

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Strategic Defence Review, HC 972

Wednesday 11 June 2025

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Members present: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Chair); Alex Baker; Lincoln Jopp; Mike Martin; Jesse Norman; Michelle Scrogham; Fred Thomas; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1-60

Witnesses

I: General Sir Richard Barrons, Reviewer, Strategic Defence Review, Dr Hill, Reviewer, Strategic Defence Review, and Lord Robertson, Lead Reviewer, Strategic Defence Review.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: General Sir Richard Barrons, Dr Hill and Lord Robertson.

Chair: I call to order today's Defence Committee evidence session on the strategic defence review, which has been published this month. I am very grateful that all three primary reviewers are with us. Thank you in particular to Lord Robertson and General Barrons, who are here with us once again, and who came in before the publication of the report.

Giving evidence are all three reviewers. Lord Robertson, the lead reviewer of the strategic defence review, is the former Secretary-General of NATO and former Defence Secretary. We also have with us in the room General Sir Richard Barrons, who is not only a reviewer but a former commander of joint forces command. I am very pleased that we have with us virtually Dr Fiona Hill, who is a reviewer of the strategic review and also a senior fellow at the Centre on the United States and Europe within the foreign policy programme at Brookings, and who holds various other prominent positions in academia and much more.

Thank you so much to all three for making yourselves available for today's evidence session. I propose that we look at the process of the review before we get into the report itself. Jesse Norman will start us off.

Q1 **Jesse Norman:** General Barrons, when the review was originally announced, it was said in terms that it would be "Britain's review—not just the Government's", and that it would consult serving military, veterans, MPs of all parties, industry and academia. As a reviewer and former military officer, were you disappointed by the way in which the Government handled the launch, in particular the briefing of the review out to business and journalists before it came to Parliament?

General Sir Richard Barrons: Was I disappointed? No, because I think it is a process that is under way. I am not party to how the Ministry of Defence elected to construct its announcement—I contributed to it—but we are locked in a conversation with industry, academia, think-tanks and veterans that reflects the 8,000 or so submissions that we had, and the importance of the review. There might have been an announcement today, but I think as this moment illustrates, we are locked in an enduring process to get the profound nature of the review across to as many people as possible.

Q2 **Jesse Norman:** Lord Robertson, what were your feelings about that?

Lord Robertson: I think we have done it in a unique way. The consultation has really been as deep and as wide as any before. We had 8,000 submissions, as Richard said. We had over 30 panels producing recommendations. We attracted the views of 30 allies, 200 companies and 150 academic institutions and think-tanks, as well as Parliament and the media. That is a quite remarkable degree of consultation with all the stakeholders in defence as a whole. I think we have produced a report that reflects a lot of the views that we obtained.

Q3 Jesse Norman: What do you think were the positives and negatives of that very novel approach?

Lord Robertson: The positives were that we were in the Department, with the Department, but not to the Department. We had a degree of independence. We had a remarkable team of people working with us—some civil servants, some military and some from other Government Departments, and representatives from America, Germany and France—which gave us an insight into a lot of activity. We also had access to the Department, and anything we wanted—any information we needed, however classified it was—was made available to us. That was the huge advantage in it.

The downside, although not a major one, was that we were eventually part of the Government machine. We were doing this in association with the Defence Secretary, whom we met almost every week. We had something like 69 various meetings with the Chiefs of Staff. We were to some extent part of the Government machine—at the end of the day, the write round had to take place—but that was a very minor irritation in what was a remarkable experience.

Q4 Jesse Norman: You say you were shown and given access to every level of secret information. Can we take it, therefore, that there is a separate report, on matters that are above secret, that has gone to Government alongside the published document?

Lord Robertson: Some aspects of defence are inevitably going to remain at a highly classified level, so yes, you can take that. There is no separate report as such, but there are elements of defence that inevitably are going to remain secret.

Q5 Jesse Norman: Of course. As you look back on the somewhat protracted process—I will throw this question open to the other reviewers as well, but it is for Lord Robertson first—what do you think could and perhaps should have been done differently?

Lord Robertson: It is not easy to pinpoint that. I think it could have been speedier at the end. Because Government operates in a standard way, the write-round process is a standard way of doing things, and because of course we were touching on other Government Departments in the recommendations that we made, the Treasury have an influence on the process. So it might, at the latter stages, have been speedier than it actually was, but I don't think that affected the quality of the report at the end of the day.

Q6 Jesse Norman: Dr Hill, do you want to come in on any of that?

Dr Hill: One element that was unique to the report and perhaps has not been covered by my colleagues is the public nature of our outreach. As already mentioned, we had 8,000 submissions. One thing that we could perhaps have done a little earlier in the process was more outreach to the public. We set up, along with the Ministry of Defence, the citizens' panels, and in many respects it took a while to get those under way, so perhaps we could have done them a little earlier.



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In the submission process, we engaged with members of the public by taking a rather random selection of them to bases for the Armed Forces—to Air Force, Army and Navy bases, and those involved in intelligence collection—and that was very informative in the later stages, when we were actually writing the report, in terms of getting feedback from the public. As I said, it would have been helpful to have that earlier in the process, because we could perhaps have shaped the launch of the report in different ways, based on some of that feedback. As was said at the beginning, the intention was for it to be Britain's report—the United Kingdom's report—not just a Government report, and certainly not the report of one political party, and having public participation is pretty key.

In terms of the outreach and getting the submissions in, I think 8,000 submissions was unprecedented. The whole approach was unique. We did get a few complaints from people that they had not really heard about it, and that is really a question about how you would do something like this in the future. You need to think about the maximal outreach to reach all the audiences that you might want to engage. The whole thing was a process of engaging people, for post launch as well, to get them basically supportive of the implementation and not just the production of the report or participation in the review process.

Q7 **Jesse Norman:** Will the review process, now having terminated, result in any further ability for you and the other reviewers to keep an eye on how the report is implemented—how the baby is being cosseted and loved by the MOD and the wider defence establishment?

Dr Hill: Hopefully. There is not anything set up in a formal way, but certainly the three of us want very much to engage in this idea of a national conversation. We have various platforms and ways of doing this.

The engagement with the general public is pretty critical. I am the chancellor of Durham University—I am speaking to you from up in Durham now—and just yesterday we had a major public event that touched on these issues. It touched not directly on the strategic defence review but on the general threats that the UK faces. We had several hundred people, which shows that there is a great deal of appetite to engage in discussions about where the UK finds itself in this moment, and the kinds of things we have to do as a society, broadly, to change our mindset about the current moment. We brought that out very clearly in the review, as part of the process of trying to have societal engagement. Obviously, Parliament plays a critical role in that as well.

Lord Robertson: On this being Britain's review rather than just the Government's, underneath the three reviewers we had a team of people in the defence review team—the DRT six. We had Robin Marshall, who is one of the non-executive directors on the board. We had Sir Jeremy Quin, who had been one of the most successful of the Ministers for Defence Procurement in the last Government—that was a very clear signal. He worked with us the whole the whole way through it.

Chair: He is a former Chair of the Defence Committee as well, Lord

Robertson.

Lord Robertson: Indeed, he was—that gave him another iron in the fire. We also had a senior Treasury official and we had Grace Cassy, who is a tech expert. They were helping us with the whole process, in order to demonstrate the fact that we were more than just a Labour Government review.

Jesse Norman: Thank you very much.

Q8 **Lincoln Jopp:** General Barrons, I distinctly remember that at the launch of this process you said two things that struck me at the time and have remained with me since. You said that the reviewing team were not required to seek consensus and that you were not required to take heed of or pay attention to holes in the legacy programme, some of which have been around for decades. I would love to hear how those principles played out as you conducted the review.

