

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

Oral evidence: The National Security Strategy

Monday 20 October 2025

4.40 pm

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Members present: Lord Sedwill (in the Chair); Lord Boateng; Liam Byrne; Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi; Bill Esterson; Lord Hutton of Furness; Baroness Kidron; Lord Robathan; Andy Slaughter; Lord Tunncliffe; Baroness Tyler of Enfield; Lord Watts; Sir Gavin Williamson.

In the absence of Matt Western, Lord Sedwill took the Chair.

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Public

Questions 53 - 72

Witnesses

I: Rose Gottemoeller, former Deputy Secretary General, NATO (2016-2019) and Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, US State Department (2012-2016); Dr Marion Messmer, Senior Research Fellow, International Security Programme at Chatham House and former co-director at BASIC (nuclear risk reduction and disarmament).

II: Asoke Mukerji, Former Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations (2013-2015) and Deputy High Commissioner of India to the UK (2007-2010); Will Todman, Chief of Staff, Geopolitics and Foreign Policy Department and Senior Fellow, Middle East Programme, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Examination of witnesses

Rose Gottemoeller and Dr Marion Messmer.

Q53 The Chair: Welcome to today's meeting of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. We are holding an evidence session on pillar 2 of the UK's national security strategy, focusing on the UK's strength abroad and, in particular, the nuclear deterrent, nuclear proliferation and technology co-operation. We have two panels; the first is with Ambassador Rose Gottemoeller and Dr Marion Messmer. First, I ask our two witnesses to introduce themselves, and then we will come to questions. Can we start with you, Ambassador?

Rose Gottemoeller: Thank you very much. I am greatly honoured to appear before this committee. I am the William J Perry lecturer at Stanford University and a research fellow at the Hoover Institution of

Stanford University. Prior to this position, I was the Deputy Secretary-General of NATO in Brussels, and prior to that I was the US Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security with responsibility for arms control, non-proliferation and political-military affairs. During my time in the State Department working for President Obama, I was the chief US negotiator of the New START treaty with the Russian Federation.

The Chair: Those credentials speak for themselves. Thank you very much for joining us. Dr Messmer?

Dr Marion Messmer: Thank you very much. I too start by thanking the committee for inviting me to speak to you today. I am a senior research fellow in the International Security Programme at Chatham House, where my research looks at modern deterrence questions. That includes conventional as well as nuclear deterrence, and I am increasingly interested in how European states especially can make the most out of their capability investments to strengthen deterrence overall. Prior to joining Chatham House, I was co-director of BASIC, where I was working on nuclear risk reduction and disarmament questions. Prior to that, I wrote a PhD on NATO-Russia co-operation at King's College London.

Q54 **The Chair:** You are both very welcome; thank you for your time today. We have about 40 minutes for this session because of votes. We hope we will not be interrupted, but I encourage committee members and those responding to keep the questions and answers fairly brisk. Of course, our witnesses may follow up in writing, should you wish to develop any points further or provide any further evidence.

I will start. I will put this question to you both, but perhaps we could start with you, Ambassador Gottemoeller. The UK's national security strategy describes nuclear weapons as having "increasing salience ... in the policies, doctrines and approaches of our adversaries". The strategic defence review also warns of "new and more complex pathways to escalation". Could you reflect for us on how that affects the security threats and what those pathways might look like? What is nuclear doctrine in this more complex age?

Rose Gottemoeller: Starting with the strategy, I note that in addition it says that "The foundations of strategic stability are being challenged" and that more states will have more nuclear weapons, expecting "further proliferation of nuclear and disruptive technology, and the failure of international arms control arrangements". I believe that we are at a time where we need to be thinking ahead and thinking hard about the role of further control of nuclear weapons, whether it is in the non-proliferation treaty regime or in arms control negotiations and the possibility of further arms control agreements with both the Russian Federation and China. China is rapidly modernising now, building up its nuclear forces in a way that we did not expect to see only a decade ago.

So, honestly, we are in a whole new era in terms of the geopolitics of the situation, with China becoming, as the United States considers it,

potentially a second nuclear peer. But we also have the issue of further proliferation among states: further states acquiring nuclear weapons, including so-called friendly proliferation among allies of the United States who may feel that they should consider the acquisition of nuclear weapons to bolster their own security and stability.

These are all difficult and dangerous trends for preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons and, as you put it, Chairman, the further emphasis on nuclear weapons. The security strategy pushes in that direction but it also points out the wide array of conventional threats that we will face. We have to make some tough decisions about whether we try to continue to control the nuclear bomb or let it run free.

The Chair: Thank you. Could you say something about those other pathways to escalation—the interaction between the nuclear and conventional and indeed modern unconventional weaponry?

Rose Gottemoeller: I have been concerned that some of the new technologies that are emerging, particularly the enhanced sensing capabilities that will emerge in the next two decades with the advent of quantum sensing, as well as the ability to further develop the means to analyse massive amounts of information flowing off sensing systems, will begin to pose a threat to mobile nuclear systems that have been at the heart of our nuclear retaliatory forces—our insurance policy. To be honest, Chairman, I do not believe that we are facing any time soon the vulnerability of submarine-based nuclear deterrence. But for those countries that deploy mobile ICBMs, for example, I think that there will be enhanced sensing capabilities and the ability to rapidly track and trace even mobile targets. These are big problems. Again, they are not for tomorrow but for within the next two to three decades, I believe.

The Chair: Dr Messmer?

Dr Marion Messmer: To add to what Rose Gottemoeller just said, I would look at the threat development in the short, medium and long term. In the short term, the biggest challenge for the United Kingdom and other European allies and partners is that the risk from Russia has increased significantly while, as the national security strategy points out, capabilities have not necessarily kept up with that. It seems to me that one of the biggest challenges for policymakers is essentially this tension around the need to make the right investments at the right time.

From how Russian policy seems to have adjusted and from the signalling that we see from the Russian Government, we can see that there are certain conventional investments that Russia is, in fact, paying very close attention to, such as long-range precision strike systems. In my mind, for the medium and longer term, what we are going to see is essentially perhaps asymmetric opportunities both to strengthen deterrence and to engage in future arms control. Arms control opportunities are likely going to be more in the medium to long term. Especially when we look at the relationship with Russia, we would need to see a significant change in the current Government in order to be able to engage, or at the very least a

significant change in Russia's security posture. Until we are at that point, I do not necessarily see us being able to get to any new arms control agreements. But with regard to strengthening deterrence, there are shorter-term steps that European states are already taking and can continue to take that will hopefully get us to some sort of new strategic stability arrangement in the European continent.

