukraine and losing people and kit on a pretty regular basis, I am less worried about an immediate crisis there, but that could change quite quickly. Again, that is an issue for the whole alliance, not just the UK.

Q31 **Chair:** You are right to understand the importance of alliances, because we cannot simply do these things alone anymore, nor could we in the past. There is a curiosity in strategic thinking in the Government that they are willing to move to 2.5% when the economic environment suggests that that is possible to do, but that completely ignores the fact that our economy and our security are symbiotically connected. One is related to the other. Therefore, waiting for your economy to get better when security is deteriorating seems a complete nonsense. I hope you would agree that you invest in your security in order to defend your economy. Our globalised exposure means that we are perhaps more open to international disruption than other countries.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: We are certainly open to international disruption. As we saw during the pandemic, disruption can take many forms. The themes of resilience and so on that you see in the integrated review are important in that regard. The difficulty, as you well know, that the country faces is that, in every area of public expenditure, there is unmet demand. In the end, security is the prime requirement of Government. We are sentencing people to go to prisons where there are no prison spaces. There is so much demand at the moment that anybody who looks at public expenditure just sees one problem after another.

Ukraine has given us one shock. If Ukraine goes in the wrong direction, it will give us an even bigger shock. That is why my real priority is making sure that we sustain the current policy and backing for Ukraine.

Q32 **Chair:** On that point, your colourful description of this document, the IR refresh, being a series of extended essays is absolutely apt. We were comparing it with this document, which was the original Defence Command Paper, which had some swathing cuts in it. I do not know how other Committee members feel, but I was half hoping that many of the cuts in here, particularly the personnel numbers, but also tank numbers and so forth, after Ukraine, which is what prompted this to be written, would be reversed. That has not happened. All this has done is, as you say, use a lot of colourful language to describe a difficult scenario, but nothing is going to change.

Robert Courts: It puts it off to 2025.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It is a holding document. It has some interesting stuff in it, but a new Government will come in and they are going to have to take some decisions, or the old Government will come back in and are going to have to take some decisions about these questions, in the light of what has happened in the war. That has all its twists and turns, even as we have seen over the last few months.

Q33 **Mr Francois:** I just wanted to follow up quickly on what you have said there about it being a series of essays. Another thing that has concerned us is not just the shortages of people, which we have given a good go-to now; it is also the shortages of equipment and particularly the shortages of reserves of equipment. If we were to have to fight a peer-on-peer conflict, which is not inconceivable now, we have got a handful of frigates. We do not actually have a reserve fleet. We have no real reserve surface escorts. We have one squadron of Tranche 1 Typhoons sitting in a hangar at Shawbury. We have large numbers of armoured vehicles from Afghanistan and Iraq, many of which might not be suitable for a peer-to-peer conventional conflict.

As well as the concerns about personnel, are we right to be concerned about the fact that, if the balloon did go up and we had to fight what the analysts call a come-as-you-are war, once we have used up what is in the front line, there is hardly anything behind it?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: There is not a lot. The main problem at the moment is stocks. That really would be my priority. Every time a war is fought, not just this one, people get amazed by the speed at which shells get used, and you soon discover that what you thought would last six months barely lasts a few weeks. That would really be my main priority at the moment, both because the Ukrainians are still going to need them and because we just do not have the stocks left. I know that is a major concern of the chiefs.

Mr Francois: It is of us too, for the record.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I am sure it is.

Q34 **John Spellar:** Why are they surprised?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I do not know, because it always happens.

Q35 **John Spellar:** Why?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I do not know. Maybe it is because of exercises or something. We have not done this thing ourselves for a while.

Q36 **Derek Twigg:** It goes back to what you said. They should actually do an analysis of why and then sort the problem out.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It is amongst the commentariat as well, so I do not think that anybody is off the hook on this. Warfare, when it is fought with this intensity, is different from the insurgencies. In terms of defeating the Iraqi army, we actually got through quite a lot of stuff then, but it just was not for this length of time and with this intensity, so you could recover, and it was not against an army that could fight back in the same way. It is just a long time since we have seen anything like this seriously, amongst anybody. We had the Falklands and we had the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s; other than that, you are going back into the 1970s, so it has been quite a long time since we have watched a war like this.

Q37 **John Spellar:** When they did a desktop exercise two or three years ago, General Hodges gave evidence to us that that showed that the British Army ran out of munitions after about a week. I still am trying to get to the root of why those lessons were not taken on board with any sense of urgency in terms of rebuilding stocks and rebuilding industrial capacity.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I do not know. The industrial capacity issue has been one for some time. The problem is that, if you do not expect to fight a war and you want to show that you have the numbers of this, that and the other, stocks is the last thing you look at; that is not a new problem. Going back to the 1970s again, that was a problem then. There is always this issue of forces that look good, have the numbers and can do a parade, but that do not necessarily have the stocks for a serious period.

