



International Relations and Defence Committee

Corrected oral evidence: The UK's future relationship with the US

Wednesday 4 June 2025

11.30 am

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Members present: Lord De Mauley (The Chair); Lord Alderdice; Lord Bruce of Bennachie; Baroness Coussins; Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie; Lord Grocott; Lord Houghton of Richmond; Lord Soames of Fletching.

Evidence Session No. 9

Heard in Public

Questions 95 - 110

Witnesses

I: Evie Aspinall, Director, British Foreign Policy Group; Professor Charles Kupchan, Professor of International Affairs, Georgetown University, and Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations.

Examination of witnesses

Evie Aspinall and Professor Charles Kupchan.

Q95 **The Chair:** Good morning. Thank you so much for joining us, and welcome. This is our ninth public evidence session on the UK-US relationship. We are looking forward to hearing perspectives from policy experts on trends in UK-US relations and implications for the future UK-US foreign policy relationship. The session is being streamed live on the Parliament website, and a transcript will be taken. Once available, we will make sure that both of you are sent a copy to make small corrections, if necessary. I am asked to remind members who have any interests to declare to please do so when first speaking. Can I ask you both, Ms Aspinall and Professor Kupchan, to briefly introduce yourselves before we go into questions?

Professor Charles Kupchan: I am a professor of international affairs at Georgetown University. I am also a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, a Washington and New York-based think tank. I served on the National Security Council under Presidents Obama and Clinton.

Evie Aspinall: I am the director of the British Foreign Policy Group. We are a non-partisan think tank in the UK, focused on the intersection between international and domestic policy here in the UK.

Q96 **The Chair:** Thank you so much. Let me kick off with the first question. Is President Trump's brand of "America first" isolationism unique, or does it reflect a deeper US instinct that may persist beyond his presidency? Can we say that America is departing from the liberal world order?

Professor Charles Kupchan: I would say that the United States, whether under Democratic or Republican leadership, is going through a period of retrenchment. We saw President Trump begin that during his first term. In many respects, it was continued by President Biden, with the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the reduction of the US military footprint in the Middle East.

That effort was, to some extent, put in abeyance by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which put the United States back in internationalist mode, and the Biden Administration were very much committed to the defence of the liberal rules-based order. But it did not go over very well, particularly among heartland Americans, and now we have a second Trump term.

In many respects, what we are seeing here is a President who, in some ways, is hearkening back to an older version of American grand strategy. Trump does not have a vision or a grand strategy. He has lots of instincts and impulses. I would draw links back to pre-Pearl Harbor America, when the United States was very much unilateralist, isolationist, anti-immigrant and protectionist, a lot of which is evident in Trump's foreign policy.

In some ways, I think he would like to go back to the 19th century, focus on the western hemisphere and detach the United States from entanglements abroad, as the founding fathers put it, but it is not doable.

The 21st century is not the 19th century. Yes, he may want to focus on Canada, Greenland and Panama, but there is no going back to the natural security and geographic detachment of the 19th century, and so you see Trump struggling with this. He wants to pull back from the world, but he is finding it impossible to do, in part exemplified by the frustration that he faces in getting President Putin to back away from his aggression in Ukraine.

The general trend line is toward an America that is pulling in from strategic commitments, but it is interesting that there is a divide internally in the Trump Administration between the China hawks such as Bridge Colby, who is at the Defense Department, and the more traditional heartland isolationists who just want to pull back from everything. The Pentagon wants to pull back from Europe and the Middle East because it wants to put all its effort into countering the rise of China in the Indo-Pacific.

Evie Aspinall: I very much agree. We are seeing a trend in which Trump is not an anomaly but rather an extremity. We are seeing a period of US retrenchment away from the global order, from which both the UK and the US have benefited for a long time. This poses a particular challenge for the UK as a nation that has long hinged its foreign policy so closely to that of the United States. I have lots of thoughts on that, but I can come to those later.

Q97 **The Chair:** Let us see how we go. By way of a quick follow-up, what does a potential US retrenchment mean for the UK-US relationship? How can the UK remain influential in multilateral settings if the US becomes more selective or inconsistent in its engagement?

Evie Aspinall: Because the UK's foreign policy has been so closely tied to the United States, we are at increased risk from the volatility that we are seeing in America at the moment. There is some genuine concern about close collaboration with Trump. The first thing for the Government is that Trump is so unpopular in the United Kingdom. Even voters in the UK who are further to the right are very averse to Trump.

Also, Trump is so unpredictable, as we are seeing today around the trade deal that we negotiated just a month ago. While that has not been finalised, we are already seeing challenges around whether steel tariffs will be implemented after all. What we find is that, while it is good to be close with our allies, particularly our very long-standing allies, this is already posing particular challenges.

Nevertheless, the UK-US relationship will remain very strong, even as the US retrenches, not least because the UK understands that it cannot afford for it not to. We are heavily reliant on the US when it comes to military, trade and soft power. The relationship endures, frankly, because it has to.

That does not mean that we will agree on everything, nor that we should. The UK has long been a champion for climate action and for upholding

international law, and these are standards that we should continue to follow through with, but, at the same time, where we can co-operate with the US or, at the very least, not proactively disagree with it for the sake of it, it seems strategically sensible to do so.