General Sir Richard Barrons: I am very confident that both of those features played through the review. The advantage of being an external review team working with the authority of the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary directly was that we asked any questions that we felt we needed to ask and interrogated the answers. We were never going to be captured by prevailing assumptions about how defence might go in future—indeed, quite a lot of the review was about challenging those prevailing assumptions.

For me, the key was that we set about this transformative process—I said it at the start and I say it again: we were managing the most profound transformation of UK defence for 150 years—and we have mapped that out in the report. It was not a favourite with everybody, but through really strenuous, energetic and exhaustive engagement with the services in particular and with the MOD finance and programme people, we got to the place we expected to get to. I do think that the comments so far this morning have rather underplayed just how much work the MOD and the Armed Forces committed to the ideas in the review. They are their ideas as much as they are our ideas.

In terms of the legacy holes, as we have discussed on previous occasions, it would have been a miracle if the benchmark for the world we now live in, in defence and security terms, was a neat fit for the Armed Forces we have ended up with at the end of the post-cold war journey. That miracle is not occurring; there is a gap to close and there are some big holes. The review balances how the holes that must be filled in are filled in over time, with seeding urgent transformation. That balance is very largely dictated by how quickly technology changes, by how fast the resources flow in, and by how well and how quickly the MOD and the Armed Forces get on with executing the transformation that they have all signed up to.

Q9 **Lincoln Jopp:** Obviously it is a fairly sensitive process, but you said that some of the assertions you made were less popular than others and you got pushback. Can you give us an idea of where those areas were?



General Sir Richard Barrons: In very big handfuls, there is always a difficult discussion in defence about what you need to do now to restore readiness—to improve the current picture—and what you need to invest to be sure that you are matching pace in technology in the 2030s and 2040s. It is the same pound that is going to be split, and there is always a difference of view about that.

Equally, in terms of the review, you will see that there is a big point from us about how the UK homeland is once again on the pitch. The Prime Minister and others have already talked about a whole-of-society endeavour; well, you are going to have to balance your resources between what you do for homeland resilience—more than article 3—and what you do as a contribution to NATO on the European continent, at sea and in the sky. You would expect those to be contested in striking the balance, and we think we struck a transformative balance.

Lord Robertson: I did a defence review once before, as Secretary of State—an internal review, where we had to seek consensus. The whole exercise was based on marrying the trade-offs inside the Department. This was a very different exercise. We were able to be blunt and radical. Some of the recommendations in the SDR are not necessarily comfortable for the existing Ministry of Defence. The attack on risk aversion, for example, is not something that would have been in an internal review, but it is definitely part of an external review. There was a clear distinction, and I think the experiment, in that respect, was very successful.

Q10 **Lincoln Jopp:** We read in the press that what we have in the SDR is version 14. Is there anything in version one that you initially delivered that you regret not seeing make the final cut?

Lord Robertson: I do not think there were 14 versions, but there were certainly a number of versions, it has to be said. Essentially, we were thinking about deliverability. This is a deliverable report. It is ambitious, radical and important, but it is also deliverable. That is the point that I made in the last meeting we had with the Prime Minister. It also has timelines. That marks it out from pretty well every other Government review you have seen, because each of the recommendations has a timeline—some of them very ambitious and quite tight. That marks it out as being very different from an internal review.

General Sir Richard Barrons: I want to make a point about the drafting process, because it is too often misconstrued that, somehow, we were changing course or our views. The only substance to that is the major change in European defence and security that occurred in February, with the Munich security conference and the US making clear its views on its relationships with Russia, Europe and Ukraine.

We produced the first draft when we said we would on 20 December. That was a Herculean achievement by the drafting team. We needed to go through, I think, five solid drafts to produce the quality of report that has been issued. It is, if nothing else, eminently readable. Quite a lot of the revisions were just about improving the quality of the output; it was not



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about changing what we recommended. In my judgment, where we ended up in the published document has all the major ideas that we were working on. We were not seen off on anything that truly mattered to us.

- Q11 **Lincoln Jopp:** On the point you just made about ambition and timelines, Lord Robertson, we had the Chief of the Defence Staff here yesterday—I have to choose my words incredibly carefully, because he implied nothing; I inferred this from what he was saying—but he made the point of saying, “You will notice that in the recommendations boxes, some of them have dates and some of them don’t.” I read these things from what is not in it, rather than what is, and I inferred from what he was saying that, at the end, some of the dates had been taken out. I would be interested to hear your observations on my inference.

Lord Robertson: I do not think you should infer anything. The Prime Minister has made it very clear that he accepts the recommendations, and you and I will be watching each of those recommendations carefully. Some of them have very clear date lines, which is relevant and practical given what they represent, but all the others have been accepted as well, and we will be watching their implementation carefully.

- Q12 **Chair:** Lord Robertson, various individuals have made various different remarks. Those of us who have read previous strategic defence reviews will, no doubt, approach this with a considerable sense of cynicism, but I wanted to quote a few to you.

Dr Dear said that the fact that the review had been decoupled from the spending review in effect “neutered it”, allowing the Government to “make policy and strategy word-smithing and empty rhetoric...while the gritty, largely boring reality of implementation and hard choices are hidden”. He also remarked that it “cannot be an ends-ways-means review, a strategy, if denied or constrained” and that the “reviewers were hamstrung by this being...neither independent and external, nor internal and owned by the MOD. Thus they have been prevented, I would guess, in going as far as they wanted.”

Is that a correct summary of what has happened?

Lord Robertson: No, it is not. There are critics out there who were going to criticise the review whatever it said. The major thing that people say to me is, “It’s a brilliant report, it’s really good, but is the money there?” We started off with terms of reference that said that we had to operate within 2.5% of GNP, but midway through our review the Government made an announcement about the 2.5% being accelerated beyond 2030, as the previous Government had said, to 2027—the year after next—and they said 3% in the next Parliament. Those were the parameters within which we operated, so this review is based on that limitation, but it can be accelerated in the future. The criticism outside is nit-picking; it is usual, and it is normally from the same people.

- Q13 **Mike Martin:** Dr Hill, General Barrons has said that the Munich security conference happened and then the penny dropped and there was a realisation that there was a change in American posture in Europe, and



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America was less engaged in European security. There are few people in the world with the level of expertise that you have about Trump and Russia, and the nexus of those two things. Was it not completely obvious that, from the election of Trump in November, the American posture with respect to Europe would be changing?

Dr Hill: To be honest, it was to the three of us, the reviewers and the members of team. Given not just personal experiences but much broader-ranging analysis of the situation, we had already factored in that no matter what, were going to get less of a commitment from the United States. To be frank, that was irrespective of whether it was President Trump or perhaps even President Harris in November last year, as a result of the election. Going back to 2014, when President Barack Obama participated in the NATO summit hosted in Wales, it had been made very clear that the United States wanted to see European members of NATO, and Canada as well, step up their commitments.

If you recall, back in 2014 a commitment was made to have spending of 2% of GDP, so the trajectory was already there that the United States wanted to see European and other allies play a greater role. As you rightly point out, anybody who had been paying attention to the debate within the United States would already have seen that there was a reluctance for the United States to be constantly taking the lead and setting the strategic agenda for matters of European security, including on Ukraine, and that all came out in discussions during the Biden Administration. We had factored that in; it was just a matter of degree as to whether other people had come to the same set of conclusions that we had.

Q14 **Mike Martin:** You seem to be saying that it was obvious to you from November, rather than what General Barrons said, which was that there was a realisation later on about that.