As for other nuclear threats that I would highlight, we are essentially looking at a much more complex web of nuclear relationships. One of the things that I have found really interesting recently is the new defence arrangement between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia that allegedly also has a nuclear extended deterrence component to it. That means that, if we are looking at southern Asia, we are now looking at essentially a nuclear stand-off between India, Pakistan, China and potentially then extending to Saudi Arabia. We can take from that essentially that, even though in Europe we are very much focused on Russia in the short to medium term and perhaps on China in the longer term, there are other nuclear armed states globally that we probably cannot ignore when it comes to the threat that they pose—in huge part because, even if the United Kingdom was not directly involved in a nuclear escalation between India and Pakistan, if it was to come to nuclear war in that region, the impact of that would be felt globally. So in that sense we are essentially looking at a very complex web of relationships, and there are some really important choices that the UK needs to make for its own security. At the same time, however, it should not neglect other relationships with states where it could influence other security dilemmas.

The Chair: Thank you very much—that is really helpful.

Q55 **Lord Robathan:** I will lead on from that directly, really. I am old enough to have grown up with mutually assured destruction—one or two other people may remember that—and it seemed quite nice and calm. Now we are talking about the possibility of tactical nuclear weapons being used by Russia against Ukraine—whether or not there is any truth to that, I have no idea—and we have heard about difficult and dangerous trends and further controls being needed. Well, the question is: as things have changed and taboos have changed, does lower-level aggression with nuclear weapons seem more or less likely?

Rose Gottemoeller: If I may, Chairman, perhaps I will begin, and I am very interested to hear what Dr Messmer has to say as well. The member, I believe, is referring to the crisis that we truly faced in the autumn of 2022, when it seemed possible that the Russian Federation would use nuclear weapons. I know that US intelligence, at least in terms of news reports—media reports I have seen—thought that there was a 50:50 chance that nuclear weapons might be used in Ukraine by Russia as a tactical mechanism or tool to try to halt the advance of the Ukrainian army when it had the Russian army on the run. Again according to reports, evidently the military in the Russian Federation was able to convince the political leadership that this was not a good idea. I want to use this opportunity to point again to the reasons why we moved away from nuclear war fighting in the 1960s and 1970s. That is because

nuclear weapons create not only immediate damage, but also radiation contamination and difficulties for troops to operate. From an operational perspective, they are simply not a practical war-fighting tool. They produce long-term damage in the kind of radiation contamination that occurs.

I have read reports, which I believe, that the message to the Kremlin was simply that this was not going to buy the advantage hoped for, and furthermore it would break this longstanding taboo. Russia already these days is very much a pariah state, but truly this would make it a global pariah state, with states that have been very committed to maintaining and sustaining nuclear-free zones across the southern hemisphere finally turning against Moscow. A number of considerations come into play. It is not only related to the threat to the nuclear taboo, rightly pointed to, but also the fact that we learned these lessons hard in the 1960s and 1970s, and so have backed away from these kinds of investments, plans and views of useful tactics. They simply do not buy advantage on the battlefield.

Dr Marion Messmer: I agree with that assessment. Tactical nuclear weapons have captured the imagination because they are something that Russia has and, frankly, the United Kingdom does not. But I agree essentially that it is very difficult to think of a way of actually using them in a conflict situation. I worry that this is perhaps a bit of a legacy of Russian thinking that stems from a time when Russian conventional forces were in a much poorer state than they are now, when there was a concern that Russia would be much quicker to go to tactical nuclear weapons simply because they did not have any other options.

Q56 **Baroness Kidron:** Ambassador, you started to talk a bit about sensing systems and quantum and what you felt was coming up in the next two to three decades. I am just curious for you to sort of build on that a bit and talk about the risks around emerging technologies undermining the nuclear capability, and really what steps we need to be thinking about to mitigate those risks in the earlier part of those two to three decades. Then I was hoping that you would speak a little bit more broadly about the sort of democratisation of access to dangerous capabilities that might manifest in other ways.

Rose Gottemoeller: Very good, ma'am, and thank you for your question. It is a complicated issue, and one that I have been thinking about quite a bit. I talked about the potential threat that could emerge to the reliability of second-strike deterrence, but I and many people are concerned about the possibility of meddling in nuclear command and control that could occur because of the artificial intelligence tools that may emerge. This is one of those Hollywood kinds of scenarios that people have been wrestling with quite a bit, but it makes sense to wrestle with the issue, to focus on it, and to have leaders focus on it. I was glad when President Joe Biden got Xi Jinping, the President of China, to agree that there should always be a person in the loop for nuclear command and control. These are the kinds of steps that nations need to be taking

and need to build on, and the kinds of steps that we need to have robust strategic stability discussions about.

I note that in the so-called P5 process, which involves the UK and France as well as Russia, China and the United States—the nuclear weapon states under the non-proliferation treaty—there were efforts in the past year to focus on these very future-oriented issues and to try to get states to recognise the threat coming at us and to think ahead about the normative superstructure we need to put in place. Then, potentially over time, I would not exclude the notion of some kind of negotiated measures that would have more technical aspects to them—that is, verification and monitoring of those kinds of limitations or controls.

We need to be creative. It is very difficult to imagine these days those kinds of technical controls, but we need to work hard to figure out what is in our best interest. Honestly, is it to again let these developments run free, or to try to think about ways to steer them or, as we sometimes say, to place guardrails around them? That would be my focus in terms of weapons of mass destruction.

You asked me to comment on other possible areas where threats may be emerging, linked to new technologies. Let me take this opportunity to say that, as far as weapons of mass destruction are concerned, my view is in future that the biggest boost to new technology in these arenas will be in the biological and chemical arenas—so-called new biotech—and there is a crossover between biology and chemistry when we think about the future of these fields. The potential for malign actors in these areas is great. I was glad to see that the national security strategy mentioned biology and chemistry as areas where weapons of mass destruction developments may occur. I will use this opportunity to say that I would have liked to have seen a little more attention paid to the potential for new controls on nuclear weapons, but the strategy was silent on that question.

Dr Marion Messmer: I agree with everything that has been said. Another likely challenge from AI that we are already seeing is essentially an influenced or poisoned information environment that makes it much harder to assess what is really happening and to draw the right conclusions from it. That affects decision-makers just as much as the general public. The national security strategy talks quite a lot about resilience and population resilience, and this is one of the areas where urgent action is needed. If the information environment is poisoned in a democracy then that leads to severe consequences and it makes it that much harder for political leaders to make the right decisions.

