



Defence Committee

Oral evidence: One-off Session on the Strategic Defence Review, HC 484

Tuesday 3 December 2024

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Members present: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Chair); Mr Calvin Bailey; Alex Baker; Lincoln Jopp; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Mike Martin; Ian Roome; Michelle Scrogam; Fred Thomas; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1 - 45

Witnesses

I: Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, Lead Reviewer, Strategic Defence Review; and General Sir Richard Barrons, Reviewer, Strategic Defence Review.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Robertson of Port Ellen and General Sir Richard Barrons.

Q1 **Chair:** I welcome everybody to the public evidence session on the strategic defence review. In particular, on behalf of the whole Defence Committee, I offer a very warm welcome to your good self, Lord Robertson, as the lead reviewer, and to General Sir Richard Barrons. I know that we are limited in time—we only have an hour with your good selves—so unless you want to briefly make any introductory remarks, I will ask Members to begin their questions.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Thank you very much, Chair, for the opportunity to come along. I am sorry that Dr Fiona Hill, the third reviewer, is on the other side of the Atlantic so could not be here today.

This is not the first review that I have done: I did another one in 1998. At that time, 26 years ago—that seems just like yesterday—we had 20,000 troops either in Northern Ireland or preparing for Northern Ireland. NATO had just signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and we had very good relations with President Yeltsin at the time. Russia was in the shadows and we all thought that globalisation was going to be a major feature of our prosperity.

That world has changed. At that point we were spending 2.7% of GNP on defence. I wanted to make that point, because it is worth remembering that fact. The world has changed out of all recognition and that is why the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary decided that they would have another review, and that they would, uniquely, have an external review and therefore asked me, General Barrons and Fiona Hill to conduct it with the Department, not to the Department. We have a very able secretariat working with us.

Briefly on the process, because it is quite important for people to know how we do it, you have the three reviewers, and underneath us we have a defence review team—as usual, as an acronym: the DRT six. We have a technology expert, Grace Cassy. We have an industry expert, Robin Marshall, who is one of the non-executive directors on the Defence Board. Angus Lapsley is the NATO expert and Assistant Secretary-General of the alliance. Sir Jeremy Quin—the former Conservative Minister for Defence Procurement and your predecessor as Chair of the Defence Select Committee—is the acquisition expert. We have Ed Dinsmore on the people side of things, another expert in that area, and Jean-Christophe Gray from the Treasury, so we have a Treasury secondeé.

Underneath that is the secretariat, where we have about 20 people. We have a Home Office embed and a Foreign Office embed. We have the Cabinet Office embedded, and a German officer and a French officer as part of the general secretariat.



We put out a number of propositions generally to the public, institutions and the Department. We have about 35¹ propositions we put out. We received 14,500 expressions of interest and about 8,000 actual submissions. In order that they could be processed, we are using an artificial intelligence method by which they can be sorted. We, the reviewers, have seen quite a substantial number of individual submissions that have been put, including all the ones by the Department, but other significant ones as well. I highlight for the moment that the Conservative party put a submission in, and it is one of the ones that the reviewers read as well.

We have 35² groups, each with an individual chair—an expert in the field—and they have four or five other experts working with them. They have gone through the challenge and review process, looking at the representations that have been made and adding their own values to it. Each of the 35 groups at the present moment have produced an out note. The out notes have been collated by us and will be reviewed. We have two away-days at Ditchley Park next week, where we are going to review the outcome of the reviews.

Chair: Thank you very much for those introductory remarks. No doubt Members will want to question and delve into the detail about the form that the SDR is taking, as well as, in particular, AI.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I hope, Chair, that you realise that we have not got to the stage of making recommendations yet and there is a bit of a limit on what we can actually say to the Committee at the moment. We are more than happy to come back once the report has been written and then give a full explanation of why we came to the conclusions.

Chair: I will be very grateful for that, Lord Robertson, post the publication. In particular, I am sure that after this public session, in our private session, there will be certain details on which you may be able to inform the opinions of Committee members. I also want to put on the record, Lord Robertson, my thanks to your good self, as well as to Sir Jeremy Quin, for making the time to meet me to talk me through some of the aspects of the strategic defence review, and for agreeing to be at today's evidence session.

Q2 **Lincoln Jopp:** Lord Robertson, thank you very much indeed. You referenced the 1998 defence review and the 2.7% of GDP that was spent on defence at the time. That defence review, if memory serves, was very much touted as being foreign policy-led and threat-based. This time you have been tasked with a review that is deliverable and affordable within

¹ The SDR formally put out 24 propositions as part of the consultation process. Some of these were broken down, and the department produced some supporting propositions to take the number to 35 propositions total.