Dr Hill: I think that what General Barrons said was correct, in that that was the realisation for others that this was a major turning point. We had already been making these cautions that the United Kingdom and the rest of our European allies would have to be seen to be doing more, which is the important element in the transformational nature of this defence review. But it certainly was not the case that that was a popular realisation, at a public level, politically across not just the UK, but elsewhere within the alliance.

Q15 **Chair:** General Barrons, you wanted to briefly come in on this.

General Sir Richard Barrons: I am happy to speak for General Barrons, being present in the room. US presidents have been saying for 20 years that they were going to do less for European security. They have often said that, I think, more in sorrow than anger. When we started the review, we understood the direction of travel and we could see the US election on the horizon. The effect of what was said in February was to change for us the financial profile that we were given by the Government. That meant that we could then benchmark our conclusions against a different financial profile, which is what is in the report today—the affordable outcome that we have recommended, and that the Government have accepted.



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The way the US set out its position in February left us with an important question, but not a whole lot has actually changed, as I understand it. The question is the degree of uncertainty that it has created about whether the American exit is a cliff edge—which has not occurred—or a decline that we can manage. That is going to play into the future debates about the speed of the implementation of the review.

Q16 Mike Martin: Lord Robertson, you led the 1998 strategic defence review. What items, equipment lines or changes were in that, but never got implemented?

Lord Robertson: I think it was all implemented, as far as I know, and major reforms took place. The creation of the Defence Logistics Organisation was a radical and major reform, and the aircraft carriers and all those things were put in place. If you look at the characterisation of that review and the way that the world has changed, in those days we were talking about power projection and expeditionary warfare, “Go far, hit hard, stay long”. The world has completely changed now, and therefore this review has had to look at a very different world from the one that we were looking at then.

Q17 Derek Twigg: I want to follow up Lincoln Jopp’s question, and maybe put it in a different way. First, I welcome the review; I think it is a very good review, particularly in the context of the political and financial constraints that you have to work within; we can have the debate around timelines, funding and so on, but that is for another day and I know the Chair will get into that in a later question. I am one of the people who has the view that we are not spending enough—that 2.5% is not enough and 3% by the next Parliament is not enough—and that is a debate to be had. You make clear the constraints you were working under, with the 2.5% by 2027 now. Is there anything in terms of capabilities or timelines that you have had to work to that you would have done differently if you had been given a higher rate of GDP spend than 2.5%? Is there something that is missing that you would have liked to have included in your review, but you could not because of the constraint around the 2.5%?

Lord Robertson: If we had been stuck on 2.3%, which is effectively what we were spending and will be spending up until 2027, then there would be profound implications for the equipment programme as it stands. We spend a lot of time going over all that with the planners inside the Department. But the decision on 2027 and the 3% obviously gave us a much better area. Inevitably, the country could do more if we had more money.

Q18 Derek Twigg: Is there anything in particular that you wanted to look at or include that you had not been able to because of those constraints?

Lord Robertson: I would not pinpoint anything in particular. On a number of recommendations in here to do with the size of the reserves and the speed at which they can be mobilised and equipped, we have said “when the resources permit”. If we had more money, that sort of thing could be accelerated.

Q19 **Derek Twigg:** Things could have been done more speedily, then?

Lord Robertson: Absolutely. We make recommendations, but maybe General Barrons would know more about the detail.

General Sir Richard Barrons: If there was more money available to defence sooner, you would be able to confront some good choices. You could derisk the shortfall in readiness more quickly—buy more ammunition, do more training, buy more spares, maybe hire a few more people—or you could reduce the sequencing in the defence programme. Our review works over a nine-year programme. Some things fall into the back end because that is where the money is; if the money turned up sooner, you could do more concurrently. That would be a good thing, and you could definitely see more transformative innovation in things such as AI, autonomy and robotics. These are all very good choices to have.

Where we left the review is, “Here’s a menu. It’s affordable over the nine years at the profile you’ve given us; we recommend that, and everyone has signed up to it. If events, allies or enemies cause you to go faster, go faster, but you’ll have to find more money sooner and make choices.”

Chair: We will come on to these very issues with Alex Baker.

Q20 **Alex Baker:** Lord Robertson, we understand that the strategic defence review was costed. You have talked a bit about this already, but could you walk us through the process by which that costing was done? Specifically, was the review’s affordability predicated on achieving 3% of GDP within a defined timeframe and trajectory?

Lord Robertson: We were operating within the 2.5%; indeed, in the early stages we were operating within the 2.3%, but 2.5% was the guidance. You have seen the terms of reference. That is pretty stringent but, in order not to get on the wrong side of the Treasury, people were not willing to talk about anything beyond that. We were engaged in a process inside the Department, at endless meetings with the planners and the people concerned with the money side of things, to see how all this could be fitted together. We did a very rigorous examination of what the implications would be of staying at 2.3%, then the 2.5% from 2027, and then 3% by the next Parliament.

Q21 **Alex Baker:** Given the historical tendency with reviews such as this towards optimism in both cost and delivery assessments, how confident are you in the robustness of the assumptions underlying the review?

Lord Robertson: It is eminently deliverable. We set out to produce something that was ambitious, radical and bold, but was actually deliverable. There is no point in producing yet another think-tank report that can sit on a shelf. At every stage, we were checking with the Defence Secretary, and regularly with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, to make sure that we were on the same page so that, by the end of the process, there would be no surprises for them, despite the fact that we were going to be quite radical.

It all depends on delivery. Inevitably, my last review depended very much on a process that was designed to make sure that we delivered all the different elements, and that applies here as well. That is why there are demanding timelines built into the report. If it is carried out, it should be deliverable, but it was designed to be deliverable.

- Q22 **Alex Baker:** Do you see a role for a new financial mechanism, such as a multilateral defence, security and resilience bank, to help to bridge the gap between strategic ambition and delivery capability, particularly when fiscal realities fall short of policy intent?

Lord Robertson: We have to think very carefully and differently about the way defence is financed. The new German Government have changed the constitution in order to allow them to make payments, and other people are thinking about it. I believe that there are two grand plans out there for a defence bank that might relieve some of the pressure for some countries.

I would certainly be in favour of imaginative thinking in order to make sure that people are safe. Defence expenditure is a premium on the life insurance of a nation, and we need to think about it in terms of an insurance premium. I have never claimed on my household insurance, but I cannot believe that I would think that I would save money by not having it, and I think the country has got to do that as well. We have got to see it in that light.

General Sir Richard Barrons: We want to acknowledge that the review has opened up a new pathway to bring in commercial sources of finance as well as commercial sources of innovation, but we want to be realistic about what that money can do. It can service innovation; it can service dual-use technology in particular; it can invest in infrastructure, but it is not going to pick up shortfalls in things like pay or training that are essentially about cash expenditure. It is really important to find new ways of bringing in private investment on good terms into defence, but it is not going to solve the problem of the public sector finances altogether.

- Q23 **Chair:** General Barrons, let me come on to that. How disappointed are you that your strategic defence review is already out of date in the sense that you were not able to be as ambitious enough with war readiness, the amount of kit and the amount of investment that we could make into our people? The parameters that you were set were 2.5%, rising to 3% in the next Parliament, and here we are being pushed by NATO, our US allies and others to towards 5%. According to all informed opinion, that is what we will be arriving at later this month. Just how disappointed are you that that is the situation that has transpired?

General Sir Richard Barrons: I do not think that disappointment is in any way the right word for me to use here. The transformative path that we have sketched out in the strategic defence review is common to all outcomes. It is restrained by the financial profile—the question we were set of 2.5% of GDP by '27-28 and 3% of GDP by no later than 2034. Both those figures really matter.