Where that is not possible, the UK should seek to identify new coalitions, such as the coalition of the willing, which is a very powerful innovation through which we can uphold international standards without the United States. We should not glorify this and pretend that it will be easy, because it will not. The UK accepts that many multilateral institutions are in need of very urgent reform and, without US engagement, there is a danger that these institutions are rendered redundant or reformed in ways that undermine UK interests.

Without US leadership, multilateral and minilateral groupings will become increasingly important. The UK may find itself balancing a relationship with the US that is trending towards retrenchment, regardless of Donald Trump, whoever the President may be after him, while also trying to maintain our multilateral values and commitments. This is difficult, but it is possible. We should find flexible and diverse partnerships and be as consistent and reliable as possible in our messaging to help maintain our legitimacy on the world stage.

Q98 Lord Houghton of Richmond: Something that is topical at the moment is a UK defence review that reported just this week. It is very aspirational in its content but is not underpinned by firm financial foundations. Indeed, the Government have, at the moment, committed to spending no more than 2.5% of GDP by 2027, and have no more than an ambition, if the fiscal situation allows, to move to 3% by the end of the next Parliament.

We are, as you will both know, a fortnight away from a NATO summit in The Hague. Mark Rutte, NATO's Secretary-General, has already encouraged NATO member states to commit—as most European NATO allies are happy to—to spending 3.5% of GDP. I think President Trump is prepared to go to the summit because he is going to lay 5% on the table. What are the prospects, therefore, from a UK-American perspective, of the current financial position of the United Kingdom in the context of a defence review that wants to reinforce the so-called leadership role that the UK has within NATO?

Professor Charles Kupchan: We are at an inflection point in the US-Europe strategic relationship, and a lot will be clearer in the next few weeks. We have Chancellor Merz coming to Washington tomorrow. You just mentioned the upcoming NATO summit. We have the ongoing negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. There are a lot of balls up in the air right now.

While I do not want to predict where Trump will land, I do detect less hostility to NATO than in his first term. We know that he has mused about withdrawing the United States from NATO and has said, "I'm not going to protect countries that aren't doing their fair share".

We have not heard that kind of talk in this term, and my best guess is that Trump will go to the NATO summit, that there will be a commitment to spend 3.5% of GDP on traditional defence and another 1.5% on defence-related items such as infrastructure and bridges, and that Trump will declare victory. In some respects, the fact that the Russians are not making a deal but are continuing to bomb heavily Ukrainian cities and infrastructure drives home to Trump that this is a partnership that needs to last.

That having been said—and this relates to the previous question—I do think that Trump wants to reduce the American presence in Europe and to hand over more responsibility to the Europeans. In that respect, one of the key roles that the UK needs to play, even if it is not a member of the European Union, is to help Europe collectively assume that greater geopolitical role.

You are very astute to put your finger on the financial issues. In some ways, to me, it is a much bigger concern than forcing levels of 3.5% or 2.5%. In the United States, we are now looking at a mounting fiscal crisis and increasing national debt. We are looking at tariffs that could cause a huge spike in prices for average working Americans. We see political centres eroding on both sides of the Atlantic. In some ways, I worry about that more than about Mr Putin—or the Chinese, for that matter.

We need to keep front and centre this question of defence spending and the overall economic performance of our societies, because that economic insecurity is what is driving the hollowing out of our middle classes.

Q99 Lord Houghton of Richmond: Will we be able to get away with a relatively quiet finessing of this, or is there an inevitable humiliation that the United Kingdom is facing, if not with President Trump then certainly with its NATO allies within Europe?

Evie Aspinall: As you say, the strategic defence review makes clear that “NATO first” is at the core of UK foreign policy. That is pretty difficult to do if NATO is telling us to do 3.5%, which we are fairly certain it will. A number of NATO countries, such as Poland, are already significantly increasing defence spending at a rate that we have not yet done. We will struggle to lead in that position within NATO. We will be fine to be in NATO and have a reasonable voice, but we cannot lead from the front if we are not spending the money, not least because, for NATO to survive and to thrive in this world, everyone is going to have to increase defence spending. Frankly, we want the person at the front of the conversation to be the one leading from the front on defence spending. If we want to lead, we have to increase defence spending.

That said, the challenge for Starmer and the Government is that the public really are not on board yet with defence spending. You see a lot of polling and things that say, “The public are happy to increase defence spending”, but, if you dig into any of it and put trade-offs to focus groups, you very quickly find that the public are not happy to increase taxes. They do not want to cut the NHS, education or welfare—any of the

difficult choices that would be required to be able to increase defence spending.

We are in a very difficult position where we have not yet convinced the public that the threat is real enough for that to be the case. Fundamentally, there is a wider conversation that has to happen at the same time. That is a challenge that we are seeing across Europe. Poland has increased defence spending because the threat is so very clear to the public, but, for the rest of Europe, it feels quite abstract. That is the first thing we have to do to then be able to increase defence spending in a meaningful way.

There is a question that we do not ask enough. It will not appease Trump or NATO, but we should be thinking about how we spend defence spending effectively. Aid spending is scrutinised beyond belief. Every bit of aid spending is now, correctly, challenged on what it is achieving and how it helps the UK or those most in need. We do not really have that in the same way in defence. The MoD is awful for excess spending, for overspending budgets and for wastage. If we want the most effective militaries, the best thing that we could do is to look at how we are spending the money and use it more effectively.