Q38 **John Spellar:** Is that not a complete failure of strategic thinking?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It is a failure. It is not a unique one but it is. You can see it a bit in the original integrated review and the refresh, recognising this. The way in which we can contribute and participate in the event of conflict is not necessarily always by doing the fighting ourselves; you may want to support others, as we have wanted to do this time. The UK can be proud of what we have done.

You cannot do it if you are going to run out of stock very quickly, so if we are in situations where these sorts of things are going to happen even occasionally, you are going to need the stock. There are issues that have been highlighted. The less prominent, visible, exciting aspects of conflict are easily neglected, and logistics and stocks is one of them.

Q39 **Chair:** Just on that, it is not just the stocks but the ability to replenish. We went to Northern Ireland and a lot of the equipment—Starstreak, NLAW and so forth—have not been made for a number of years. To rekindle those programmes would be very difficult indeed. There is not even a button to press to say, "Now is my hour of need. I now need to thump more of these out". There is no strategic thinking along those lines.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: Keeping production lines open is difficult. It is expensive, and industry needs to know that it is not going

to be a one-off, that the orders will keep on coming and so on. These are addressable problems.

Q40 **Chair:** There is this myth in Russia that baked bean can companies have to, every so often, produce shells for artillery. I am not sure if that is actually true, but the concept is understandable: that you have companies that are producing and procuring things with an everyday capability, which are able to, when required, flip across and do something for the war effort.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: Russians like quite basic stuff, though.

Chair: Yes, baked bean cans and artillery.

Q41 **Mr Francois:** Professor, apropos this, how you prepare for a war depends on the kind of war that you expect to fight. As a Committee, we have multiple different inquiries under way at any one time. We are doing one on readiness, which overlaps with today. We took evidence from General Sir Nick Carter just before the summer recess, and we asked him whether the MoD was still operating a 10-year rule, i.e. we did not expect a major war for 10 years, which was the situation we had in the 1920s. His answer was really quite candid. He said that we had actually, up to 2018, at least in the case of the Army, been operating a 12-year rule, i.e. no major war for 10 years, and a further two years once we realised we would have to fight to reconstitute.

That tells you how we allowed a situation where our ammunition stocks ran down that low, because, for over a decade, we were not going to have to do it at scale for real. Are we still, even now, despite Ukraine, operating a bit of an informal 10-year rule in defence planning?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: That is not an assumption anymore, just from talking to people. The problem the Chairman alluded to of how you actually crank up production is bothering people a lot. That remains a challenge. It is not a rule so much now. The expectations of a few years ago that Russia would go so far but no further have been dashed, because they went further. Once we recognised that it was in our interests and our allies' interests to stop them, even if we were not going to do the fighting itself, then we have given what we can. It is not trivial by any means, but it has left us with very little left. It is going to take time to be able to build the stocks up again. That is a major priority for the moment.

Q42 **Mr Francois:** That is even if we have to sacrifice some bright shiny kit in order to do it.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: Yes, it is really quite important.

Q43 **Chair:** In our remaining minutes, I just wondered if we could take advantage of your thoughts and reflections on Ukraine and the character of conflict. Many expected, looking at the Gulf War and looking at other conflicts, that it would be over quite quickly. Clearly, the resilience and

determination of the Ukrainian people has been phenomenal, but who would have thought trench warfare would have been back? Who would have thought the utility of the tank would now be back in play? We were hoping, again, given that it is Ukraine that was supposed to have prompted the upgrade, that this would reflect the composition and the make-up of our own defence posture. Can you just give us some thoughts and your take on what is happening? There is the combination of drones and the high-tech capability satellites, and yet we have trench warfare taking place at the same time.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: It is a very old-fashioned war in many respects. Mines and artillery have been critical to the Russian defence. There has been a readiness to sacrifice people on both sides, but the Russia tactics are based on expendable forces, literally. This is stuff that we did not really expect to see, because a lot of the American strategic thinking—this was probably too influential in thinking through how Ukraine might do its counter-offensive—has been based on manoeuvre. A lot of people have been warning that manoeuvre is really quite difficult. In modern warfare, as soon as you are in the open, you are likely to be hit.

What we have been seeing over the last couple of months is the Ukrainians moving away, for the moment—I do not think it is precluded—from using the tanks and the infantry fighting vehicles to dismounted infantry, moving forward very slowly, taking out mines as they can, combined with highly accurate, longer-range artillery, Storm Shadow and so on, and then drones. Even since this war started, the role of drones has been transformational, because at any given time there can be 50 or so of these things in the sky, and they are expendable; they are cheap. We started off with the highly capable drones that could follow events and launch missiles and so on. Now, it is very basic stuff that is not expected to last. This means that the knowledge of what is going on in the battlefield is really quite extensive. It makes it, again, much harder to hide.