On the democratisation of access, the national security strategy rightly points out that there might be a growing threat from non-state actors as well as state actors. We are already seeing some of these trends. One of the technologies that has become vastly easier to procure is missile technology. That is not necessarily related to weapons of mass destruction, but it is one of those technologies where we can see how conflict is changing and how new actors can now use almost the same technology as state actors. The other is of course drone technology,

where you can see that, even with commercially accessible drones, it is easy for a range of actors to put together quite sophisticated attacks. Drawing the bridge on what could be done to remedy that, we know that the UK and wider Europe do not have enough traditional missile defence or drone defence technologies, so we need both national thinking and joined-up thinking across Europe to remedy some of that.

Baroness Kidron: On your point about the poisoned information system, where do you see that conversation happening and where do you see mitigation against that possibility happening? In what arena?

Dr Marion Messmer: That is a really big conversation and there would need to be various layers to it. There needs to be greater awareness among the public that this is a threat to begin with, but you would need to target specific interventions at different groups of people. There is something to be done at different levels, including elite levels, whether CEOs of companies, university professors or indeed parliamentarians, just because those are people who make quite important decisions and need to be able to assess information accurately. At the same time, we need to look at, for example, how journalists are consuming information and where evidence is coming from. Another element would need to be the greater regulation of social media channels. We need to make sure that there is a clear, trusted pipeline of information that is accessible, or at the very least that everyone in society is much more critical about the information that they are consuming and better able to verify whether or not something is accurate.

Q57 **Lord Watts:** What are the long-term risks to the credibility of the nuclear deterrent? Do you have a view about whether it is feasible for the Dreadnought subs to come on and serve us by 2030? How could we strengthen NATO's deterrence? Those are three questions in one, but because of the time I have put them that way.

Dr Marion Messmer: Some of the long-term challenges to the credibility of the nuclear deterrent have a lot to do with perception. Of course the actual capabilities are important, but in thinking about that question I was thinking about a range of different impacts. On the one hand, there is the impact of the failed Trident test in February 2024, and then there is the impact of the Vanguard submarines being longer at sea and then returning to port with visible damage and needing to be serviced more frequently. Then there is what we know about the Dreadnought replacement programme and the warhead replacement programme.

Importantly, whenever we talk about deterrence, how it is perceived by potential adversaries is very important. Something that I find interesting in that regard is how, among the Russian public, the UK, NATO, France and various aspects of deterrence capabilities are spoken about. If we assess all these aspects separately, we know that Russia really cares about the fact that UK nuclear weapons are dedicated to NATO and are part of NATO's extended deterrence capability; they see that as something that they need to pay attention to. We have seen that, as France has thought about what role its nuclear weapons play for

European deterrence, the Russian media conversation about France has shifted significantly. So, if we are weighing up pros and cons, that is a plus in long-term deterrence capabilities.

However, I am afraid that the failed Trident test in February 2024 would be seen as a weakness. Even though the US has of course conducted lots of successful tests, the track record for UK tests is a lot less strong, and that cannot be explained away simply by saying that the missiles are part of the same pool, because deterrence has so much to do with perception as well. Similarly, the Vanguard submarines staying at sea longer, and returning with barnacles on them or whatever, is also not necessarily a show of strength in nuclear deterrence.

What does that mean for the UK? As the UK is thinking about how to invest in various deterrence capabilities, messaging is a really big part of that. Showing that NATO joined-up European deterrence thinking is at the forefront of UK thought is going to be really important, but it is also important that the Dreadnought replacement programme works well and that the submarines can be delivered as close to schedule as possible. As far as I know, they are still on schedule, but the history of large-scale defence industrial projects in the UK shows that they are often not delivered on time and schedule overruns are quite common, so, given that the delivery deadline is still a little while away, I wonder whether we are going to be able to deliver on time. Given that we know that shipyards are facing challenges, this is one of those areas where the earlier that investments can take place, the better.

Lastly, on the last aspect of your question, there is an interesting intersection between industrial policy, skills policy and investment. Something that struck me when I looked at the national security strategy was that it points out that it wants the UK to be a leader in all sorts of technologies and capabilities, but look at the extent to which the university sector in the UK is struggling at the moment. That is a crucial part of being able to deliver on those various aspects because it is where a lot of the skilled workforce is going to come from when it comes to engineers, investment in new start-ups and so on. So a big challenge that the UK faces is that lots of these challenges are incredibly integrated, and you cannot necessarily solve them just by investing in one aspect of it. A much more holistic approach is needed.

Rose Gottemoeller: That was a comprehensive answer, and I will depend on it for my own response about the state of the UK programmes because I am much less up to date on them than I am about the US triad modernisation, which is also under pressure. We are hoping to see the first of the Ohio-class replacements by mid-2035, but it is under pressure and there is no question about it: the investments have to be there and, indeed, the workforce.

I want to reflect a bit more on the extended nuclear deterrent and what has been done, since the national security strategy rightly points out that transactionalism is due to increase and that states are relying more on pragmatic deals rather than, of necessity, extending their guarantees and

policy. Dr Messmer is quite right that the reliability of extended nuclear deterrent guarantees is a matter of perception, so it is very important to think about, in this era of greater transactionalism, how to ensure the reliability of the extended nuclear deterrent in Europe.

I applaud the UK and France for various steps that have been taken together, and the strategy makes note of the fact that the Lancaster House agreements are being bolstered in preparation for a UK-France summit meeting coming up in 2025. I know that the Lancaster House agreements have served the nuclear programmes of both countries well, and that is an aspect that will continue to bolster the reliability of the nuclear deterrent.

At the moment, the extended nuclear deterrent capabilities deployed in Europe are in top condition. The United States completed the modernisation of the so-called B61-12 warhead. All those warheads are now deployed in Europe. The storage and handling facilities have been upgraded at considerable cost. All NATO allies that are basing states have agreed to purchase the F35 and some of them, such as those in the Netherlands, have already been certified for the so-called dual capable mission.

It is important that NATO continues to project, as one, the reliability of the nuclear deterrent. I am glad that the exercise Steadfast Noon took place last week. It is very important, again, to colour the view that the nuclear deterrent in Europe is alive and well and that extended nuclear deterrence continues to be viable and strong. But there is no question, with this greater transactionalism in the alliance, that it will be important for the UK and France, as the other nuclear weapon states in the NATO alliance, to continue to strengthen their roles. I have been glad that the UK has been willing to do so along with France in the past year.