Q100 Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: We have talked about how America's foreign policy aim is around retrenchment. Professor Kupchan, you were saying that what the UK can do is help Europe collectively step up to the plate. How important is the UK to US foreign policy? What levers do we have, particularly as we are outside the European Union? We have just discussed the spending challenges. Is this such an asymmetric relationship? Ms Aspinall just said that we cannot afford not to be close to the US. What issues can the UK be most successful at? That is what I am trying to find.

Professor Charles Kupchan: The UK still plays the role of the bridge between Europe and the United States. The role of the UK is, in many respects, to be as close to the United States in perspectives and roles as any country. Having worked twice in the White House, I found that, if there was one party whom you would pick up the phone to and there would be a convergence of interests, perspectives and teamwork, it was the UK. That is still the case.

There is no question, however, that the relationship has declined in the sense that it is not quite as special as it used to be, in part because Europe's centre of gravity shifted eastward after the end of the Cold War, and in part because the United States is looking more at the Indo-Pacific than the European theatre. That is going only to increase in emphasis once the war in Ukraine dies down, which it will eventually.

In some ways, whether it is Keir Starmer or any other Prime Minister, the role of being a Trump whisperer, building a good relationship with the American President and talking to him about the importance of the Atlantic relationship in its many guises, economic as well as strategic, is key. If Europe is going to hold more responsibility, the UK has to be part

of that effort, because it punches above its weight in the projection of power. The French, the Germans and others will need the UK as a partner if Europe, collectively, is going to shoulder the kinds of greater geopolitical responsibilities that the United States is going to look to Europe to take on.

Evie Aspinall: There are probably three levers that are particularly powerful. The first is for us to think about what the US wants. As Professor Kupchan spoke to, the role of the UK as a bridge into Europe is really powerful. The relationship with Europe has been rebuilt quite substantially in recent years and is in a much better position. There is an understanding from both the US and Europe that the UK is quite uniquely positioned to do that.

There is that great phrase, "Trump whisperer". As we do this reset with Europe, we should think of ourselves as that at this point in time. We have the door open more than most do, which is really useful, not just for the UK but also for our partners. We can use that to help Europe and Ukraine. It is not just a one-sided benefit.

The second is not only to think strategically about what the United States wants as a nation, which is getting someone to lead on Europe, but to think about what Trump, as a person, wants. It can be uncomfortable, but the reality is that he loves the Royal Family. He loved the Queen. I know that lots of people found the offer of a state visit quite uncomfortable, but it played to his ego. It has that history, tradition and prestige that the US President will never have, because they are there for only a couple of years. We should leverage that. That is a really powerful asset that we have, and we should be using that to help open the doors that mean that we can achieve our wider foreign policy.

The third is to think about our balance between the Indo-Pacific and Europe, where there is a role for us—and this will help Trump—to take leadership in Europe, and there is an opportunity to do so. We must also balance that with the fact that he will want people to help him in the Indo-Pacific. There is very little in the strategic defence review about the Indo-Pacific. It is identified as the second-most priority region for defence, alongside the Middle East, but there is nothing substantive in it on the Indo-Pacific.

There are partners, such as France, that have much greater engagement in the Indo-Pacific, but, if that is where Trump wants us to go, we should focus and lead on Europe or spread ourselves more thinly and help in the Indo-Pacific too. We need to work out where Trump's interests really lie, as well as our own. Do we have the capacity to do very much in the Indo-Pacific? If the answer is no, we have to be genuinely leading in Europe. That then comes back to the question of defence spending.

Professor Charles Kupchan: On the "Trump whisperer" front, Trump has, for reasons that I find hard to understand, a deep-seated suspicion of and hostility toward the European Union. He constantly refers to it as an entity that is out to swindle the United States. I do not know if it is

because he sees a lot of BMWs, Mercedes and VWs on US streets, but I think he misunderstands what Europe is about. The UK can help on that front by explaining the European experiment and helping Trump get his arms around how important it is to the United States when it comes to its own long-term interests.

Q101 **Lord Grocott:** Can you give a profit and loss account of the relationship between the UK and the US in foreign policy? I am sure that we can all think of examples where it may have been beneficial. We can probably quite easily think of examples where it has not existed on important foreign policy issues. Is it occasionally a disadvantage that we are expected or assumed to be so closely aligned with the United States in co-ordinating our foreign policies? Can you reflect on that area of discussion?

Evie Aspinall: Overall, it is a positive, and has been for a long time, in terms of strengthening our position and our influence in the world, the main benefits being militarily, particularly the sharing of military intelligence, and to the UK economy. It is our biggest export partner, for example, which is incredibly powerful. Giving us legitimacy when we are speaking to other nations and having that weight of the United States behind us has long been beneficial.

It does create a couple of challenges. The first is the current unpredictability of Trump, which is impacting not only his reputation but our own, as well as our ability to do things. We have partnerships all over the world, for example, in delivering international development and aid. Suddenly, the US is pulling out. Our reputation is also on the line, because those programmes do not go ahead. We have also cut our budgets, but not quite to the same extent. Around the world, those partnerships are challenging if we cannot trust the United States.