² Across the 35 propositions, there were 27 review and challenge panels, as panels considered more than one proposition.



the resources available within the trajectory to 2.5%. Does this not slightly put the cart before the horse by constraining your defence review to within a particular spending envelope, rather than taking a more purist approach, which might be required in the most dangerous situation that we have found ourselves in since the second world war?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The reality is that we all have to live within certain envelopes and in 1998, inevitably, the same situation applied. The terms of reference we have were actually quite clear. I will read them: "The SDR will determine the roles, capabilities and reforms required by UK Defence to meet the challenges, threats and opportunities of the twenty-first century, deliverable and affordable within the resources available to Defence within the trajectory to 2.5%. The Review will ensure that Defence is central both to the security, and to the economic growth and prosperity, of the United Kingdom." These were the terms of reference that we had and that is what we are living with.

Q3 **Lincoln Jopp:** If your review came upon something that said, "We really ought to be doing this, but that is going to take us beyond the 2.5% envelope," are you going to note that as a sort of shopping list for the future?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: It is a strategic defence review, so we are looking out to 2030 and 2040 as well. There is a longer-term trajectory, but we are living within the envelope that has been laid down for the terms of reference.

Q4 **Chair:** Lord Robertson, in your introductory remarks you mentioned that there were 35 propositions. However, the Committee, in the original paperwork that we were sent, was advised that there were only 24. Has there been a change since the initial 24?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We split some of them up in order to do it. They might have been too large. I think it is 35, is it not?

General Sir Richard Barrons: Yes. For example, originally space was included in the air proposition and we separated it out. We are treating intelligence differently. There have been some steps taken along the way to break subjects out into their own arena.

Chair: Thank you very much for that clarification, General.

Q5 **Michelle Scrogam:** What learning has been done from the previous defence reviews about the cost to the strategic proposals that you have been putting forward?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We are pretty rigorous in costing all of what we are doing. The legacy we have inherited is obviously the situation that we have to deal with. We have to deal with a legacy, we have to deal with new developments that have taken place that we have discovered are necessary and we have to bear in mind what SACEUR wants from NATO. At every stage we do costings of any of the issues that



come before us. We are pretty rigorous in making sure that we know exactly what the costs are.

Q6 Michelle Scrogham: I am particularly interested in post 2010. My constituency, Barrow-in-Furness, is still paying the price for that. As a Government and a country, we have paid a huge price for those decisions. Saving a few pounds this year has cost us an awful lot going forward. To what extent do you think you are having to make trade-offs, and will you be presenting a menu to Government on where you think those trade-offs would be? Or are you designing a concept that you would put forward?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I had a long discussion with Liam Fox, who was the Defence Secretary who did the 2010 reviews. We had an interesting exchange of views at that time. We have learned a lesson from each of the defence reviews going back through time. If there were mistakes made, we will try to avoid them this time around.

I think you will find that what we are doing is quite novel and interesting. We do not have to seek consensus. We make our views known to the Secretary of State. We have a weekly meeting with the Secretary of State. We have already met the Prime Minister and the Chancellor and we will meet them again in the process of doing it in order to make sure that what we are doing is robust and will last the test of time.

General Sir Richard Barrons: We remind ourselves every morning that every review in my working life has failed, generally within two years, for a combination of two reasons. The first is that they have not predicted what has actually happened in the world. The 1997 review obviously did not predict 9/11 and there are many other examples. Our objective has to be as least wrong as possible in terms of how we design a formula for the future.

The second reason why they have failed—and the 2010 review is the most powerful example—is because they have left an enormous gap between ambition and resourcing. They had a presumption that massive efficiencies would close that gap and other things that would make the programme more difficult would not happen, but they did happen and efficiencies did not appear.

We are very mindful of that and it is important to note that this review is therefore different in a number of key respects. It is external, so there is not a threat to consensus, which is healthy. We are absolutely dealing with the transition to a new era. Everyone acknowledges this. It is a harder world that will have to be treated, from a defence perspective, with a different formula from the formula that worked during the post-Cold War era, as we now retrospectively understand it.

That treatment will include being really transformative, because we are in the digital age, so we are not about filling in holes that the Armed Forces may have had since the end of the Cold War. That would be the wrong



thing to do. This review is also profoundly different because it is looking across the entire defence enterprise. We are not just looking at the front end. We are looking at how the whole thing operates, and there are ways of spending money much better within the 2.5% limit in there. That is a constructive thought.