Q58 Lord Watts: Can you clarify how independent the systems are, because they seem to be somewhat reliant on American co-operation?

Rose Gottemoeller: The French have always said, of course, that their nuclear deterrent is for the defence of France. President Macron has recently been talking more about extending nuclear deterrence guarantees to NATO allies, including Germany. The UK sustains its independent command and control decision-making, with nuclear use decisions belonging very much to the Prime Minister—as, of course, in the United States of America, where the final nuclear use decision belongs to the President of the United States.

The US declaratory doctrine under this Administration has been, as far as we know, as follows. Mr Hegseth, the Secretary of War, stated in February that the European allies would be responsible for conventional defence in Europe, and the United States would remain responsible for the extended nuclear deterrent and for decisions that would have to be made in that regard. We must rely on that statement. As I said, the alliance is showing very well, in the way in which it is training, exercising and deploying nuclear weapons, that capability and capacity are

available. But it is up to decision-making in the individual capitals of the nuclear weapon states in the alliance as to how and when nuclear weapons would be employed.

The Chair: We are quite short of time; could both witnesses please keep their answers quite brisk? That would be very kind.

Q59 **Lord Tunncliffe:** The UK independent deterrent is stuck on the top of an American missile. Can we have confidence that the lease programme will continue indefinitely?

Dr Marion Messmer: This agreement is essentially protected through the UK-US defence agreement, which is one of the longest-standing nuclear co-operation treaties—certainly between the UK and the US but also globally. That treaty was strengthened in November or December 2024, just towards the end of President Biden's term in office. It is my understanding that, at least from a legal perspective, it is a difficult agreement to get out of, but you are right that the threat to the continuity of the UK's nuclear deterrence capability is, of course, the servicing of the Trident missiles. If they could not be serviced in the long term, the UK would not be able to field Trident missiles.

Rose Gottemoeller: As part of the triad modernisation in the United States, all due attention is being given to the modernisation of the Trident missiles. I personally feel confident that not only are the missiles in a modernisation process that will continue but the US-UK nuclear co-operation agreement and the agreement with regard to the Trident missiles will remain and continue as they have for many decades.

I also mention the advent of the so-called AUKUS programme, which perhaps is not apropos to this discussion today but nevertheless is noted as being part of the UK's outreach to other parts and regions of the world where there are important alliance relationships. I believe that the AUKUS programme and the submarine construction programme that goes with it bolster the overall co-operation between the UK and the United States.

Q60 **Lord Robathan:** You have answered the following questions to a certain extent already. In particular, ambassador, you talked about the commitment of the UK and indeed the western alliance to nuclear weapons. I am really interested in proliferation, which you also mentioned, ambassador—small countries getting nuclear weapons. When I say small countries, I mean other countries getting nuclear weapons, which we would probably rather they did not have.

First, I ask you both what would be the potential consequence to UK security if international constraints fail and there is proliferation, which is what we have been talking about? In particular, could you look at the insecurity that would drive UK allies to start developing their own nuclear weapons, as you talked about, ambassador? What more could the UK do—probably in alliance with America and possibly France—to reassure our allies that such proliferation is unnecessary?

Rose Gottemoeller: Let me refer to a bipartisan task force that I recently served on, chaired by Tino Cuéllar, Ernest Moniz and Meghan O’Sullivan from, respectively, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Nuclear Threat Initiative and Harvard University’s Belfer Center. We came up with a report, *Preventing an Era of Nuclear Anarchy: Nuclear Proliferation and American Security*. Nuclear anarchy, in my view, would apply to global states worldwide and certainly to US friends and allies.

I underscore the main message of that report: we should be looking for ways to reassure our allies and partners so that friendly proliferation, as it has come to be known, does not become a trend. To be honest, I would like to have seen that message in the UK national security strategy; it was not present. There was a mention of the advent of further nuclear proliferation, but no mention of the necessity, for example, of bolstering the non-proliferation treaty regime or of looking for other ways to strengthen the work of the International Atomic Energy Agency, especially as we move into an era of enhanced attention to and innovation in the area of nuclear energy. These, of course, are important trends for further access to electricity generation from nuclear power, but we also have to ensure that the new reactors are proliferation-resistant.

We are not hopeless or helpless in this regard, but we need to pay attention. The reassurance that the US, the UK and France can provide to the other allies is the first order of business, but we should also be paying attention to the strengthening and bolstering of the non-proliferation regime.

Dr Marion Messmer: US extended deterrence has played a significant role previously in ensuring that other European states did not want to develop nuclear weapons. Given that we have seen the UK decision to join the dual-capable aircraft programme, if there was a serious threat that non-nuclear weapon states within NATO were currently considering developing nuclear weapons then figuring out whether extending the DCA programme to them could be one easy step to take that could hopefully discourage them from proliferating. In addition, I acknowledge that Ambassador Gottemoeller pointed out the extent to which we can currently rely on US extended deterrence in Europe, but if there is any further concern that that might not remain as stable in the future, then the UK and France could present some more serious options as to what they could do together in order to provide extended deterrence for NATO.

Q61 **Lord Hutton of Furness:** Let us turn our attention to the future of collective security in Europe and the balance between nuclear and conventional forces. How would you rate the UK’s efforts to reduce the need for nuclear responses by boosting conventional military capabilities through, for example, deeper collaboration with the European Union? Is this a sensible thing for us to be doing?

Rose Gottemoeller: This has been a long-term trend. I should have noted earlier that, as far as NATO policy is concerned, NATO believes that the potential to use nuclear weapons is extremely remote and would

come about only as the result of a nuclear attack on a NATO target, and we need to keep it that way. Nuclear weapons being used would be an enormous catastrophe, and we need to ensure that that potential remains extremely remote. We do that by bolstering and strengthening conventional capabilities and capacities throughout the NATO alliance.

Frankly, I welcome the co-operation that the UK has underlined with the European Union, because it can do a lot to address the issues that we have seen in the defence industrial base as we have been trying to assist Ukraine throughout these three years of war. The defence industrial base throughout Europe—the UK being among the strongest, of course—needs modernisation and upgrading. It needs attention to technology and innovation, and it needs the ability to handle serial production in a way that may and will be needed should Russia continue in its aggression. So I applaud the notion of deeper co-operation between the UK and the EU, as it can be very valuable.