The other big risk is that we get drawn into debates and conflicts that we do not want to be a part of. The clearest example of that would be a trade war with China, which is not impossible at this point in time, and who knows where that will go? That would have huge implications for the UK economy. We might not want to engage with China because of security reasons or concerns over values or human rights, but the economy is less of a priority for us as to why not to engage with China. The economic benefits for the UK of engaging with China seem slightly clearer, so we get drawn into conversations that are not quite our own.

The third is that we do not get support when we need and expect it. We have seen this, for example, on Ukraine, where, collectively, we have consistently given it just about enough to survive but not enough to ever win, and that looks like the foreseeable future. If Trump was in office when Putin invaded another European country, such as Estonia, which is not impossible, we do not have the confidence that he would step up and support Estonia in the way that we have seen the US support Europe in the past. That is a real challenge, because we have invested so much into this relationship, but we cannot trust it and we do not know that it will always be there for us.

They are the main risks. Another is that the United States has significant leverage over us. It is a two-way relationship. If Trump decides that we are not doing enough to increase defence in Europe, or that we are not helping enough in the Indo-Pacific, he can decide that he will pull out from Ukraine entirely, stop sharing military intelligence or slap massive tariffs on us. We are still at the whims of Trump, even as the relationship is relatively strong.

There are definitely risks, but I would not say that that is a reason to disassociate, not least because that would draw Trump's ire. Not to be a coward, but, fundamentally, we do not want to be hit by these huge tariffs being placed on China, Vietnam, et cetera, so there is always that challenge. A second point is that we benefit from the assumption around the world that, where we go, the US will not be too far behind. That has long been of benefit to us. There is a reputational challenge around that, but the net is probably positive.

A challenge for us, then, is finding opportunities to disagree amicably, to allow the United States not to lead on climate change but push it harder on Ukraine, for example—picking our battles with the United States and pushing where we have the leverage to do so.

There is a tendency and a desire to critique Trump very loudly and overtly, because it feels good to say, "No, you are awful and you are really bad". If that is going to achieve something and change his behaviour, we should absolutely do it. But if it is just going to cause a slanging match between two traditional partners, that is not helpful for the relationship or for our position in the world and our ability to counter strategic rivals. We just have to be strategic about it.

Professor Charles Kupchan: I am struck, when I look back at the post-Cold War era, by the degree to which the UK and the US have been by each other's side in just about every major military contingency that has emerged, including George W Bush's invasion of Iraq, which was not particularly popular in Europe. Whether it is Iraq, the Balkans, Afghanistan, the counter-ISIL campaign, Libya or working together to ensure that Ukraine survives the Russian invasion, the teamwork is quite remarkable. Even if the UK is not sending four aircraft carrier task forces, it is there. It shows up. It is in the campaign with the United States against the Houthis to protect shipping. There really is a level of teamwork between the UK and the United States that is a testament to the closeness of the relationship.

The risk is that you invest a lot of time and effort into building a lasting, durable relationship with Trump, and he turns in a direction that we all hope he does not turn in. That is not where I am going to put my money; I do not think that he is going to walk away from Europe. I do not think that he is going to cause a global trade war, but we do not know. He changes his mind every 15 minutes on these issues. The real risk is that you lean into this relationship, try to keep the United States as the good partner that it has been for many decades, and lose the battle because Trump decides to head in another direction.

Q102 **Lord Grocott:** You gave a list of respects in which the US and the UK have been very closely aligned. It would not be too difficult, would it, to point to a number of different examples, perhaps closer to UK politics than American politics? I know that it is going back a bit, but they were hardly in alignment over the Suez crisis. On Vietnam, it was not a hand-in-glove relationship by any means. There were major foreign policy issues of that sort, not to mention broader and less easily defined issues such as views on colonialism, imperialism or whatever you want to call it.

Do we have a special relationship with the United States in respect of foreign affairs? We have heard a great deal from other witnesses about how close the defence relationships are, and that is pretty well unarguable, but what is special about the special relationship between the UK and the US specifically as far as foreign policy is concerned? Are there any examples of where the Americans were going off in one direction and, due to the special relationship, we persuaded them to go off in another?

Professor Charles Kupchan: There have been episodes, some of which you pointed out, where the US and the UK have diverged. In fact, we were each other's main enemies for quite a while. We went to war over independence. We went to war again in 1812. It really was not until the 20th century that this so-called special relationship came into being.

On issues ranging from climate change to development assistance, there are now big divergences between the US and the UK that we cannot ignore. Right now, we are in one of those historical moments where the wind could blow either way. It may be that the United States heads in directions on fundamental foreign policy issues that move it away from the UK and Europe. I do not think that that is going to happen, but we are now at that moment when we simply do not know. We are at that intersection, and we need to see whether the United States turns left or right.

Evie Aspinall: I would answer similarly. The answer that you are seeking would at the moment probably be Ukraine, where the United States has not done exactly what we wanted it to. But if the UK had not been there, consistently pushing so hard for support for Ukraine, including from the US, it would have retreated further from Ukraine more quickly, not least because of public opinion in the US, which was never particularly bothered about Ukraine. That would probably be the best example at the moment.