Now, all of this is being done with limited airpower. That is where we have to be quite careful about the lessons that we draw, because the West would not have fought the war in this way. If the US air force had been involved and the issue of nuclear weapons had not been so prominent, the Russians would not have lasted very long. It would have been a different sort of war. Equally, if the Russian air force had performed as people were expecting it to perform early on, you would not have expected the Ukrainians to last this long. The air dimension has not been absent—there are a lot of aircraft being flown—but it is nothing like what we expected. That means that the drones have taken over a role.

You are then just back to old-fashioned artillery. The Ukraine war in 2014 was an artillery war. Artillery is still the most important battlefield weapon. At the moment it is difficult to try to extract lessons that are relevant to a different sort of conflict fought by our forces, because we

would not be fighting in the same sort of way, but it is a very important reminder of just how gruelling land warfare can be, the problems of operating in a pretty transparent battlefield, and the ammunition stocks that we have already talked about.

It is also a reminder of the importance of willpower, morale and all of those components. What is striking about the Ukrainian effort, despite all of the pain that they are suffering, is that they keep at it. There are interesting lessons also about attacks on infrastructure and the importance the Russians attach to taking out electricity—I think we will see this again in the coming winter—and trying to generally disrupt the Ukrainian economy, agriculture and so on.

There are all sorts of things that are going on here, and a lot of them are quite specific lessons that may not be that relevant to other conflicts. For most people who are following this, who have studied military history, the surprising thing is how little of it is that surprising, how familiar so much of it seems, how much you can go back into battles of the past and recognise what is going on, and how much World War II generals, after they had been introduced to some of the new technologies, would have understood perfectly well what was happening.

Q44 **Mr Francois:** You could argue back that at one time it was starting to look like Verdun.

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: The numbers are much smaller. That is just the thing—the Battle of Kursk or whatever. The numbers were far greater then.

Q45 **Chair:** I have a final question. This is Putin's war. A big chapter or a big development that has taken place is the removal of Prigozhin. The Wagner Group was arguably the most potent capability fighting against Ukrainians. They have now gone. Are Putin's days now numbered?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: I hope so. I am always reluctant to predict. General Surovikin's departure is as important. It is still called the Surovikin line, the main defensive line. He was by far the most accomplished general. He was certainly far more accomplished than Gerasimov. He was last seen in civvy clothes. Other generals have been dismissed for insubordination.

There are real problems there, but there is stoicism and resilience in the Russian system that is unwise to underestimate. One of the problems that we have is that Putin's days are numbered the day this war ends, which is why he wanted to keep it going.

Q46 **John Spellar:** You mentioned the resonance with previous conflicts. In the light of the experience in this one as well, are we going to have to revisit the question of mines in the interface between NATO and Russia?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: No. Mines and cluster munitions are playing critical roles. One part of Ukraine is going to be an

environmental mess because of the munitions that are going to be left over.

The reasons why people do not like mines and cluster munitions remain valid, but they turn out to be quite effective in war. That is the problem that is going to have to be addressed. Russian tactics depend on mines combined with drones, artillery, forward infantry and so on. It is not just mines but mines have played a critical role, as any account of the first days of the Ukrainian offensive will testify. You just have to be honest about the choices you make. You may not expect to be defending territory in similar ways, but if you are, mines are a good means of defence.

Q47 **John Spellar:** That is why I posed the question. Should we be at least re-examining, if not revisiting, our prohibition on landmines?

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman: As a matter of practice, we have to reckon on the fact that enemies that we face are likely to be using mines. We have to think about whether there are going to be situations in which we are really going to regret that we do not have them. I doubt if there will be that many.

The Ukrainians use mines. The Ukrainians mined the area around Odesa. This will have long-term consequences. With wars and conflict, there are trade-offs, and the things you do in the short term can come and bite you back in the long-term.

Cluster munitions are an even better example than mines. They are terrible weapons. They have a terrible legacy. If the Ukrainians were not using cluster munitions, they did not have very much else. It has made quite a bit of difference to some of their recent success. Again, these are trade-offs. You have to recognise that if you accept the prohibitions, you may lose ground.

Chair: Professor, it has been a fascinating and illuminating discussion this afternoon. You have left us with that phrase, "a series of essays", which I think we will take away with us as a wonderful description of the integrated review refresh. Can I thank you for your time? Can I thank the Committee and the staff as well? That brings an end to this Defence Committee hearing focusing on the Defence Command Paper.