Q7 Mr Bailey: My questions will centre around your roles as external reviewers. I suppose the Government's aim in appointing you both is to inject objectivity and innovation into the process. To prey on some of your remarks you already made, you say that your involvement in defence seems like yesterday, and it was not for either of you. One potential risk we could therefore expose ourselves to is you bringing back past perceptions and biases into the process. There are also a lot of potential benefits in bringing you both in, in that you will be strong challenge advocates, being able to see the difference and disparity since the time you left. What do you see as the benefits and risks that external reviewers for the Government defence policy can bring?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The benefit is very clear. We can look afresh at all these issues without necessarily seeking a consensus either in the Department or in the wider Government. My experience the last time round was that I had to execute the policy, so a lot of trade-offs took place inside the Department at that time. We can look at it with a clear eye.

We are not doing it alone. This is not three people with our own particular opinions and biases. We have gone through this quite remarkable process of consultation, and it really is quite unprecedented and certainly much greater. Nearly 100 think-tanks and academic institutions have contributed. There have been over 200 contributions from the defence supply chain and the wider industry. Thirty nations from around the world have all made submissions in answer to some or other of the questions. The review and challenge groups have very thoroughly gone into it and come out with their views.

At the end of the process we will have tested a lot of the opinions and the preconceived notions that many people will have. It is pretty unprecedented to go through that kind of consultation, especially at speed. We have now finished all of the review and challenge groups and a lot of the conclusions are really quite remarkable and far-sighted in what they are telling us.

General Sir Richard Barrons: I spent 40 years in the Armed Forces before retiring. Actually, I did not retire; as a former chief you never really retire, but you leave and do not get paid. I noted that. I have now been in the afterlife for eight years and I only do defence and security as that is my life. As an external reviewer, I bring to the review that journey, particularly from my tenure as the operations director and then commander joint forces command. In the 2015 review, I launched "Warfare in the Information Age", and you will find echoes of that, as they have developed in the Ministry of Defence since then.



In the eight years I have obviously looked at things with a much more commercial focus and worked with other Governments and institutions. I bring back to this a very different perspective. Because I have no career, I have no axe to grind. I know where the skeletons might be and how the services operate in the conditions agreed because that was me. It would be fair to say that I like to think we can provoke a very challenging discussion where we are not looking for consensus.

On risks, there are two. Our job is to deliver the best review that we can. We are well on course for that, and then we hand it on to the Department to implement. Some in the Department might think they can humour us and then go back to normal jogging. I see no sign of the Government allowing that to happen, nor senior defence leadership.

The other risk is that we will design a transformation agenda for other people to deliver and they need to understand what we are saying. The way in which politics—this Committee in particular, as well as the senior defence leadership—pick up and run with the remaining 85% of this transformation is as important as the review we are doing.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I have been in politics for 46 years, so I am slightly ahead of General Barrons.

Q8 **Mr Bailey:** I understand. We appreciate you both for your service, particularly to the defence enterprise more broadly. I also note some biases in your remarks already about the failure of previous defence reviews. One thing that I note is that there has been no defence review in either of your lifetimes that has ever actually gone about attempting to create growth within the defence enterprise, which is a challenge perhaps to leave you with.

Moving on to implementation, the Australian defence strategic review, which this process has been largely modelled on, created an implementation board. This is something that you mentioned a moment ago, General Barrons. One of the biggest challenges will be ensuring that this is implemented adequately. Once you extricate yourselves from this, do you see a role in going forward with this? What does implementation look like for you?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Having done one review before, I should have learned the lesson. We are finishing the report. As I say, we are consulting along the line, so it will not come as a surprise at the end of the day. We hope that the Government and the Prime Minister will say, "Yes, we like it and we want to implement it," but it will be up to the Government to do that. We want to get back to a normal sort of life again, but implementation will be extremely important and is very much in mind. We want to produce a report that is implementable and is implemented, so that is very much in our mind, but it will not be for us to do it.

Q9 **Ian Roome:** My questions are around the governance and transparency



of your work. You have involved a number of experts in your review and challenge panels, as well as reportedly using AI to form the submissions to the SDR. How are you ensuring transparency and building public trust in relation to your approach?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We have done a widespread consultation. We have gone to a whole series of groups ourselves, apart from harvesting the opinions from a wide range of organisations beforehand. In the process of doing that, the review and challenge process is probably unrivalled. The number of people who are actually involved in that process is certainly unprecedented as well. Our work is highly transparent, as I say, partly through our responsibility to Parliament and this Committee, as well as being very high up on the agenda. In terms of consultation, what we have been able to do in a very short period of time since the election is pretty well unprecedented.