We are at an inflection point, where it partly depends on where the US goes, but we also have to think about who we will work with if the US goes off in a different direction. The answer that we would probably all give is Europe, because that feels the most natural; it is our natural hub in that sense. We also have to face the reality that the EU has a lot of members, not all of which think the same, particularly on key issues such as China and Russia. This is why the EU has been very slow to move on a lot of issues around Ukraine, and will be a very challenging partner when it comes to foreign policy.

The UK will not be able to lead by itself and will have to form minilateral and multilateral groupings, which all becomes very complicated and quite ad hoc. That does not mean that we should not do that; we should be thinking about those, but our first priority in the meantime should be trying to keep Trump onside, because that is an awful lot easier than trying to get everyone else to co-ordinate on all these different things.

Q103 The Chair: Professor Kupchan, in your answer to my opening question, you referred to Pearl Harbor, to the 19th century and to the historical priority that the US has given to the Pacific. In addition to the obvious, what are the US's key priorities in the Indo-Pacific? How do you assess the prospects of co-operation with the UK?

Professor Charles Kupchan: There is not much bipartisanship in the United States today, except when it comes to China. Democrats and Republicans alike unify around the supposition that China represents an existential threat. We saw the Biden Administration begin to impose export controls on semiconductors and other high technologies to, in effect, slow down China's innovative capability and to keep the United States and its allies ahead on AI. We see the Trump Administration beginning to move in the same direction as well. That is likely to continue to be the direction of US policy for quite some time.

There is a divide within the Trump Administration between the trade hawks and the geopolitical hawks. Trump tends to think about the world very much in geo-economic terms, not in geopolitical terms. One of the reasons why he has hit China with high tariffs, even though he has come back down, is that he wants to try to get a trade deal. That would be his top goal. If he is able to strike a trade deal with China, which looks somewhat unlikely, my best guess is that he would dial down the geopolitical confrontation. He is not obsessed with the defence of Taiwan in the same way that many members of the foreign policy establishment are. Then there are those in his camp—Secretary of State Rubio and Bridge Colby at the Pentagon are in this category—who are very much China hawks on geopolitical fronts. We just do not know how this is going to play out.

Collectively, the US, the UK and other partners that are concerned about China's rise have to have a group discussion about whether there is some way to dial down what appears to be an increasing chance of an irreparable geopolitical rupture. We live in a world that is more interdependent than ever before. Whether it is climate change, nuclear proliferation, global health or the management and regulation of new technologies and AI, we have to find a way of working across ideological and geopolitical dividing lines, because the costs of a complete economic rupture, followed by a geopolitical rupture, with China would really set us back when it comes to the global agenda. I would put that on the to-do list of the US-UK-Europe dialogue.

Q104 The Chair: Ms Aspinall, as a supplementary question, do you foresee areas of potential friction where priorities may diverge between the UK and the US?

Evie Aspinall: There are fairly fundamental ones, not least in the assessment of the threat. In the United States, China is seen as an existential threat and, therefore, the Indo-Pacific is the top priority. The strategic defence review said something along the lines of China being a “sophisticated but persistent challenge”, again avoiding the question of whether China is seen as a threat. That in itself shows the differences in the level of priority given to the Indo-Pacific.

I go back to the point that the strategic defence review barely mentions the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, it makes very clear that engagements in a defence setting beyond Europe should be undertaken only as long as they do not really distract from the main priority, which is Europe. That is the thrust that you get from the defence review.

This contrasts starkly with Trump’s view of the world, where the rise of China, be it economically, technologically or militarily, is the bigger threat. The US is going to consistently ask the UK for more on the Indo-Pacific than the UK is ever able to give, particularly while there is war still going on in Europe. We are seeing very clearly the divergences there, and China particularly will be a challenge. That comes down in part to the question of who wins in the US—the geopolitical or the geo-economic hawks.

Nevertheless, if there is a trade war between the US and China, or if it escalates in any way, that will pull the UK into a challenging position, with a Government who have moved closer to China and prioritised economic growth and prosperity over concerns about values and national security. Particularly if the conflict in Ukraine dies down, and perhaps the conflict in the Middle East, the focus then quickly becomes very much on the Indo-Pacific, where the UK and Europe will be trying to recover from the war in Ukraine at a time when Trump may very well use an opportunity to scale up the tensions around the Indo-Pacific, and we will not be ready or willing to help.

Q105 **Lord Alderdice:** I want to pick up a couple of questions on the UK and the US with regard to Russia. First of all, beyond the immediate conflict in Ukraine, how coherent are UK and US strategies towards Russia in the long term? Do you see alignment around a shared vision, such as containment, managed competition or selective engagement, or are deeper strategic divergences emerging?

Evie Aspinall: The UK is very clear, and we see almost the reverse of what we see in the Indo-Pacific. For the UK, Russia is an existential threat that goes well beyond Ukraine. It goes back to Crimea in 2014, and to the Salisbury attacks. We are seeing it very clearly today in cyberattacks and disinformation at home.

Although not necessarily likely at this point, there is definitely the potential of an invasion of a Baltic state, such as Estonia. That feels very much like an existential threat in the UK, which is why, in the defence review, Russia is identified as an enduring threat in areas such as space, cyberspace, undersea warfare and chemical and biological weapons.