Dr Marion Messmer: I agree with that. Something that the national security strategy could have done better is to focus much more on conventional deterrence and how to acquire those deterrence capabilities. Something that concerns me in the UK's approach—the UK is not alone in this; several other European countries do this as well—is trying this dual approach where on the one hand there is an awareness that stronger conventional deterrence is needed, but on the other hand any defence procurement is also meant to help with strengthening the economy overall and providing all these secondary benefits. Unfortunately, we know from military procurement research that the more requirements you have for your procurement—not just procuring the capability as such—the greater the risk that the procurement is going to overrun, whether in time or cost. While I completely understand why there is an emphasis on also strengthening the economy and economic performance, given the security challenge that we are in, the focus ought to be on procuring the best systems that can handle what we require them to when it comes to conventional deterrence.

Q62 Baroness Tyler of Enfield: To press a little further on the issue of deepening collective security in Europe, in your opinion how realistic would it be for the UK to reduce its strategic dependence on the US—for example, through new nuclear partnerships with France? Secondly, will the new strategic defence partnership between UK and the EU bring any strategic value that the UK does not already receive through its work with NATO?

Rose Gottemoeller: Again, I point to what I see as the great advantage of the US-EU partnership—that is, the defence industrial base but also the modernisation of infrastructure that will have to continue to occur. I know that the continued modernisation of transportation and communication infrastructures is very much part of the 5% of GDP commitment to NATO, so it will be vital for the UK and the EU to work together on that so as to have a holistic approach to the modernisation of these infrastructures—road and rail networks, for example—in Europe.

The partnership will be not only practical but that co-operation will be vital to the future of defence capacity in Europe.

However, I do not see it by any means as being at the cost of US-UK co-operation and the traditions that we spoke about a moment ago—the long-standing nuclear co-operation and missile co-operation between our two countries—but I like the fact that the national security strategy pointed to the necessity of continuing to build up co-operation with the United States and taking advantage of the innovation and technology co-operation that may be further strengthened by enhancing that co-operation.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: I want to press you on that point. Do you feel there is any danger, in the UK trying to rebalance its strategic relationships with Europe and the US, of ending up with a shallow relationship with each that is not deep enough in either case?

Rose Gottemoeller: I take your point but, again, I see the deep legacy of US-UK relations continuing to serve both our countries well. As far as the EU is concerned, since the exit of the UK from the EU, and certainly when I was DSG, it was very clear to NATO that the UK was working really strongly and intensively with NATO to ensure a strong relationship there. Obviously we have many parallel members in both NATO and the EU, many of them, so it seems natural to me that the UK would now redouble its efforts to co-operate with the EU as well on defence matters, particularly, as I said, as we are looking at 5% of GDP, with 1.5% of that being spent on infrastructure improvements that will benefit all of Europe.

Dr Marion Messmer: I agree with what has been said. I think of co-operation with France or other European states as adding to the relationship with the US rather than replacing it, in part because it is good for the UK to hedge and in part because we have noted a range of European capabilities that are required, regardless of what the United States wants to do. In addition to nuclear, for example, I would add space technologies to the table, and France would be a great partner for the UK in that regard, as would Germany.

What advantages is the UK getting from working with the EU that it is not getting from NATO? Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU and NATO have come to a fairly good split in terms of their responsibilities. The EU is focusing a lot on funding various defence projects and funding the expansion of the defence industrial base. It is important that the UK work with the EU in that regard so that the UK defence industry has access to those same programmes. The EU is also working out what a single market, especially for defence companies, can look like. Again, it is important to ensure that UK companies also have access to that market. When it comes to industrial co-operation and funding and access to the European single market, those are important aspects that the UK can primarily get from the EU rather than from NATO.

The Chair: That is a neat segue into our final topic.

Q63 Lord Boateng: The UK's national security strategy is, to put it kindly, light on references to Africa. United States Africa Command is in fact based in Europe, in Stuttgart. The UK and France have certain vital strategic and indeed historical interests on the continent. Looking at the impact of migration, events in Africa impact hugely on the security of our borders in Europe. If you look at vital supply lines in terms of minerals and indeed rare minerals, Africa is of importance. The People's Liberation Army is the fastest growing military presence in Africa. Could you elaborate a bit on how you see Africa in all of this. Where and should the Government be prioritising closer co-operation with the EU on defence and security in relation to that continent?

Dr Marion Messmer: One of my regrets when looking through the national security strategy was seeing the trade-off that is seen between some of the UK's aid and development investments and the security investments. I mentioned earlier the framework of looking at short-term, medium and long-term threats. One of the big dangers in the national security strategy is that we are setting ourselves up for future problems at the expense of current problems.

You mentioned the large Chinese presence across Africa. We also should not underestimate the Russian presence in Africa and Russian strategic interests there as well. My worry is that the UK is one of many European states that is essentially, by and large, withdrawing from working with various African nations and leaving a lot of diplomatic space open to Russia and China. We are already seeing the impact of that at the United Nations and in other multilateral fora.

You mentioned a range of security risks that already exist for us. Although I completely understand the need to prioritise and the fact that there is a limited budget, this is perhaps not necessarily the best trade-off, simply because it is already evident that there will be many challenges coming at us in the future. In a report that came out in April this year, I made some recommendations around how European Governments could essentially work more closely together to leverage their budgets, which would be much greater if they were put together, and to better co-ordinate what they focus on. So, for example, if the UK has a special relationship with one country and France has a special relationship with another country, they can co-ordinate on the diplomatic relationships they have to have a greater impact overall.

Q64 Lord Boateng: Ambassador Gottemoeller, the Wagner Group has, in effect, kicked the French out of much of the Sahel. Clearly, this is of concern to the US. Can you help us with that?

Rose Gottemoeller: I wish I could but, honestly, the Wagner Group, now called the Africa Corps, is indeed riding roughshod over any notion of principled governance in West Africa. It concerns me very much indeed that both Russia and China are really quite dominant in their influence in the region now.

I have to be very honest that I have been very sad and concerned at the way the current Administration in Washington has dismembered our aid and assistance programmes throughout the world, especially in Africa where treatment for AIDS, for example, has rapidly deteriorated due to the withdrawal of USAID from Africa. I note that personal concern of mine, which is very strongly felt.

I also took note last week of what I considered to be an important commentary in the *Financial Times*, which said that NATO and the European Union, as two institutions working together, should be focusing further—and I am not proposing that NATO take its military forces to Africa; the alliance has many partners in Africa—on playing a global role in terms of assisting countries in Africa, with the European Union, with its assistance budget, able to perhaps step into the breach where some programmes have been closed by the United States. The institutions of Europe, both NATO and the European Union, should be also thinking in terms of the global role they can play in countering Chinese and Russian dominance in the global South and particularly in Africa. This takes us back to our previous discussion. I think UK co-operation with the EU could be a force multiplier in this regard.