Q10 **Ian Roome:** Will the make-up of the review and challenge panels be made public?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: At the end of the process it certainly will be.

Q11 **Ian Roome:** Do you have a process for identifying and resolving conflicts of interest? Are you comfortable with its robustness?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Absolutely, and both of us, as reviewers, have stood back from any involvement that we had that may have compromised us. All the members who are involved in the process, including the DRT six and those on the review and challenge panels, have all had to declare any declarations of interest.

Q12 **Ian Roome:** Could you explain a little more about how you have used AI?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: AI is a tool. It is not intelligent; artificial intelligence is actually machine learning. We have used a couple of these tools to sort through the 8,000 submissions that we had in order to make sure that we see them. It is simply a tool. It does not think for itself or come to conclusions. It sorts out what would take us years to read if we were actually to read every single submission. As I say, we have been very careful that we, the reviewers, have read all the submissions from inside the Department itself. We also read quite a substantial number of the individual representations that have been made.

Q13 **Fred Thomas:** Lord Robertson, we hope that this SDR will leave this country in a better place in decades to come and better equipped. There is a war going on in Ukraine, and we hope that at some point the forces of democracy will force out Putin. What will be left then is a large amount of learning about modern warfare. At the moment, some people say that the UK is not in a position where, after that war in Ukraine finishes, we will be able to, and will have the intellectual right to, make, produce, train with and use at scale the autonomous and electronic warfare



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capabilities that are having success today in Ukraine. What practical steps are you considering to recommend so that that changes?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The military and the Department are obviously watching very carefully and learning all the time. I hope that that learning experience being passed on to us will be something that will be eye-opening for the future. We have to deal with a lot of other things beyond it.

Maybe in the private session we can talk more about the future threats that we see. Clearly, Ukraine is a particular episode from which we can learn quite a substantial amount, but it is not the only event that we have to take account of in terms of the future. Richard might have a view.

General Sir Richard Barrons: It is a very important question. In my view, it would be completely wrong to think that the lessons that are coming from Ukraine in how war is fought in the digital age within that particular construct and how industry supports that are not being fully absorbed by the UK Armed Forces. The Secretary of State has announced Project ASGARD in Estonia. There is a direct correlation in that.

The work of the review is absolutely taking note of what is being learned in Ukraine and what that might mean for the future of the UK Armed Forces, in terms of both the evolution of how you do armies, navies, air forces and the enabling cast, and the industrial relationship that is essential to supporting that. I think you will be happy when the report comes out.

Q14 **Fred Thomas:** I hope so. To follow up on that, some defence commentators say that the types of organisation that are able to learn very quickly and iterate capabilities that are having effect successfully in Ukraine at the moment tend to be smaller or medium-sized businesses. You will have had hundreds or thousands of submissions from SMEs. How are you choosing which SMEs to meet with, or which forums to meet them in? Are you connecting that to any activity in Ukraine?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: A lot of submissions have come in from the trade associations as well as from some of the big primes. We have also had submissions from some of the smaller companies as well. One key element of this review is going to be how we deal with industry in the longer term. Clearly, if we have learned anything substantial from Ukraine, it is that the supply of munitions, the supply of ammunition and the other supplies that our Armed Forces are very short of have to become part and parcel of the military effort. There will be a very considerable part of our report involved in that.

Sir Jeremy Quin, as I say, is a former Conservative Defence Minister. I am absolutely intent—the three reviewers are—that this is not a Labour defence review. This is a United Kingdom defence review. By choosing Jeremy Quin, who was a very successful Minister for Defence



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Procurement and a Conservative, we were giving a very good signal, but we were also getting a very crucial resource to help us.

Q15 **Fred Thomas:** Lastly, having been Defence Secretary, taken a further career and now here you are doing a review outside of the Government, do you think we in the UK are positioned well to innovate quickly enough to keep pace with what is happening in modern warfare in Ukraine?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We certainly will be when this review is implemented.