That threat does not seem to be quite as felt in the United States, at least from this side of the Atlantic, with Trump moving not in a particularly consistent way but to a slightly more collaborative approach to President Putin. We are already finding it difficult—we found it difficult under Biden as well—to maintain US engagement with Ukraine. Once that war ends, it will become even harder. If Russia invades another European ally, we do not have the confidence in what Trump will do to help us deliver the success that we would want to see there.

There is also a very different approach being taken, which goes back to Trump's strongman politics. He likes his bilateral conversations. He wants to be in the room with Putin, Xi or whoever, and having those conversations directly. That is not really the UK's approach to these conversations. Again, the SDR makes clear that NATO is the route via which we should address the Russian conflict. NATO is an institution that Trump, while more supportive this time round than last time, is still not supportive of. He still sees it as a burden on the American economy, and so the direction of travel in how to resolve these conflicts is also not aligned.

We are increasingly seeing a world in which Trump wants to get Russia on board, sooner rather than later, to get it to stop being a rival of sorts and to have a more constructive relationship, whereas there is, understandably, a deep-seated concern about Russia in the UK, which is not going to end when the invasion of Ukraine ends, and so it will still be seen as a very significant threat.

Professor Charles Kupchan: I broadly agree. If Putin were playing his cards a bit more strategically, meeting Trump half way, dialling down the war and talking about a durable ceasefire, we would have a bigger problem, because Trump would be ready to have a summit meeting with him in Saudi Arabia or Istanbul and sign a bunch of trade deals, whereas no one in Europe is prepared to begin to do that.

The fact that Putin is not showing signs of negotiating in good faith keeps the Trump Administration closer to Europe in some ways, because they are not able to move ahead with the normalisation of US-Russia relations and will just have to wait and see whether this effort between Trump and Putin goes anywhere. We do not know yet.

Neither side of the Atlantic really has a long-term strategy for Russia. My assumption is that the relationship between NATO, Europe and Russia is probably going to look a lot like the Cold War relationship until Putin leaves power. Even if he ends the war in Ukraine sometime soon, there will be a palpable sense of a continuing Russian threat in the Baltics, in Finland, in Poland and throughout south-eastern Europe. It may be that that is when you begin to see divergences between Washington and Europe, if Trump is still in power, because he may want to begin to normalise the relationship with Moscow in ways that Europeans are not ready to do.

Q106 **Lord Alderdice:** Taking that a bit further with regard to Russia,

Professor Kupchan, you have pointed out that, to date, there is not much sign that President Putin is too eager to accommodate Donald Trump in his wishes to come together on the economic question. Instead, Russia is attempting to offset its decline in relations with the West by developing closer ties with China, Iran and North Korea. Is that an opportunity for the UK and the US to work together to counter this emerging alliance of countries that are either in competition with or outright hostile towards the West?

Professor Charles Kupchan: We are looking at the emergence of what we now call the axis of autocracies, headed by a strategic partnership between China and Russia, which looks pretty durable. Circling back to the conversation about US and European alignment on China, the two parties are closer together now on the nature of the Chinese threat in part because China has supported Russia in its invasion of Ukraine. Before that war and before Chinese support for Russia, there were clearer divergences across the Atlantic over China policy. I do not want to suggest that there are no differences now; there are important differences over trade, but the two sides of the Atlantic have moved closer together on Russia and China because of that conflict.

My final thought is something I would put on our to-do list for conversation. How durable is that Russia-China link-up? My sense is that it is very durable at the elite level. It is very much dependent upon the relationship between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, but it does not have deep societal or bureaucratic roots. We want to have a conversation, which will probably have to take place only after the war in Ukraine ends, about whether we collectively—the US, the UK and Europe—can think about ways to put some distance between Russia and China. There are latent differences of interest between Beijing and Moscow, and it would be in the interests of the West to try to bring some of those differences to the surface.

Lord Alderdice: Evie, would you like to pick up this question of how far we can come together in pulling Russia and China apart?

Evie Aspinall: The key is us—the UK, the US and Europe—collaborating to create an offer that, to at least one of them, pulls them apart. When you look at the four as a group, Iran and North Korea probably do not have the global influence and weight to be the ones to bother picking off. You want to go for China or Russia. In the United States, there would probably be more focus on how we can rebuild relations with Russia after the war in Ukraine. In the UK, there is probably more desire to move closer to China than to Russia, which is a bit of a tension.

If we could disincentivise them from co-operating with each other, it would probably be economically. It is about saying, as a collective, to China or Russia, "This is the collective offer of how we can increase trade, and how beneficial it is to you". The European market is a really valuable offer, particularly to China, as a way to deepen those ties, so that it will not want to go and partner with Russia because it knows that that will

jeopardise those relationships. We have to have a clear economic offer to them if we want to disincentivise them from collaborating.

We might then decide that it is not worth it. We might decide that it is better that they collaborate and that we do not take the risks of moving closer on trade, because there are challenges that come with that as well. It is always a balancing act, but it is probably the economic angle that is the most beneficial.

Q107 **Baroness Coussins:** You have both mentioned the Middle East in passing in earlier answers, but I would like to focus in more detail on that region now. Professor Kupchan, what is your assessment of the US engagement in the Middle East? What do you think that will look like over the next decade? To what extent are the priorities of the US and the UK in that region likely to be aligned or to diverge?