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My view is that it is possible, even likely, that the combination of events, our opponents and perhaps our allies—the NATO summit is an example—may cause the UK not to implement all of this programme over nine years, but to go faster. You have the head of German intelligence saying that Russia will test NATO in 2029. The point is, if you need to go faster, it is the same menu and the same direction of travel—you just go faster, but you will have to make very difficult choices across the public sector about how you find that money sooner, and I think that is where the debate is stuck.

Q24 Chair: If there is an acceleration, would we need another strategic defence review?

General Sir Richard Barrons: We would not need another strategic defence review; if we need to go faster, we just implement this review faster and better.

Q25 Chair: Lord Robertson, in the joint op-ed that all your good selves penned, you said that “the Government’s important decision to raise defence spending to 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2027/28 and, vitally, to 3 per cent in the next Parliament made an enormous difference.” How much of an enormous difference would there have been if you had been set the parameter of 5%? Does that not lead you to be angry in any way or disappointed that you were not able to be that ambitious?

Lord Robertson: No, we had to live within that. That is what we were asked to do. We were not asked to do blue-sky thinking about what you would do if you had an infinite amount of money. Like every other Government Department, we have to live within our means. That was the task that we were given, and that is what we accepted at the very beginning.

Q26 Chair: But with all due respect, it is not about infinite thinking; it is about setting 5% rather than 3%.

Lord Robertson: As General Barrons said, you can move more quickly. We could do a whole series of things that we have recommended in here, and do them more ambitiously than if we are constrained by what it is just now. If the NATO summit agrees to 5% and our Government agree to 5%, you can use this review to go faster and quicker.

Chair: Fair enough. Lincoln Jopp wanted to come in.

Q27 Lincoln Jopp: I guess we are all asking the same question in different ways. If, as a result of future decisions, defence expenditure stays at 2.5%, how much of the SDR should I tear up?

Lord Robertson: You do not tear up anything. It is designed for 2.5% in 2027 and 3% in the next Parliament. That is the design; the menu is there, as General Barron has said. We have created the menu: you can go faster or better, but the menu is still there. The guts of this, irrespective of the money—I keep trying to tell people this, because they are obsessed with the money—are that it is a transformative review that deals with pretty well every aspect of defence in Britain, radically shifting and

changing the whole culture of how we do it. You don't tear anything up at all; you just multiply some of the recommendations.

- Q28 **Lincoln Jopp:** You would effectively extend the dates, rather than bring them in, if spending were to remain at 2.5% and we were not to achieve the nationally stated ambition of 3% by the next Parliament.

Lord Robertson: Circumstances can change. The world can change. Things are changing all of the time. There is the NATO summit. The consent of the people can change, as well. The basic structure we have created in this review is there to be used, not discarded.

- Q29 **Chair:** Dr Hill, the report sets out what you view as a "new era" of threat. Are the timelines and funding profile that you were asked to work within appropriate to counter those threats?

Dr Hill: As both General Barrons and Lord Robertson have spelled out, and as we have all been discussing, a lot of this is very much dependent on events. We talked about a major pivotal point in February: the Munich security conference, after the speech from Vice-President Vance and, prior to that, from Defence Secretary Hegseth at the meetings in Brussels a week or so before. A series of events like that makes it very clear that the United States is not committed in the same way as it might have been previously. We also talked about that longer trajectory of change. That is what we are looking at in terms of the larger threat level.

Since the report was released, we have had this major operation by the Ukrainians in which they delivered drones into the Russian heartland basically by a stealth operation that delves back almost into antiquity—through a Trojan horse approach. That has transformed the way that we should all be thinking about threats. Things happen on a daily or weekly basis that change the way that we might perceive the urgency of the threat; this is what we are saying all the time here. This is part of a national debate, of which this hearing is part, in which we have to get people at the political level, in Parliament, and in the public to understand that the world is changing very rapidly.

What we are trying to do—what we have been trying to do with the review—is lay out capabilities and the different mindset that we will need to adapt to everything as it comes our way. That is the message here; this is not static. Everything is in play at all times here and everything changes really dramatically, even as we are speaking now.

We have to get ourselves prepared and to engage as a country, not just in the sectors that have an interest in defence, in thinking about how we best position ourselves to meet the challenges.

- Q30 **Chair:** Lord Robertson, given your considerable experience, you know that strategic defence reviews are often assessed against two different criteria: whether the view of the likely future is proven correct, and the potential gap between ambition and resources. What approach did you take to manage those risks? What makes you think that you will be more successful than previous reviews in accomplishing that?



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Lord Robertson: Because we started out by looking very carefully at the future. This is a strategic review, so it is mapping out Britain's defence up to 2035 and beyond. General Barrons and I had this argument about whether it was the most transformative review in 100 or 150 years. It is pretty fundamental, because it addresses the shift in the behaviour, culture and mindset of Britain's defence. In that respect, it is truly transformative.

We build into the future—and we account for that in the review, in the context in which we operate—but we have to operate within the fiscal constraints that any Government would have to operate within at the present moment. Who knows whether it will be successful, or whether it can be blown away by events in the next few weeks, but by and large we have tried to the long look to establish a structure that will be suitable for this country for the future.

Chair: Agreed; only time will tell. Let's hope that you are successful, for the sake of the nation.

Q31 **Derek Twigg:** When did you give the report to the MOD?

Lord Robertson: We gave in our final version about a couple of months ago.

Derek Twigg: So March-ish.

General Sir Richard Barrons: It was 10 March.

Q32 **Derek Twigg:** Given that the Government have accepted the recommendations in the report, are you convinced that they have a strategy in place, or are developing one, to implement those recommendations? Is that in place now, or is it an ongoing process in the MOD?

Lord Robertson: They have to appoint the National Armaments Director, who is fundamental to the review. I think they are down to a shortlist of two or three at the present moment—

Derek Twigg: I understand that, but with respect, sir, because of the time, let me come back to the question: have they got a strategy in place to implement this report?

Lord Robertson: The Defence Secretary is absolutely confident that he has got a structure in place in order to implement it, yes.

Derek Twigg: So there is already a plan to implement the report. For a strategy you need—well, I do not need to tell you, because you are much more experienced than me.

Lord Robertson: Yes, but we are not in charge of that.

Derek Twigg: I am just asking whether you know that there is a plan or strategy in place to implement the report.

Lord Robertson: I think that there is, but that is not our business.

Derek Twigg: By the sound of your response, you are not 100% sure.

Lord Robertson: I am pretty confident that when the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister say that they are going to implement this, and finance the review, they have got a plan in place.

Q33 **Derek Twigg:** Okay. We heard that one of the questions you would answer was about whether the Armed Forces are “thinly spread and...should be more focused”. What does the review recommend that UK defence stops doing, if it is spread too thin?

Lord Robertson: I will let General Barrons answer on the detail of that. We were quite conscious, in this review, that we were not going to excavate the past and pin blame for the hollowness of our forces. Circumstances over the years have led the country to have hollowed-out forces because they were postured more for the past than for the present. In this report you will not find some detailed critique of what has happened in the past; we were looking to the future. It is positive and we were as consensual as we possibly could be, in terms of politics, in what we did. I think General Barrons can answer your question.

Q34 **Derek Twigg:** General Barrons, we are too “thinly spread”, so what is it that we should not be doing?

General Sir Richard Barrons: The review is really clear in resolving this under the umbrella of NATO First. We looked very carefully at what NATO asks the UK to do in making its contribution to the alliance, and that includes improving the resilience of the homeland, and defence’s role in that. If you look in the review, the Royal Navy is going to focus on the Atlantic bastion: the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap.