Q16 **Derek Twigg:** Can I ask how far you are examining policy in terms of global commitments and operations that we are involved with at the moment? The Secretary of State last week said that there are around 10,000 personnel deployed in 50 geographical locations. What is your remit in terms of policy and the global commitments we already have and may have?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The homeland has to be protected but the Armed Forces that are designed for that can also be deployed elsewhere, and we are very conscious of the global responsibilities that the United Kingdom has. The terms of reference that we have also make it clear: "The SDR will identify ways to maintain the UK's defence ties to the Indo Pacific region, the Gulf and the Middle East. The UK is committed to the delivery of the AUKUS partnership with the US and Australia." In terms of what we recommend, we have to bear that in mind.

Q17 **Derek Twigg:** You are then looking at whether, for instance, we have too many commitments, given the envelope of working, and whether we should focus more narrowly on where our Armed Forces should be involved.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: As I said at the beginning, we have to deal with the legacy, the new elements that are now making themselves apparent that we do not have, and what SACEUR wants to do, but we must be conscious also of the wider responsibilities of this country.

Q18 **Derek Twigg:** I understand that you are conscious but I am being specific. My question is about whether you have been asked specifically to examine whether we are too thinly spread and whether we should be more focused.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: That is one of the questions that we have to answer.

Derek Twigg: That is something that you actually are looking at and that will be part of your recommendations to the Secretary of State and the MOD.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We clearly have to focus on—

Q19 **Derek Twigg:** How far are you down the road with that at the moment?



Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We have only finished the review and challenge process, so we have not yet got to the stage of making recommendations.

Q20 **Derek Twigg:** You suspect that that will be a significant part of your recommendations at the end of the report.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: It is part of our consideration.

Q21 **Derek Twigg:** With that in mind, are you also considering the implications for logistics, sustainment and personnel? If so, how are you testing the resilience of those options?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We are.

General Sir Richard Barrons: It is a very important aspect of acknowledging that we have moved into this new era of potentially existential risk, where deterrence rests on credible warfighting capabilities. From the perspective of working out what to do best for the Armed Forces, you cannot construct a credible option just about the shop window of equipment and the people in them. We have to be absolutely clear that we are constructing options that have enough ammunition, spare parts, training and medical capability so that they are able to actually fight, because that is the basis on which deterrence functions.

This is a really important part of how the review frames options and it also relates directly to the changes we may recommend in how the defence enabling Act—so logistics and infrastructure—functions. It has to support credible deterrence in a resilient and enduring way. It plays absolutely to the question asked about innovation, because it is common to all outcomes.

Q22 **Derek Twigg:** Let us just take one of those—say, logistics. You are part of this process. You will be testing the resilience of being able to basically deliver the logistics of whatever Armed Forces we should want in the future. That is what you are saying.

General Sir Richard Barrons: It is a profoundly important aspect of it.

Derek Twigg: That will definitely be a part of your whole process.

Q23 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Morning, both. As you know, the Defence Sec has recently announced defence reforms and capability cuts, and the Permanent Sec announced job cuts to the MOD when he was last before this Committee. How have these impacted on the review? Are you worried that future announcements might prejudice your findings?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The Defence Secretary and the Ministers are keeping us informed of what they are doing all the time. They are trying not to make decisions that would pre-empt the outcome of the review, but they have to continue to run the Department as it stands at the moment. This is a strategic defence review, so we are looking forward. The Ministers are determined that they will not pre-empt our



conclusions by taking decisions but, in the meantime, they have to take decisions about equipment that is not necessary, is redundant and is more expensive to maintain than it is to prolong. We expect that to take place, but all along they keep us well informed.

Q24 Mrs Lewell-Buck: Could your findings be at odds with some of the changes they are making? Could you say, "We disagree with that" in the outcome of your review?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: If we were to disagree—and we have not—we would disagree before they took the decision. They are very conscious here. As I say, we are doing it with the Ministry of Defence, not to it. Although we are independent reviewers, at the same time we are perfectly conscious of what Ministers have as responsibilities.

Q25 Alex Baker: Every new Government loves a review and it would appear that this Government is no exception. At the moment we have the AUKUS review going on, the resilience review, the China audit, the global impact review and the economic diplomacy review, to name just a few. How do your team go about engaging with all these other ongoing reviews in Government and try to align with them?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We would like to think that we were the most important of the reviews, but maybe that is just an illusion. You ask a very good question, because these things are going on. The ones that relate to defence are doing it in tandem with us. For example, Mr Lovegrove is doing the AUKUS review, so he is working very closely with us as he goes along. We will see the conclusions of the security review and the China review and we will take them into account.