The Chair: That concludes our first session. I thank both our witnesses, Ambassador Gottemoeller and Dr Messmer, for some fascinating and very rich testimony. If there is anything further that you want to provide to the committee in writing, we would welcome that. With that, I close our first session. We will take a short break before moving to the second.

Examination of witnesses

Asoke Mukerji and Will Todman.

Q65 **The Chair:** Welcome back to today's meeting of the Joint Committee's scrutiny of pillar 2 of the national security strategy. We are joined by Will Todman and Ambassador Mukerji. Will you both introduce yourselves briefly, starting with you, ambassador?

Asoke Mukerji: Thank you for inviting me to this committee session. I was India's ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations. Prior to that, I served in London as the deputy high commissioner. I was in the Russian Federation as the deputy chief of mission. I have also served in Central Asia, in the United Arab Emirates and in the World Trade Organization as a trade negotiator. Currently, I am a distinguished fellow at the Vivekananda International Foundation think tank in New Delhi, and I am on the faculty of a non-profit organisation called DiploFoundation, which focuses on capacity building for young professional diplomats.

The Chair: Thank you for joining us today. Mr Todman?

Will Todman: Thank you so much for inviting me today. I am chief of staff for the geopolitics and foreign policy department and a senior fellow in the Middle East programme at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS, which is an independent and non-partisan think tank in Washington DC. I should say that everything I say today is my own opinion. Most of my work in the Middle East has focused on the drivers of instability in the region, conflict-affected states and challenges of governance.

Q66 **The Chair:** Thank you. I will start with you, Mr Todman. There is a bit of a fashion in some parts of the Administration of suggesting that the Europeans should focus on the Euro-Atlantic, America's Pacific allies should focus on the Indo-Pacific, and the two should not really mix. Yet, in our national security strategy, we talk about co-dependence interconnectedness and so on. Will you give us your perspective on that, please?

Will Todman: The national security strategy is absolutely right when it talks about these different theatres being connected. First, the Middle East as a region has been shown to be deeply interconnected over the last two years. Following the attacks of 7 October, Israel has conducted attacks on six or seven countries across the region. Of course, the US joined with that in Iran. The Houthis have been attacking shipping lanes. Because of that, the consequences of what happens in the Middle East have, necessarily, rippled into other theatres and it becomes very difficult to separate them.

The attacks on the shipping lanes have affected global commercial interests, supply chains and energy flows, which has of course affected the UK. We have seen the instability in the Middle East fuelling waves of

irregular migration, which has roiled politics across Europe as well as in the US.

The connections play out in some interesting ways. Take Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The fact that Russia focused more of its forces on Ukraine contributed to the openings that the Syrian rebels identified last December when they launched the offensive against the Assad regime that ultimately toppled it in a matter of days. As well as that, we now see Iran supplying weapons to support Russia's efforts in Ukraine—both missiles and drones. Some of my colleagues at CSIS have been doing work on the so-called CRINK axis, a horrible acronym for China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. Although our determination is that this does not truly represent an axis yet, the deepening bilateral ties between these four partners have real security consequences for the US and for European security more broadly. I am very happy to talk more about that, if it is of interest.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Ambassador Mukerji, you have served in most of these regions, so please give us your perspective on this question of disaggregation versus interconnectedness.

Asoke Mukerji: When I read the national security strategy document, I was a bit puzzled by the connection between the transatlantic and the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific has been driven since 2017 by a set of drivers, primarily the United States, and there has been very little footprint in that of a transatlantic character. Today the Indo-Pacific is in a bit of disarray because of the current US Administration's approach, which is not yet clear. But in this period, we have seen the growth of the Indo-Pacific's identity among the states in what is defined as the Indo-Pacific region.

One problem that arises with the Indo-Pacific strategic framework is the lack of a common definition among the four countries driving the Indo-Pacific through the Quad. While the United States and Australia define the Indo-Pacific from the southern tip of India to the Pacific, Japan and India see it as a confluence of the entire Indian and Pacific oceans. That is important in the context of what was just said by my co-panellist because events in west Asia or the Gulf unfortunately do not feature on the radar screen of the Indo-Pacific. That may need to be looked at.

Q67 **Lord Boateng:** That is very helpful, Ambassador Mukerji, because I wanted to ask you about events in the Gulf, the Horn of Africa and further down south. The strategic defence review identifies the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific as secondary priority regions for UK defence after the Euro-Atlantic. India is a member of BRICS and clearly has an interest in the Horn of Africa. China has a base in Djibouti. Russia is engaged in joint naval exercises with South Africa, off Simon's Town, a traditional British base in the southern tip of Africa. What is your take on the extent to which the UK's national security strategy gets these priorities right? What is your take on how our strategic interests are challenged by some of these recent developments?

Asoke Mukerji: You have raised a very important point. In terms of the UK's approach, the Indo-Pacific is a latecomer to the diplomacy that has gone on in the past 20 years. The UK of course has to prioritise its own resources and policies, but the first step should be to revisit 1971, because that is when the United Kingdom really left Asia and retreated into Europe. Today, for the United Kingdom to come back into Asia, it is a new Asia. There is a new dynamic on the ground here, which requires much more interaction with the states that make up the Indo-Pacific or the western Indo-Pacific region.

The second important thing is the contribution of the states of this region to collective security or to securing the Indo-Pacific region, which primarily has meant the maritime domain. There is very little on the landmass of the Indo-Pacific; it is primarily the maritime domain. Here, as far as India is concerned, in 2015 we set out a framework for the Indian Ocean called Security and Growth for All in the Region, or SAGAR. The United Kingdom would do well to see which parts of this framework strategy for the Indian Ocean proposed by India and worked on by several other Indian Ocean countries will fit into the UK's priorities and purposes.

What the UK has going for it, even today, is a tremendous historical experience of this region, whether in Aden, where the British and Indian Armed Forces set up the first base after the Suez Canal was opened, or, in more recent times, the Diego Garcia Mauritius-India-UK collaboration. There is a lot of history, but that now needs to be imaginatively brought into the strategic and diplomatic initiatives taken by the United Kingdom.