Q35 **Derek Twigg:** So we should do much less in Asia-Pacific then?

General Sir Richard Barrons: We have very clearly said that the job of the British Armed Forces is to play a prominent role in NATO deterrence, which is an everyday activity. For the Navy, that is the Atlantic bastion; for the Army, it is a SACEUR strategic reserve corps—one of only two, France being the provider of the other; and for the Air Force it is its role in the NATO air component. If you commit to that, and accept that deterrence is a 24/7 activity, you are not going to regularly station force elements—ships, tanks, aircraft—in the Indo-Pacific.

However, the UK has important global interests, and in conversation with the officer who runs Indo-Pacific command for the US, he said it does not really help to have UK forces permanently stationed in the Indo-Pacific region, because he has a lot of stuff, but it is really helpful if, as we are seeing now, the carrier group makes a sortie there about every four years. It sends a really important signal to opponents and friends, and he welcomes that as part of his strategic communications campaign. We are going to service our global interests with far fewer permanent positioning-of-force elements, and a much greater reliance on things such as diplomacy, technology and training.

Q36 **Derek Twigg:** Basically, you are saying that our focus should really be on Europe and not on trying to do lots of things in different parts of the world.

General Sir Richard Barrons: In terms of what we do with our forces, absolutely.

Q37 **Derek Twigg:** Can I ask one question on nuclear? You say in the review: "Commencing discussions with the United States and NATO on the potential benefits and feasibility of enhanced UK participation in NATO's nuclear mission." As the Chair has raised on the Floor of the House, and you will have seen in *The Sunday Times*, does that include—and is there a reason why you did not include—the possibility of tactical nuclear weapons carried by aircraft, or F-35s, in other words? Did you consider that as a potential expansion of our nuclear capability? If so, why is it not included? If not, why not?

Lord Robertson: Yes, we considered it. The fact that it is not there indicates that we were not terribly enthusiastic about it.

Derek Twigg: Can you say why you were not enthusiastic?

Lord Robertson: When I was Defence Secretary the last time around, I got rid of the free-fall bombs and maintained only one strategic deterrent.

Derek Twigg: Why were you not enamoured with that idea?

Lord Robertson: There are a number of practical reasons that might be there. The dual-capable aircraft system that applies in NATO has got attractions. It is symbolically important because it ties people into the American nuclear umbrella, but there are a number of practical issues that might be concerned about the United Kingdom.

Q38 **Derek Twigg:** So you considered it, and you decided that was not the way that we should be moving forward?

Lord Robertson: We said it should be the subject of further discussion. We did not rule it out.

Q39 **Derek Twigg:** Were you not personally a fan of expanding our nuclear deterrent to include F-35s with tactical nuclear weapons?

Lord Robertson: I am here to represent the review, and the review simply says we should have a discussion about that gap in between the strategic deterrent. One of the fillers for the gap is long-range heavy strike weapons. That could be said to fill that particular gap.

Q40 **Derek Twigg:** Is that being actively discussed in the MOD?

Lord Robertson: It will be discussed inside the MOD. We made the proposal that they should discuss it with NATO. We are not sure whether SACEUR thinks it is a good idea that the UK go down that route, but we simply make the suggestion that it should be discussed.

Q41 **Chair:** Further to what Derek Twigg just said, based on the reporting by

The Sunday Times, it seems that they have commenced on that particular path, perhaps procuring from the US aircraft that can enable us to deploy tactical nuclear weapons, but you are not aware of any such conversations, and that is not something that you recommended?

Lord Robertson: There are other reasons for buying the A version of the F-35 beyond that of carrying nuclear weapons. We have suggested that there is a mix of the different variations of the F-35.

Q42 **Chair:** The Defence Committee was recently in the US over a few days. This issue came up in conversations on the periphery. Dr Hill, what are your thoughts on the US perspective on this, please?

Dr Hill: To be frank, this is one of the reasons why we did not recommend it. There is a debate in the United States as well, which I am sure you were privy to when you were there. There is a determination, as Lord Robertson said, about what SACEUR might think but, of course, there is going to be a change with SACEUR. A lot of changes are going on all the time in the Department of Defence and the Pentagon, and there has been a lot of debate in the US Congress about these issues. The United States itself is revisiting its posture, both at home and abroad, for the military.

Partly because of that uncertainty, we opted not to make any major determinations about this. There are other allies who already have dual-capable aircraft and have tactical nuclear weapons as part of their arsenal, but in close conjunction with the United States. Like France, the United Kingdom is one of the other NATO members that is a nuclear power. We were focusing more on the unique role of the United Kingdom, rather than simply looking at the ways that the United Kingdom can play a role with other allies. Again, I am sure a lot of this will be talked about as we move forward to the NATO summit. To make it clear, there is a lot of uncertainty about this issue in the United States as well.

Chair: Definitely, Dr Hill. That is why some of us have raised it on the Floor of the House. Given that this would represent the biggest expansion of our defence posture since the cold war, no doubt we will come back to this subject, but let us move on to another topic.

Q43 **Jesse Norman:** To pick up the point you just made, Dr Hill, the uncertainty has a very significant potential cost for UK defence and security if we cannot rely on the USA in relation to sharing of expertise, refurbishing of warheads or intelligence. Those things create enormous potential costs and it would be interesting to explore how far you thought of those within the review. Obviously, our job is to expose and probe potential concerns that you might have had—tensions, disagreements and other things—that might later surface in relation to the review.

General Barrons, you rightly mentioned a concern about the latent tension between readiness in the short term and investment in the longer term. It is noticeable that, for reasons we all understand, the Government have been very vocal about the capital investments that are being made over the longer term—the AUKUS stance, GCAP and all the rest of it—and much less explicit about the cash commitments that are being made. If I were



an adversary looking at the UK, I would think, “Well, hold on a second: a degree of uncertainty and disagreement at the top of our US ally, war in Europe with potential scope for escalation, not much happening in terms of upgraded readiness in cash terms for the next two to potentially four years.” Do you have a concern about that? To take a random example, how would we massively accelerate investment in the drones that might increase our lethality and our ability to resist a shorter-term form of threat?

General Sir Richard Barrons: It is a very complex question. At the heart of it, we have to make a judgment about risk over time. The spending profile against which the review is benchmarked takes UK Armed Forces to a very transformed and pretty complete answer of over nine or 10 years. That works well if you are sure that you have nine or 10 years to get to that point, but within the context of your NATO allies. There are other members of NATO—Poland and now, latterly, Germany—planning to make really big investments.

The debate was sharpened by the sense that President Trump has awarded Europe the problem of Ukraine and re-assuring some form of settlement, when that appears. That settlement is clearly much further away than people want or can now reasonably expect, I think. Underlying this question of risk over time is generally the view that whatever the outcome in Ukraine, Russia will emerge from it either successful, emboldened and aggressive, or not successful, damaged and aggressive. Either way, that relationship with Russia will be very complicated for a long time. The question is: when? If the answer to that question is not before the 2030s, we are in reasonable place. If you think the answer to that question is 2030 or sooner, then there will have to be co-ordination with NATO. We really have to remind ourselves that a mobilised NATO massively over-faces Russia, but a NATO that is not mobilised and has less support from the US has possibly a greater degree of vulnerability.

The issue for our review is that we answered the question: it is over nine or 10 years. If events, enemies and allies require you to go faster, go faster. There are many things in the review that, if you needed to go faster, you could go faster. There are some things, like GCAP and AUKUS, where you cannot go any faster—technology will not get you any further, quicker.