Q26 Alex Baker: You will know my constituency, where we have a strong defence industrial base. From speaking to the companies that are there, they are seeing that, alongside the SDR, we have the DBT's industrial strategy, where defence is listed. We then have the defence industrial strategy. Their feedback is that there are a lot of strategies. How is this all going to join up?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: That is a question for Government. It is a good question. I can assure you that the Government are well aware. The reviews are being done for a purpose. After 14 years, there needs to be a fundamental look at all these issues, but they all blend together. The Cabinet Office, and the Cabinet Secretary in particular, has the job of making sure that there is a degree of compatibility with all the reviews.

Q27 Alex Baker: Once you have the recommendations for the SDR, if there is a substantial change in that, will the Government commit to changing, for example, the defence industrial strategy or the DBT's industrial strategy to fit in line with that?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Thankfully, I am not in the Government and that will be a matter for the Government. We have been chosen because we are not in the Government and we can look with fresh eyes



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at these issues. I am relieved of the responsibility that I once had, but it will be for the Government to do the implementation.

Q28 **Alex Baker:** Will it be your recommendation that the Government need to make those changes?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We will take account of the reviews that relate specifically to defence. The terms of reference were actually quite clear at the beginning: that other areas of national security policy are outside the scope of this review. We are focusing largely on defence and the issues that relate to defence, and we will make our recommendations in the light of that. We are conscious that other reviews are taking place and will take them into account.

Q29 **Alex Baker:** Do you think I will be able to go back to the companies in my constituency and say to them that there is a commitment to have a clear strategy, so that they will be really clear how they can operate, do business and meet our defence needs?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Once the report comes out, you should send them all a copy of it. Then they will see very clearly the direction of travel and the way in which we have built industry into the way in which security policy is determined. That is why Sir Jeremy Quin is there. He has been doing a lot of consultations, as part of his job on the defence review team, in order to bring smaller companies, as well as the big ones, into the general debate.

Q30 **Mike Martin:** I wonder whether you might be able to tell us a little bit more about what you understand by "NATO first". Within that, are you looking at maybe fleshing out some options, depending on whether the stance of the United States with respect to NATO shifts as we go into the new year?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I used to be in charge of NATO, so I have an appreciation of both the strengths and the weaknesses of the alliance. We have been out to SHAPE, the supreme headquarters in Mons, and we have spoken to the people there. We have also spoken to SACEUR himself in relation to what he wants of this country. The whole military posture of NATO has changed given the prevailing situation in the world. We are perfectly conscious now of what is desired and wanted of this country. "NATO first" does not mean "NATO alone", because we have broader responsibilities than that, but it is perfectly clear what NATO needs and the alliance needs for the future, and we fit into that.

Q31 **Mike Martin:** Specifically on the question of the potential change in the United States's posture going into the new year, would that influence the outcome of the review at all?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We will see what happens. We are watching carefully, as everybody else is, what is happening on the other side of the Atlantic. There is a change of Government coming in on 20 January. Personally, I do not think that much is going to change in



relation to NATO. It will remain a very substantial part of the NATO alliance and will continue. As I used to say when I was in charge—it is as true now as it was then—the Europeans need to do more inside NATO in order to carry more of the burden presently carried by the United States.

Q32 Mike Martin: That is absolutely right; I think we would all agree with that. The UK has a role to play in that as well. Do you think the UK and NATO could deliver its mission in the Euro-Atlantic area without the support of the United States?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: That is a hypothetical. I do not think it is going to happen. Under the first Trump Administration, they reinforced their support for NATO. They gave weapons to the Ukrainians. Defence expenditure was increased and so was the contribution to NATO itself. We will need to wait and see, but that is a hypothetical issue that will only become relevant when we see what happens.

Q33 Mike Martin: I have one final question. As you go through this process, and as draft conclusions come out and firm up—I know you are not quite there yet—one thing this defence review will do is send signals to our allies and adversaries. To what degree are we road-testing those with not just NATO allies but the incoming Trump Administration, Russia and China? To what degree do we understand how this review will be received around the world?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We are in constant contact. We have an American officer as part of the secretariat, so we are making sure that allies and partners are involved. We had a big review and challenge panel at Wilton Park last week, discussing specifically allies and partners, and with a lot of the people engaged. Yes, we will. As the recommendations firm up, we will obviously be involving other people in that.

General Sir Richard Barrons: Surprise is something best inflicted on your opponents, not on your own side. As the review matures—it is not at that point yet—there will come a period where the emerging conclusions have to be socialised across Whitehall and with key allies. In the announcement of the review, and indeed its implementation, clearly that is sending a message to our potential opponents about where UK defence is going as part of collective security in the world in which we live. It will probably happen in that order.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I had a strapline the other day about intimidating our enemies and inspiring our friends. That is what I hope the review will do.