Will Todman: I agree that the Euro-Atlantic would be the primary theatre, followed by the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific as secondary. My issue with the national security strategy is that I do not believe that it is honest about the trade-offs that the Government are making in the Middle East and the ways in which they are undermining UK interests in the region. As Ambassador Gottemoeller said in the previous session, cutting foreign aid is having real effects, and this is happening at a time of unparalleled opportunity in the Levant. We have the potential to secure the sidelining of Hezbollah in Lebanon and to help Syria ensure that it has a positive transition.

At the same time, the UK is reducing its military presence in the Gulf. HMS "Lancaster" is due to be decommissioned, making it the UK's last permanent warship in the region, and my understanding is that it will not immediately be replaced. These moves are sending messages about the prioritisation. Although the national security strategy talks about the different tools that the UK has in the Middle East—diplomatic, humanitarian, military and prosperity—it does not say which ones are most effective in this new environment. I personally believe that there is a real opening for diplomacy at the moment.

In many ways, the military tools that Israel has wielded have done their job: they have sidelined Hezbollah, contributed to the overthrow of Assad, weakened Iran and clearly forced Hamas to agree to the ceasefire.

The UK is well placed to capitalise on the strategic connectivity that it has. It can talk to nearly everyone. It is trusted by the US, Europe and key regional players, and it is more agile as a mediator than most. It is difficult to do that when there are changes among our senior diplomats. My hope is that the new Foreign Secretary will be in place for a while to be able to maximise that potential, but I would like to have seen more of a prioritisation of the tools that the UK has to offer in the Middle East.

The Chair: Thank you very much. As you probably both can hear, the Bell has just gone for a vote in the Chamber of the House of Lords, so we will have to suspend the session there. I hope you will be able to stay on a little longer than originally scheduled. We will return to the session as soon as we possibly can.

Sitting suspended.

The Chair: Welcome back to today's hearing. I turn to Tan Dhesi, chair of the Commons Defence Committee.

Q68 **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi:** Thank you, Chair. Both our panellists will be aware that the UK strategic defence review and the national security strategy identify the changing nuclear context within the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East. I have a two-part question. First, Ambassador Mukerji, how is this playing within your region of expertise? Secondly, to focus on India-Pakistan tensions, the national security strategy notes that "tensions between India and Pakistan have reached their highest level for decades" and goes on to say that that would have a profoundly negative impact on our energy security, the cost of living and our ability to grow our economy. Given that growing concern and the possibility of further conflict or tension between India and Pakistan, what role, if any, can the UK play to help to de-escalate tensions?

Asoke Mukerji: The best role that the UK can play, and is already playing on the ground, is to be a source of support for the efforts of both sides to retain the nuclear option as the last option. The problem of no bilateral dialogue between India and Pakistan is acknowledged, but there is ongoing contact between the military establishment of Pakistan and the military establishment of India. Despite the stoppage of that bilateral dialogue, every other nuclear installations agreement is implemented on 1 January and both countries exchange their official statuses of the nuclear establishment. That happened even this January.

That is a role that needs to be played carefully, because the core issue—going to your second question—is about the India-Pakistan relationship itself. Until earlier this year, there was an understanding about continuing with efforts to sort out issues through good offices or bilaterally, but not through a third party. I think that is a red line as far as India is concerned. That goes back to the Simla agreement, a treaty containing a legal provision that is notified to the United Nations, and so on. For us in India, to revisit that and try to get others involved would mean revisiting what happened in 1971, which was the context of the 1972 Simla agreement.

I think that is realised but, when I say that, I also know that today, after 50 years, what happened in 1971 is also happening in bits and pieces again in south Asia, so we need to be very careful about what is going on.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi: Mr Todman, with regard to the changing nuclear context, can you advise us on how it is playing out in your region of expertise? Also, the second part of my question is on Iran. You will be aware that the UK strategic defence review identified the risk of Iran's nuclear programme. What role do you think the Gulf states see the UK playing in containing Iran's future nuclear ambitions?

The Chair: Order, order Mr Todman, we are going to have to pause there again.

Sitting suspended.

The Chair: Order, order. Welcome back. We are resuming the Joint Committee session on the national security strategy, and Mr Dhesi had just put a question to Mr Todman about the Iranian nuclear programme.

Will Todman: Going back four months, clearly, Israel determined that there was a real risk of nuclear proliferation and Iran gaining nuclear weapons capabilities. Four months on, those questions have not yet been resolved. Although intelligence reports have said different things, there are some senior members of the Iranian regime who have said that this has hardened their resolve to gain those capabilities. Just last week, Ali Shamkhani, one of the senior advisers to the Supreme Leader, said as much, in essence, and said that the Israel's war in June would not have happened if they had had nuclear capabilities.

That would then lead to a knock-on effect with Saudi Arabia almost certainly seeking its own capabilities if it got to that stage. I do not think that is very likely, though. There is now a window of opportunity to try to consolidate some of those gains from the military tools that were used with diplomacy. The problem is that with the E3 having just reimposed sanctions on Iran, trust is very low. But the UK still has a better ability to help get us back towards negotiations on the future of Iran's nuclear file than many other international actors.

You asked me about the Gulf states as well. It is quite remarkable just how much Gulf states' views and calculations on Iran have changed over the last decade. They went from vehemently opposing the Iran deal, the JCPOA, to now being very supportive of the US-Iran talks in Oman and Italy. So, I think the Arab Gulf states are looking to the UK to try to advance diplomacy. Even though they consider Iran to be at a point of historic weakness, they still want some kind of agreement with Iran that can serve as a strategic framework for a more sustainable presence and relationship with Iran in the region. Gulf states are looking to the UK and others to get back towards diplomacy because they really fear what happens if Israel strikes again, or even if the US were to strike again. They think that the blowback will hit them once again.

Q69 **Sir Gavin Williamson:** For many decades, India has pursued a strategy of strategic autonomy. Obviously, the relationship between China and Russia has shifted significantly. Ambassador Mukerji, how would you describe India's evolving relationship with Russia and China? Is it going to be realistic to continue to pursue strategic autonomy?

Asoke Mukerji: Events in the last six to eight months in the Indo-Pacific region demonstrate the necessity for pursuing strategic autonomy, as far as India is concerned, because the strategic investment that India made in developing a very close strategic partnership with the United States since 2017, including the signing of four foundational military co-operation agreements, seems to have now been forgotten in Washington DC, where trade and tariffs and issues that really should have been addressed through treaty and agreement frameworks are being addressed through the media and social media.