Q44 **Jesse Norman:** That is an extremely helpful response, which points that to the fact that you have answered the question. The question is itself, potentially, changing quite rapidly, and it is a political question how to respond to that. Are there other comments that reviewers would like to make on that? Obviously, it is very sensitive.

Dr Hill: I would like to like to emphasise something that perhaps does not get as much attention, as a result of these larger threat questions in the realm that you have laid out here about the military threat.

The United Kingdom, like every other European country, is under constant attack and assault from Russia, even as we speak, in terms of cyber



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intrusions and political influence operations. Frankly, the United Kingdom has already been the site of two attacks: using polonium radioactive material against Alexander Litvinenko, which had a major impact here in the City of London, and also the use of weapons-grade nerve agent novichok in the English city of Salisbury. We have to bear those in mind. There were casualties as a result of those, including the death of Dawn Sturgess, a UK citizen, directly, as a result of that attack by the Russian security services.

We know from hearings at Parliament and reports coming from the UK intelligence services of sabotage operations, and of the recruiting of agents from other countries to operate within the United Kingdom to push back against UK support for Ukraine, for example. This is something that is active. There are threats to our critical national infrastructure. We looked at that in detail. There are concerns about gas pipelines, for example, coming from Norway and the vulnerabilities there, and undersea cables, and all these issues. Again, the review stresses a great deal of attention that needs to be paid to the homeland.

That is not just an issue for the Ministry of Defence. It goes across multiple Ministries, which is why we need to engage the Government at large, the public at large and Parliament. There needs to be thinking about key legislation, national security Acts and how we would protect critical national infrastructure. There is a role for the private sector, because it will be also responsible for hardening its own infrastructure—power stations and the grid. We had the incident at Heathrow. It is thinking about what if that had been an act of sabotage, as we saw for the power outage in Spain, Portugal and France. All these things have to be considered.

We keep talking about when we should be thinking about an actual military attack from Russia, but we are under attack in all different ways. At the same time, we are also seeing China, North Korea and Iran supporting Russia in the war in Ukraine. Those words mean that we are in a very uncomfortable relationship with all those countries as well. That has to be taken on at a diplomatic, political level, too.

I do not want us to just be thinking all the time about the nature of a military force, where people are saying, "What could happen next?" We are actually in the midst, as General Barrons and Lord Robertson have said. This is an unprecedented period in the last 20 or 30 years. We are under constant threat at all times.

Q45 Michelle Scrogam: General, you are recommending some significant changes within defence, but also in the way that defence engages with other actors. Do you feel that our defence system is ready and able to deliver? If not, what does it need to enable it to make those changes?

General Sir Richard Barrons: I think that there are a couple of important levels to that question. The first is under the banner of NATO. The UK Armed Forces—the Ministry of Defence—have to embed themselves wholeheartedly in NATO, in the command structure. We want



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our very best officers to think that the cream of the crop will go to a NATO command appointment, and the best staff officers will go to NATO staff. It is not some sort of second string. Armed Forces training must be focused on the major NATO events, not simply cleaving to the US or cleaving to a national agenda. That is an important cultural shift for many in the Armed Forces.

The second thing is that within the Ministry of Defence they have to establish a whole set of new internal relationships under the umbrella of defence reform. They have to change their structure, their process, the tempo at which they work and the risk aversion culture, particularly over money, or they will never deliver this review. A very big chunk of the review is about the new industrial partnership. For me, it is at least half the output of what we recommend. It touches on innovation, acquisition, manufacture, logistics, support and money.

The National Armaments Director, when he or she is appointed, will lead that organisation as one of the top four officials in the Ministry of Defence. We need industry to lean into that relationship, but we also need the Ministry of Defence to make that relationship work. If they do not energise the industrial partnership that we have laid out in conjunction with them, they will not deliver this review.

Lord Robertson: I agree. As I say, the guts of this review is to do with changing the whole mindset and the whole organisation of defence in a way that will, as I said at the beginning, inspire our friends, intimidate our enemies and involve industry, but make the country safer. That is what it is genuinely about, and the relationship with industry is crucial to it. Changing the culture and mindset inside the Ministry of Defence is going to be hugely important.

The European taxpayer does not get anything like the sort of \$300 billion or \$400 billion-worth of defence because of the competition between countries and between elements inside it. As General Barrons says, inside the British Ministry of Defence the new defence reform structure that John Healey is designing goes side by side with the review, in terms of giving the Chief of the Defence Staff much more executive control over the Armed Forces as a whole. With the creation of the National Armaments Director and the recommendations here, we could see much better value for the country and it being much safer as well.

Q46 **Michelle Scrogam:** Do you think they are equipped for the challenge of actually making those changes?

Lord Robertson: I think they are, yes, and they are up to the change. When we originally came into the Ministry of Defence, we were a surprise to them. They had geared up for a strategic defence review that would be done in the traditional way, so having external reviewers coming into the Department was a bit of a shock to the system, but they got used to it very quickly. We worked with them, not to them, and we have produced a report that they have embraced in its entirety. That is a very good sign of the way in which it will be implemented.

Q47 Michelle Scrogham: Dr Hill, areas of resilience often rely on other Government Departments, on industry and on wider society to make changes. How confident are you that changes can be achieved? What action do you think is needed to support that work?

Dr Hill: As I keep mentioning, we need dialogue. One element that I think produced some really interesting insights was that outreach to the public and the creation of the citizens panels. A couple of elements that came out of that are seeded throughout the report.

The first thing was that when members of the public engaged directly with the servicepeople that they met at the various bases they visited, they were deeply impressed by the people. This was an interesting element. It turned that they were not so interested in what equipment the military had—obviously, they wanted to see the Armed Forces properly equipped and supplied for the task at hand—but were deeply impressed by the dedication of the people, and they wanted there to be more support for the Armed Forces. For example, we got a lot of feedback that people want to have more engagement with the Armed Forces. That is an important message.

The other thing is that they were very impressed by their professionalism. As somebody who was essentially coming in from the outside, being mostly based in the United States, and engaging with people across the Ministry of Defence, I was also deeply impressed by the professionalism and sense of mission of the secretariat and the people we engaged with—all the people who took the time to submit evidence and respond to the proposals. As Members of Parliament, you should take it to heart that we have dedicated professionals who genuinely want to do something for the country and who see themselves as playing an important role.

The second element that came out of the citizens panels basically reflected what Lord Robertson talked about: the idea of life insurance, or personal liability insurance perhaps, for the country. One of the common refrains we heard from the citizens panels was that people want to feel better insured. There was a concern that we might be underinsured—that we are not doing enough for the defence of the nation. People really want to be part of that, and they want to be engaged in a dialogue.

That is an important way of addressing your question about how we move this forward. There has to be constant engagement. Obviously, as Members of Parliament, you can do that in your constituencies. Some of your constituencies are directly involved in the larger defence enterprise, but I think people across the country want to be involved in a larger dialogue. People are better informed than they are given credit for—that is something that really came out of the panels and the polling that we did.

I think that is an opportunity, and it is something we can use to move things forward. Britain is not geographically large. It has a very diverse and large population, but there are opportunities to have dialogue up and down the country using your constituency offices, parliamentary services and town halls, and thinking about other ways in which we can engage.

Q48 Chair: Lord Robertson, I want to come on to the fact that lots of ambitions are being highlighted. We want to significantly increase defence spending, and on creating a One Defence approach, you also say that the number of personnel should be increased—the number of active reserves should be increased by 20%, and the regulars should not decrease. However, at the same time, you say that civil service costs should come down by at least 10% by 2030. Do you think it is possible to manage more people, manage more pieces of kit and do more while cutting the civil service by at least 10%?