Ms Aspinall, perhaps I could tag on a question for you in particular. What should the UK prioritise? Should it be specific issues and areas such as maritime threats in the Red Sea or Gulf security, or would it be preferable for the UK to focus on broader issues and broader presence in the region?

Professor Charles Kupchan: In some ways, Trump is an outgrowth of what I would call America's strategic overreach in the Middle East. The "forever wars" did not go over well in Main Street. A lot of Americans looked at the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, which cost \$6 trillion with not much to show for it. Especially in the deindustrialised parts of the country, where a lot of people are having a hard time making ends meet, there really was this primal scream: "Too much world, not enough America. What about us? What about my school? What about my Main Street?"

Trump is very much catering to that voice in the American electorate. As a consequence, you will see the US avoid major land wars in the region. One of the reasons why Trump is negotiating as hard as he is with the Iranians is that he does not want another war in the Middle East. I do not think you will see the United States pack up and go home. It has an interest in keeping its military infrastructure in the Gulf region and protecting the free flow of commerce and fossil fuels, but it will tread lightly.

It is interesting to me that the Israelis expected to have Trump very much behind them, and it is not really playing out that way. When the war in Gaza comes to an end—sooner rather than later, I hope—Trump is going to push Israel to try to move forward. He will see the dismantling of Hamas and Hezbollah, and the weakening of Iran, as an opportunity to build on the Abraham accords that he was able to negotiate in his first term, in particular to get normalisation between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Where does the Palestinian question fit in there? It is very difficult to say, but there is a moment of reckoning coming when the dust settles, because Trump is going to push the Israelis on this front.

There are no major areas where I see the UK and the US parting ways in the Middle East. Most of what I just said would be more or less consistent with the UK's views of and interests in the region.

Evie Aspinall: I agree very much with that last point. In the UK, there is very little desire for that sense of overreach into the Middle East that the UK and the US have collectively had in recent decades. For the UK, the focus is very much on Europe, and the Middle East is not a priority area. Ultimately, we have followed the United States's approach to the region for a long time, and we will pretty much continue to do so most of the time.

The situation in Gaza is perhaps a more challenging one. The UK has long struggled with its own position on it, and we are now seeing that Trump has moved slightly further away from Israel, although his instinct is more pro-Israel than this Government instinctively are. That can be challenging, particularly as we see some of the images coming out of Gaza at the moment. That is a potential challenge in the relationship, but, I hope, one where we will see that conflict resolved soon.

Beyond that, there are some areas of co-operation, with the caveat that neither party particularly wants to be heavily involved in the Middle East at this point in time. The most important one is probably investment in joint maritime operations around the Red Sea. The second is to think about what the UK's strengths are. While our reputation in the Middle East is also not particularly strong, it is probably slightly better than that of the Americans. Thinking about our reputation particularly in higher education, which is highly sought after in the region, we can leverage that as a way to open doors. That is important not just for our relationships with the Middle East but for limiting the impact of our strategic rivals.

If we go back to the last question on the increasing co-ordination between Russia, China and North Korea as a bloc, if we can collectively have a positive offer in regions such as the Middle East, which is not proactive and overly extensive but nevertheless offers our strengths and opportunities for partnership, that could be a really valuable way to counter some of the threats posed by our strategic rivals in the region.

Q108 Lord Bruce of Bennachie: These are very interesting comments. I wonder whether I could turn our attention to Africa and south Asia, and the potential engagement of the UK and the US, which, at the moment, is about disengagement. When Donald Trump announced the dismantling of USAID, I had in mind for about 24 hours that there might be a role for the UK to step in, but the UK Government stepped straight in and said, "We are going to match that cut".

I get the impression that President Trump really does not care very much about Africa and does not want to engage. Is that true? There is obviously a geographical issue. The UK is a lot closer than the United States to Africa, and we see it in how migration, both legal and illegal, from Africa to the UK is a very significant political and economic factor. Is

there scope for co-operation, given our diminished engagement with aid, although it could include trade and investment, diplomacy and other things, or a division of labour where we could take a lead where America is not?

Ms Aspinall, you mentioned Sudan, where the UK thought it had some influence. Indeed, it has had influence in the past, and we put money in, but we are dismantling our conflict prevention, so we finish up spending much more money dealing with conflicts and much less on trying to prevent them. We have just heard that they are going to dismantle our anti-Ebola engagement in Africa, which probably prevented Ebola from becoming the next pandemic. Maybe it will be now. What is the scope for the UK and the US to deal specifically with Africa, but possibly with south Asia, given that we have both dismantled the very instruments that we were using to engage with them?

Evie Aspinall: You got it pretty much spot on there about the very depressing picture of the state of both UK and US engagement with Africa. It is characterised by cuts to the aid budget and a broader disengagement or disinterest. We see very real challenges in the region, such as Ebola, which I believe the UK has a duty to help support and address. Also, we see China and Russia increasingly using their soft power in Africa. The most recent thing that I was reading about was China providing free TVs in various regions in Africa, with the only accessible channel being Chinese TV, for which you have to pay a large subscription. The cuts to the BBC World Service and BBC media are a particular challenge.