Q34 Mike Martin: Would you commit to share that review with this Committee at the same time that you share it with allies and partners?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We have already committed to the Chair that we will certainly come back. Once we have a clearer view about where we are going, we will certainly come back.



Q35 **Chair:** Thank you very much for that undertaking.

Lord Robertson, to press you further on this particular issue, Nick Witney, the former head of the European Defence Agency, stated that the work of the SDR—your work—will be complicated by what is happening around the world and the decisions will therefore be contingent on what is going on not just in the US but in France, Germany and elsewhere. How concerned are you that your work may be unravelled by some of the political scenarios that may play out at the beginning of next year?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Again, we are trying to map a way forward, not just for five years or 10 years but up to 2040. There is no reason why events that take place in the future will not completely destroy what we are doing, but you cannot predict what is going to happen in the future. When I did the review in 1998, we could not have contemplated the changes that were going to take place in the world. As I said at the beginning, it looked fairly benign and globalisation was going to produce great results. We are where we are today, so we have to deal with today, but try to look forward as well to developments that are taking place not only militarily but politically.

Chair: I am glad you are alive to that.

Q36 **Fred Thomas:** I want to go back to the question about the overall strategy and what we can expect to see from the SDR. Will you be getting into as much detail as to recommend particular centres of excellence or clusters, for example around marine autonomy?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I cannot imagine why you are asking that question.

Fred Thomas: No, I have no link to it whatsoever.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: No self-interest, no.

Fred Thomas: In the interest of full discretion, I represent Plymouth, which would be a potential place for a centre for marine autonomy development. The reason why I ask is that we need to innovate quicker. In the SDR, are you going to recommend how we do that practically, as opposed to just strategically saying that we need to innovate more quickly?

General Sir Richard Barrons: You are absolutely right. At the heart of transforming armed forces for warfare in the 21st century you are going to embrace two major themes. One is foundational data—so cloud, operated by AI, networks, and synthetic environments into which you plug capability—and the other, which has already started, is the evolution of armies, navies and air forces into a crewed, uncrewed and autonomous mix, with autonomous capability predominating as time passes. That mostly relies on the progression of AI and the trust in it.

Our review is absolutely going to chart that path, with at least a 20-year horizon. It will alight on the first steps because they are essentially



already under way. It will illuminate that there is enormous opportunity for the UK to set the pace globally in how you do some of those things. At the level of specific acts, that will be mostly a matter for the Department and implementation.

Q37 Chair: We have had a good canter through various aspects of the SDR. Before we move into our private session, are there any other things that you would like to place on the record, Lord Robertson, with regard to some of the submissions you have received, or certain things you would like to say in public that we have not covered thus far?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I do not think so; we have covered most of the ground. The territory on which the submissions have come in is very broad indeed. The process of review and challenge has been pretty demanding of the panels themselves. They have looked at them, scrubbed them and come back with a lot of views and conclusions from that. We will now collate them, get a series of recommendations and, eventually, give a draft report to the Secretary of State.

Q38 Chair: For the record, are there any areas in which you found there was a shortage of evidence, or certain submissions that changed the direction of travel in terms of your thinking?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We had 8,000 submissions. I do not think that there was any stone left unturned in that process. We have our own thoughts and have developed them as we have gone along.

Q39 Mike Martin: I was struck by your comment earlier that defence reviews tend to come unstuck for one of two reasons: either the world changes or ambition and resources are not matched. There is obviously very little we can do about the former, because it is impossible to predict the future. Can you categorically guarantee that this review will match ambition and resources?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We hope so. We can only say to the Government what 2.5% of GDP can produce.

Q40 Mike Martin: It is absolutely down to the Government, but will the actual review document be fully costed, and will that ambition match that resource? Obviously, it is out of your hands how the Government choose to implement it, but, in terms of the bit you are responsible for, can you guarantee that ambition and resources will be matched?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We cannot guarantee anything and it pre-empts what we are doing. It is a hypothetical situation. We are operating within an envelope that the Government have laid down. We will try to plot a trajectory well beyond the immediate period and then we will present that to the Government. The terms of reference are very specific: that we have to make our recommendations within 2.5% of GNP, which I remind the Committee is actually well above the NATO objective, which is 2%. The 2.5% is above that, although the OBR report actually projects 2.3% for the five years of the Parliament.