Lord Robertson: I think they can. I think efficiency is very much in the air. The use of people is very high up the agenda, so there is no reason why it cannot be done.

Q49 Lincoln Jopp: Lord Robertson, just a quick one on defence reform and the Department's huge challenge in following through on what it wants to do. They say that culture eats strategy for breakfast. My understanding is that part of the reform is to try to make the Department of State function more strategic and more policy-focused, leaving the military to get better at delivering the military effect.

Lord Robertson, you are a distinguished former Secretary of State. And General Barrons, you would have made a brilliant CDS. Do you have a word of advice to your successors in those roles on following through this cultural change? What advice do you have for the Secretary of State and the incoming CDS?

Lord Robertson: I will let Richard answer that first.

General Sir Richard Barrons: The defence reform model establishes the Department of State, a military strategic headquarters, a nuclear enterprise and a National Armaments Director group. My first observation is that the Department of State must be *primus inter pares*. There is nothing in there that should tinker with civil control of the military through money, but those four things are going to have to collaborate.

My second point is that, given the transformative menu set out in the review, this is going to start with clear, unequivocal, firm, robust leadership at the top. We will all be looking for that as they work through these changes this summer.

You touched on the sense that this is all very difficult and complicated. It may be both of those things, but I hear those words from people who may want to resist that kind of change. They have to see it as not optional, and they have to be held to account—first by Parliament and Ministers, and then by their own senior leaders. I would be surprised if everybody in the Ministry of Defence, in and out of uniform, makes this journey intact, but it is not optional. The pace can be a bit sporty, but it is not impossible. They should get on with it.

Lord Robertson: I recall when I was Defence Secretary, getting the then just-retired General Colin Powell to come and talk about how to deal with racialism in the Armed Forces. He stood up and asked "How do you change



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the direction of a column of ants? The answer is: step in the first 10." I kept reminding him of it later when he was Secretary of State. The whole question of leadership is important. What I said to the first meeting that we had with the 300 top people in the Ministry of Defence was that we have to get rid of the idea of business as usual. Our adversaries do not believe in business as usual, and we cannot afford to have business as usual. As Richard says, leadership from the top is going to be important. At the moment, we have got serious leadership at the top of the Ministry of Defence. I believe that John Healey is absolutely determined to make the defence reform proposals and the strategic defence review implementation work. Leadership is clearly what is required.

Q50 Mike Martin: How should we monitor and measure that implementation? Did you propose any metrics to the Department? General Barrons, you said that there was a role for Parliament in there. Do you think that the Department should be reporting back to Parliament on those metrics on a regular basis?

General Sir Richard Barrons: There are three good places to look. The first is the execution of NATO First; we should all be looking for signs of the Ministry of Defence leaning into NATO in the way that the review has prescribed.

Q51 Mike Martin: So if the carriers are in the Indian ocean, then that review has failed?

General Sir Richard Barrons: If it is going every four years to help Indo-Pacific strategic messaging, then everyone has signed up to that.

But what we expect to see are the Armed Forces leaning in: the Navy into the Atlantic Bastion; the Army into the strategic reserve corps, which will be the most transformative bit for land forces in Europe, based on the CGS' prescription; and the way the Air Force ties itself into the NATO air component. All of that will be very visible because you will see different training patterns and different appointments and that kind of thing.

Secondly, the Defence Secretary has set out defence reform, so we know what it is meant to look like and how it is meant to work. A few months down the track, it should be obvious whether that has happened or not.

Thirdly, which is slightly more difficult, the direction set by the SDR will be articulated into the defence investment strategy, which is not a public-facing document. That is essentially the giant spreadsheet that allocates actual money to actual programmes and executes the direction set by the review. If the defence investment plan reflects the direction of travel in the review, we are in a good place—provided it is then executed by defence reform. If it does not, then the review will have been neutered by some alternative programming exercise within the Ministry of Defence. All those things should be apparent to this Committee.

Q52 Mike Martin: Is there a role for regular reporting, Lord Robertson?

Lord Robertson: There should be. I believe in parliamentary democracy, and this Committee can ask for information on a regular basis. The whole

issue of readiness is central to what we are talking about here. There is no reason why the Committee should not get regular reports from the Secretary of State on the state of readiness of our Armed Forces.

Q53 Chair: Dr Hill, are you in agreement with that?

Dr Hill: Yes, absolutely. As I mentioned before, taking the public temperature will also be pretty critical. We will get a sense of what people think in response to this as well. There is easy-to-do polling and some focus groups with the public to get a sense of whether people themselves feel that Britain is more ready, or that there is a clearer articulation of the line of travel for defence.

Lord Robertson: The review makes a proposal for a national conversation, and we need to have a national conversation about security. If our defence expenditure is the premium on the insurance policy, people have to be engaged in that. The Prime Minister has embraced the idea of a national conversation. It has to be led from the top by all Ministers, and we all have to be engaged in that. We are not safe. That is the reality of today. People think they are safe; they are not safe. People thought they were safe in eastern Ukraine, and very suddenly they were not. People need to be reminded that the defence of the country is not just the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence or the people who happen to be in uniform at any particular time; it is the responsibility of all of us. If we are not safe, we need to pay the premium to be insured.

Q54 Mike Martin: As a member of the Committee, I welcome your comments that the Defence Committee has a role in that conversation. I note that you cleverly designed the review so that you can accelerate or decelerate depending on the assessed levels of threat and competence of our adversaries. Do you think the Defence Committee should also play a role in that?

Lord Robertson: I do not think we should decelerate, but we can accelerate depending on circumstances. On Monday this week, Secretary-General Rutte delivered a very blunt message to the British people: you either spend 5% or you start learning Russian. That is a pretty blunt message for the Secretary-General of a 32-nation alliance to come and deliver. We all have a responsibility of making sure that the recommendations here, which change everything inside the Ministry of Defence and the way defence is thought about, are implemented. The Committee has a responsibility as well.

Q55 Fred Thomas: Just to continue the theme about metrics and measuring the success of the review being executed, the SDR lays out that lethality will be improved by 10 times. General Barrons, what is lethality and how can we know if it has improved 10 times?

General Sir Richard Barrons: We do not want to be over-scientific about this but, very broadly, take an infantry company of about 100 people with the ability to see a certain distance and to affect targets with its weapons, as the Chief of the General Staff has outlined in the way that he implements what is called Project Asgard—the 20:40:40 mix. Ten years



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from now, a group that size should be able to see much further and be able to co-ordinate much greater fire, both organically—the stuff it has itself—and the things that it can call on. In very broad handfuls, that company should be able to destroy 10 times as much enemy in a fixed timeframe as it is capable of doing now. In many ways, that is more an attitude and an approach to technology than something that you can refine into an equation, but we will know it when we see it. The CGS has said that he regards that as a bit of a stretch target, which is a good thing. He knows perfectly well that not just the UK Army, but every first division army, is going to do that.

Q56 Fred Thomas: Thank you. On measuring success, Lord Robertson, can you give a sense of timing? How long until the UK should be sending the battle group that we currently send to Estonia capable of fighting with FPV drones?

Lord Robertson: I am not an expert in the field, so I cannot give you a technical answer to that.

Q57 Fred Thomas: It is a very major part of the SDR.

Lord Robertson: It is.