So, the lesson that has been drawn in the last six to seven months in India is to reinvest in strategic autonomy, to reach out to China—our Prime Minister went to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit a few weeks ago—and to reopen the contacts between India and China, which have been almost frozen for the last five years, following the border clashes in Ladakh.

As far as Russia is concerned, the relationship is more of a partnership than an alliance. The partnership is used for giving India what it needs in the case of, for example, defence. Now, in India, there is an awareness that this partnership gave India the equipment it needed to counter the Pakistani army in the recent skirmishes in May.

There is a transactionalism at work behind the strategic autonomy, which does not mean that India wants to be in a binary mode of being with one or against the other. Strategic autonomy enables India to create its own constituency of what the media call the global South. That is now building up steam. In the next couple of years, we will see more of India as a fourth option in a multipolar world.

Sir Gavin Williamson: What are some of the opportunities where the UK and India can work more closely together? Is it possible to have a genuine strategic partnership or are these just nice diplomatic words to make a piece of paper feel a bit more special?

Asoke Mukerji: Your question is very important. The document we are discussing today identifies an area—technology and security. I participated in the first cybersecurity connections between India and the UK back in 2011. That has borne fruit and has enabled a certain amount of trust to develop bilaterally between India and the United Kingdom. It has been bolstered by the participation of private sector companies and entities in this technology and security partnership. So, today, when you see the seven big pillars of the India-UK technology and security partnership, you see a whole-of-society participation rather than something led by diplomats and states. It is much more than that. That is the future and will drive the relationship forward.

Q70 Lord Hutton of Furness: This is a question largely for you, Mr Todman. Returning to the security environment in the Gulf, since the UK national security strategy was published in June, there have obviously been some pretty significant developments in the Middle East, including, for example, the US-Israeli air strikes on Iranian nuclear sites and, hopefully, the prospect of an emerging peace plan with Israel and Hamas. What do these events tell us about the security dynamics in the region now?

Will Todman: The way that a lot of actors in the Middle East see the events of the last few months is that this is a region without guardrails. Although many of the consequences of the actions you mentioned are in the UK's interest as it relates to weakening Iran—reducing the threat of Houthi attacks in the Red sea and hopefully coming to a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza—lots of Gulf states view Israel now as emerging as a regional hegemon. They are looking for signs that other international actors, namely the United States, can constrain it. Of course, this was most clearly seen by the Israeli attacks on Doha last month.

There are some promising signs in that regard. These are not the same Gulf states that we saw even a decade ago. They are now much more pragmatic and willing to come to agreements that will secure their economic stability in the region. The threat environment is changing, but the longer-term challenges, even the short-term challenges, frankly, as it relates to Gaza, are huge.

I really hope that the UK will remain deeply engaged. I know that US officials called out the role of the UK in helping secure that ceasefire. By talking about having Tony Blair playing a big role, they clearly trust UK diplomats to play an important role here. I hope that that engagement remains strong so that we can try to work through the very challenging issues ahead.

As Iran becomes more weakened in terms of its conventional capabilities, we will see an uptick in the kinds of cyber and hybrid threats that it conducts. Iran and other actors are increasingly using cyber tools for espionage, disinformation and attacking infrastructure. I hope that that will be a key part of the UK's defence strategy going forward. That is why, going back to my answer to the previous question, I hope that the UK begins to rebuild trust with Iran and engages in diplomacy in a way that could consolidate these wins, get to a more sustainable balance of power and find solutions for the region.

Q71 Lord Hutton of Furness: Do any of these changing security dynamics mean that we should revisit the national security strategy and the way it has categorised UK security interests in the Gulf as being secondary?

Will Todman: No. I think the region should still come as a secondary priority after Europe and the Atlantic. But, again, I hope that being a second priority does not mean that the region is sidelined and comes far down the list when it comes to the allocation of resources. Some of the moves we have seen, as I mentioned earlier—cuts to aid, and the

withdrawal of HMS “Lancaster”—signal a declining UK interest in the region. That is a mistake.

There are some lower cost ways of signalling that the UK still cares about this region. Part of what I hope the UK will do is build on some of the structures that already exist, the security structures in the region, and take them from being bilateral to multilateral. We saw this as it relates to Bahrain with the C-SIPA, the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement, which was originally between Bahrain and the United States. The UK became a formal member of that this summer, which is a really important signal towards bolstering collective security and new kinds of security architectures that can better meet the needs of this changing environment. Ultimately, we have already seen the positive benefits of that. Bahrain was the only Arab state to engage in the maritime mission in the Red Sea that the UK participated in to counter the Houthis.

The Chair: Finally, I call Lord Robathan.

Q72 **Lord Robathan:** I will be very brief, as I understand we are pressed for time. Turning to Saudi Arabia, which I think is your department, Mr Todman, we have a long history of having a good relationship with Saudi Arabia. Al-Yamamah goes back 40-odd years now, and we have a lot of other defence agreements. However, things seem to be changing there; in particular, Saudi Arabia’s evolving relationship with China. What is your take on what is happening in Saudi Arabia?

Will Todman: Saudi Arabia sees itself as a middle power and is forging strategic partnerships with a wide variety of states across the world. China is an important strategic partner for Saudi Arabia. It is the biggest importer of oil. But focusing too much on that downplays some of the other ways in which China plays a deep economic role in Saudi Arabia.

If you take renewable energies, China is investing upstream and downstream in the development of renewable technologies in Saudi Arabia, which the Saudi Government have described as a key pillar of their economic strategy going forward. It will be very difficult to dislodge that. When the UK has a partnership with Saudi Arabia, it needs to be on the understanding that it has less leverage over Saudi Arabia because ultimately the Saudis have other options. It is incumbent on the UK and like-minded allies, particularly in the West, to articulate why the value-add of deepening engagement with the West is preferable to that of China. It is not too late for that. Although China has made serious advances when it comes to technology partnerships, we see that the Saudis are still looking for other partners. If there is a free trade agreement between the UK and the GCC, that will spark a lot of deeper technology partnerships between the UK and Saudi Arabia. So there are still options, but the relationship needs to be understood as just one piece of Saudi strategy. The time of the UK and, frankly, even the US being able to dictate the terms of those partnerships is probably over because it has so many other options.

The Chair: Thank you. There are clear echoes there of the point that Ambassador Mukerji made earlier about strategic autonomy and India. There are some themes emerging there. Thank you both for a fascinating session, and for your patience with the disruption to it because of the votes here. Thank you to Mr Todman, Ambassador Mukerji and our earlier witnesses for joining us today. That concludes today's session.