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Q41 **Mike Martin:** If I may push you gently on this, if we are setting it to a 2.5% envelope, that implies that you are going to be arguing in the report for a reduction of our ambitions.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Why would we be reducing our ambitions?

Mike Martin: Defence is not currently fully funded. There is a £17 billion hole in the equipment programme, for instance.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We are operating on the basis of the terms of reference that we were given and we will make our recommendations based on that.

Q42 **Lincoln Jopp:** I was struck by General Barrons' statement that we are not going to fill in holes in defence left, in some cases, since the Cold War. That would suggest that it is not a question of using the 2.5% to backfill those holes in the current EP, for example, and that some things will be left.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I do not necessarily need to speak for General Barrons—he can speak for himself—but by looking at every aspect of the defence enterprise, there are areas where we can see that things can be done better and cheaper. Some of the potholes can be filled in as part of that process. I think that people outside underestimate the way in which we are looking at every aspect of defence with a laser-like approach to seeing what is being done, why it is being done and whether it can be done better. At the end of the day, as General Barrons has said, we hope that we will produce a model that other people will admire and maybe even copy.

Q43 **Fred Thomas:** Lord Robertson, you said just then that you are looking at every aspect of defence. Yesterday we had a statement of intent around the defence industrial strategy, which is from the MOD rather than from you. Can I ask about skills? As part of every aspect of defence, are you finding that we have a severe shortage of skills? Is it a red-flag area that impacts our ability to carry out the strategic things that you are looking at, or is it somewhere else? Are we in fact in a good place on skills?

General Sir Richard Barrons: No, there is a skills crisis. It is not unique to defence. The review is examining that and will make some very powerful recommendations—I am pretty confident—on the way to fix it. That is as important as deciding on how much ammunition to buy.

Q44 **Fred Thomas:** Is the skills crisis that you allude to, General, to do with tech and the ability to move forward? Or is it to do with more traditional skills, such as building things made of steel?

General Sir Richard Barrons: They are slightly different problems. The one that is most prominent for defence is accessing the skills in the digital space—so cyber, information operations, artificial intelligence and those kinds of things—where the technology is led in the civil sector but



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you have to apply it in the military. We have to find a better way of doing that, and that is fine.

The second aspect is more about the industrial base. In order to deter, you have to have homeland resilience, and part of that is industrial resilience. Some of that is about sovereign supply and some of that is about having a national skills base that allows you to innovate and endure in an environment of confrontation and conflict. In the defence space, we are interested in that. There is no point having powerful armed forces and a fragile defence industry. They have to be seen as symbiotic. It is only defence's job to fix some of that.

There are other aspects that are a wider-society issue. One thing that underpins this review is that we are having to reflect that we have transitioned from an era that I served in, where war was essentially outsourced to the regular Armed Forces and did not really trouble civil society. Now we are in an era where clearly war has returned as a whole-of-society endeavour. Our review is only about the defence bit of that and there are many other dependencies that are for others to fix.

Q45 Mr Bailey: To prey on your comments again, before I finish my questioning, the comments you made on AI sound very much like the prophecy of Sandys in his review on missiles and unmanned flight. That is just a point to note.

On the stones unturned, you spoke about medical capability. Have you received an input from the NHS about our ability to absorb large casualty numbers in Europe, and our commitment to a European problem? Bearing in mind that we, as a democratically elected body, struggle to hold defence to account and to understand the progress of anything that is already under way, published and bought into by the Department—as Derek alluded to earlier—what are your hopes of doing so?

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: We can bring fresh eyes to some of the problems that exist. Having been involved as Secretary of State and then as Secretary-General of NATO, I have kept a deep knowledge of and a deep interest in and curiosity about defence. I am learning some new things by being in the review and in the Department, and having access to any of the information we require.

I am not sure that a lot of it was hidden before. A lot of it is there, open and easily available to the public. I sometimes wish that people were as worried as I am on behalf of my children and my grandchildren when I know what is going on. We are all in possession of that information and I do not see, despite heavy classification of a lot of material, that anything material is being hidden from us, Parliament or the general public as a whole. I hope that there could be a wider appreciation of what the military does, what it needs to do and what the country has to do at this time.

Chair: Lord Robertson, General Sir Richard Barrons, it has been a



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pleasure; thank you very much for giving evidence to the Defence Committee. I am sure that everybody in the wider defence community will have gained great benefit from this session. I am also grateful to Members for keeping their contributions concise so that we have finished within the hour. With that, I bring the public evidence session on the strategic defence review to a close.