General Sir Richard Barrons: I am an expert in drones—self-confessed. It can do it now. It already has them now, but we want to be really careful about the question. We are seeing the primacy of drones in the way the war is turning out in Ukraine. We should be absolutely clear that the UK Armed Forces and NATO would not fight a war like Ukraine has to fight war. As you will well recognise, if you look back into history, there is the tussle between the improvised explosive device and counter-improvised explosive device—between the tank and the anti-tank missile. Drone technology is about to go through one of those cycles where counter-drone technology will reset the balance of drones in the battle. They will very definitely still be vital, but they will come in two shapes. They will come in the attritable ones—the big, expensive ones you want to come back—and then consumable ones. The last thing that you want is a warehouse full of increasingly obsolete consumable drones. You want the ability to get them made and update them, and particularly to update their electronic warfare capability, at the speed of the war you end up fighting. What we are really talking about is how that evolution of the Army—that battlegroup in Estonia—is a conceptual model for how the land orchestra of war is going to change. Drones will be a fundamentally important part of that, but they are not a magic bullet.

Lord Robertson: Now you see how this review team worked. You have a politician, a soldier and a foreign policy expert. The combination of the three of us has produced this report.

Chair: We can see it is a lethal combination.

Q58 Derek Twigg: First, I welcome your comments about the Committee being able to hold the MOD to account over readiness, because we have been denied that opportunity time and time again. I welcome that,

particularly coming from a former Secretary of State as distinguished as you, Lord Robertson. Dr Hill, during the course of the review, was there anything that really surprised you about the way the MOD does business?

Dr Hill: That is a very good question. As I said before, I was surprised, in a pleasant way, by how dedicated many of the staff were, and how willing they were to pitch in and think outside the box. That is not a negative surprise, but a positive one. As Lord Robertson and General Barrons have said, we were already quite aware of the deficiencies, because they are there in every modern army, be it that of the United States or of one of our European allies.

One thing does need to be emphasised. It is not quite in response to the question, but from thinking through what General Barrons said. We also need to posture not just the Committee but the general population much better for the time ahead. General Barrons has just talked about the importance of not fighting the last war, not thinking that any future war will be just like it is in Ukraine, and being able to innovate at speed. We also need to start to think about the skills of the public at large and how the country itself is postured. It is not just about the relationship with industry, as it is now, but thinking about upskilling and reskilling the population, about education, and about transportation and infrastructure. A lot of things need to be thought about and considered that are beyond the remit of the Ministry of Defence, or even of the Committee. As part of that national dialogue, most people might be surprised by how far-reaching this effort has to be. We touched on that when we looked at the NHS, and the link with defence medicine, for example. We looked at housing and accommodation, and transportation, as they link together for the Armed Forces, but education and people skills are critical. I hope that we do not lose sight of that as we move on with the discussions about readiness. Readiness depends on how ready the population, and the country as a whole, is to innovate and adapt to the constant changes both in warfare and the way that the country is postured. The issue of resilience is critical. We need to have a debate about how that manifests.

Chair: Brilliant, thank you.

Q59 **Jesse Norman:** Dr Hill's point on skills is absolutely right. The other point is what you might call dual-use companies: companies that might not be in the defence and security sector at the moment, but can produce military goods, if called on and required to, as in the Ventilator Challenge model. That is not something for now, but I would be interested to know what plans have been considered.

A point was made earlier about complacency and tacit opposition within the bureaucracy. I very much worry about that. Even, if I may dare to say, I was surprised by CDS's response yesterday when I put to him the Rutte quote about speaking Russian if we did not get to 5%. I got a much more pacific answer than the one that you have given, Lord Robertson. To come back to the issue of early response and readiness, do you, Lord Robertson and General Barrons, not think that the call to be on more of a pre-war footing is profoundly important? There are models, particularly in drone



technology, of assembly and programming in which you do not have to wait for something that will be obsolete when it is made. You can make it now, and programme it, arm it and get it moving—get it in flight, as it were—as an organisation and as a country, rather than delaying interminably for some future outcome that never occurs.

Lord Robertson: Your former colleague, Jeremy Quin, as part of the review, looked at the acquisition process. Fundamental reforms are baked into the strategic defence reform in order to make sure that we capture, at the earliest stages, the developments that are taking place. In that partnership with industry, we are producing a long-term relationship that will make sure that we are properly up to date. With the reforms that are in here, the way in which we look at procurement will radically change the way in which things are done at the moment.

Even though I had a background in this subject, I was shocked to realise how long it took get projects off the ground—six years between the project starting and the contract being placed, by which time things are out of date. The Ukrainians are showing how quickly things need to move. If we go down this route, things will be very—

Jesse Norman: They will be on their 10,000th iteration by that point. I think Dr Hill wanted to come in.

Dr Hill: I had one comment, just quickly. If there was a surprise, as Lord Robertson says, it is that timeframe that it takes to get something from contract to fulfilment. That is definitely an issue and that is about speeding things up.

I just wanted to make sure that, in terms of thinking about readiness and skills, it is not just technical ones. There was the quip about learning Russian to somebody who has been invested in studying Russian and Russia since the 1980s. I think it is very important for both our intelligence posture and our foreign policy posture to have people with the requisite language skills, not just relying on Duolingo, for example, for technical means of translation. It is about having people who are deeply skilled and deeply knowledgeable of a whole range of the challenges that we will be facing.

I urge the Committee to think about leaning into education writ large with language acquisition, and not just Russian and Chinese, but obviously Arabic and so on. That is also a very important part of the picture. We did talk about that also in the review. The UK's intelligence agencies are superb—first rate—as is, for example, the Foreign Office and its staff, but they will only be as good as the people and skills that we will be able to hire over the longer term.

Q60 **Alex Baker:** It is great to hear the ambition from you all, but it strikes me that delivery will depend on getting the foundations right. We had the CDS in front of us yesterday and we saw his commitment to reform. Given the aspects of defence reform, what do you consider to be the key dependencies for successful implementation of the SDR?



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Lord Robertson: We will know it when we see it. We will begin to see how the output is being determined. Implementation is very difficult in something like the Ministry of Defence, with the hundreds of thousands of people involved in it, but I think that the Secretary of State is absolutely determined to drive it. Leadership is going to count.

General Sir Richard Barrons: For me, it was an absolute joy to be back in the Ministry of Defence for the nine months. I found that some things really had not changed and that some things had. We do not want to lose the Minister of Defence's ability to do an absolutely brilliant job of admiring any problem from every conceivable angle, because it does develop real understanding. We absolutely want to acknowledge how well the MOD has done in response to operational circumstances. I would particularly single out the Chief of Defence Staff and his team for their work in supporting Ukraine. It has been globally pace-setting.

However, the Ministry of Defence has two habits that it needs to get rid of. First, it is extraordinarily risk-averse. It worries about spending public money, so it asserts a set of controls over it that mean that almost nothing ever happens. Secondly, it is a very complex organisation and it has fallen into the habit of thinking that basically everyone above the rank of lance corporal needs to agree to everything before anything happens. That has to go. That is acknowledged in defence reform with the creation of a new Department of State, the Military Strategic Headquarters and the National Armaments Director, and in the way all that is meant to work. We will be looking for signs that quality in admiring the problem is matched by quality of action, and that will become apparent quite quickly.

Lord Robertson: The Committee will be able to look at the outputs as well. When this is all over, I am going back on the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, so I will be watching, too.

Chair: Brilliant. General Barrons, when you last came to give evidence before us, you said that every strategic defence review in your lifetime had failed, generally within two years. I sincerely hope that that fate will not befall this SDR.

Lord Robertson, you are right that this Committee will be scrutinising the implementation of the strategic defence review. We may well call on all three of your good selves again to give evidence and monitor progress.

I am very grateful that all three external reviewers of the strategic defence review—Lord Robertson, General Barrons and Dr Hill—have made time for us. On behalf of the Committee, thank you so much for taking the time to engage in parliamentary scrutiny. I am sure it has made riveting viewing just before PMQs and the spending review today.