What can we do and what are the positives? This is very challenging, because of these financial cuts, but also the unpredictability. The UK has found itself really struggling, because the US has pulled back. The best thing that the UK could do right now, which is sort of a capitulation but also not, is to work out where the US is pulling back from and where we can fill in some of those immediate cliff-edge cuts. There are whole programmes immediately being cut, with devastating consequences. Where are the opportunities where the UK can step in?

Then we need to think about what, collectively, our offer should be. The very light silver lining to this conversation and wider debate around aid at the moment is that it is encouraging us to think about what aid should look like moving forward. The crucial thing is that we should be moving to more equitable partnerships and more development-focused initiatives.

If that is the case, we need to think about what our collective offer is. For the UK, that seems to me to be higher education and law as opportunities to help nations develop in the long term. Strengthening that alongside what the US wants to bring to the table and creating collective offers is the best that we can do at this point in time, with the caveat that our budgets are very reduced.

The second part of that is to think more about investment into Africa. The relationship so far has been aid-focused. Africa is a fast-growing

continent. There are huge areas where we could be doing more. Part of that challenge is that the public see Africa as a collective charity case that we send money to, and not as a strategic opportunity for investment. The more that we can do to challenge that, the better.

Lord Bruce of Bennachie: Professor Kupchan, do the Trump Administration care about China and Russia moving into sub-Saharan Africa on the scale that they are? They do not appear to; they seem to be accepting that that is happening.

Professor Charles Kupchan: A lot of damage is being done because of the immediate tangible implications of the pullback of US assistance, aid programmes, food and medicine. This is having an immediate impact on the lives of many people in countries that were the recipients of this aid.

We are witnessing a moment where there is new agency. Many countries in what we call the global South are playing the field in ways that they have not. India is, in some ways, the best example. It is pursuing what it calls a multi-alignment strategy, where Modi is having a steak dinner with Biden one day and is with Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin the next. Everybody is doing that. Turkey is doing it, as are Nigeria, South Africa and Indonesia. Many countries are now playing the field, and that is because they have options. Two-thirds of the world now trades more with China than with the United States. China is the lender and investor of first resort in many of the parts of the world that we are talking about.

The straightforward answer is that Trump does not care that much. I just do not think that he thinks about the global South in geopolitical terms. My advice would be that what we should do is prepare a post-Trump strategy for re-engagement. He is not going to rejoin the WHO. He is not going to reopen USAID. A lot of damage will be done, and one of the questions that we should all be thinking about is, "How do we pick up the pieces when this President leaves office?"

Q109 **Lord Bruce of Bennachie:** As a follow-up to that, Trump has pulled out of climate change engagement, whereas the UK is making a big play at being a leader in tackling climate change. Is it just a question of, "We have to do it because they are not going to do it"? Is there any scope for getting the Americans at all involved, or even persuading them that it is in their interests, in some way or other, or is it just, "Drill, baby, drill" and we are on our own?

Professor Charles Kupchan: I would not waste a lot of effort on that issue, because this US Government are very much hard over on, "Drill, baby, drill", fossil fuels and undoing a lot of the very important steps that Biden took to get greater investment in renewable energy. I would not say that it is worth making a big effort in that regard. The key, again, is that this will not last for ever, and we should be thinking about a post-Trump strategy to get the United States back in the game of trying to fight climate change.

Evie Aspinall: I very much agree. Trump is not going to move much more constructively on climate change, so the UK has to find the partners that will. Realistically, if you are China or one of the many nations in the developing world that have become increasingly frustrated at feeling like they are shouldering the burden of the climate transition, it will be very difficult to get any progress on climate change in the next few years, because the United States will not be leading. The UK has to think about how we hold a bar of consensus that we can build upon for the future, and how we make COP 30, if not a success, not a complete disaster. We have to manage our expectations on that, and it is quite a challenging situation.

Q110 **Baroness Coussins:** Professor Kupchan, you said that we should look at preparing a post-Trump strategy. That would be a lot easier if we had the first idea of what the Democrats think. Given your background, can you say anything, however briefly, about when we can expect policies coming out from the Democrats and who might be speaking for them?

Professor Charles Kupchan: No is the answer. The Democrats are a bit in the wilderness right now. There are many people, including some of the names that were in the mix before. Gavin Newsom, Josh Shapiro, Andy Beshear, JB Pritzker and Gretchen Whitmer are all potentials. Nobody has really emerged as the leader. Part of the problem is that there has not been an effort to build a new strategy. The party is ideologically divided and, in many respects, demoralised.

I will say that a lot of what Trump is doing will not work. You are already beginning to see independent voters and moderate Republicans move away from him. The Democrats are likely to take back the House in the mid-terms, and there will be a point at which, mainly because of inflation and because of price increases at Walmart, as a consequence of the tariffs, you begin to see Republicans, especially those in swing districts, distance themselves from Trump.

I do not know exactly where the Democrats are going to locate themselves, but we are in a period of American history in which the pendulum is going to swing back and forth from one party to the next, because nobody has good answers to the toughest questions of how to get working Americans back up on their feet.

I am relatively optimistic that, even though Trump is more a symptom than a cause of the hollowing out of the political centre in the United States, the pendulum is going to be swinging back, and those in power will get back on to the agenda of climate, assistance to Africa and some of the other areas where the US and the UK have worked together closely.

The Chair: Thank you both very much indeed for a very interesting session. It was really helpful. I declare the public session closed.