



International Relations and Defence Committee

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

Wednesday 5 November 2025

3.30 pm

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Members present: Lord De Mauley (The Chair); Lord Alderdice; Baroness Blackstone; Baroness Coussins; Baroness Crawley; Lord Darroch of Kew; Lord Grocott; Lord Robertson of Port Ellen.

Evidence Session No. 18

Heard in Public

Questions 196 - 206

Witnesses

I: Hon John O. Brennan, Former Director, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA); Professor Sir David Omand, former Director, GCHQ and currently Visiting Professor, Department of War Studies, King's College London; Dr Dafydd Townley, Senior Teaching Fellow, University of Portsmouth.

Examination of witnesses

Hon John O. Brennan, Professor Sir David Omand and Dr Dafydd Townley.

Q196 **The Chair:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. Thank you so much for making yourselves available to talk to the committee about your perspectives on the UK-US intelligence relationship. The session will be streamed live on the Parliament website. A transcript will be taken and you will have a copy to make what, I hope, will be minor amendments, if any. There may be Divisions during our session. If that happens, I am afraid we will have to suspend operations for 10 minutes. I hope you can bear with us. If members have any relevant interests, please declare them when first speaking. Gentlemen, would you very briefly each like to introduce yourself, and then we will pile in with questions?

Professor Sir David Omand: I am currently visiting professor in war studies at King's College London, previously UK security and intelligence co-ordinator, permanent secretary of the Home Office, director of GCHQ and deputy under-secretary of state for policy in the Ministry of Defence; so I am a securocrat.

The Chair: Thank you; a busy one.

Hon John O. Brennan: I was a CIA officer from 1980 to 2005. I also worked for President Obama as his deputy national security adviser and homeland security and counterterrorism assistant. From 2013 to 2017 I served as director of the CIA, and I am now semi-retired.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Dr Dafydd Townley: I am a senior teaching fellow in international security at the University of Portsmouth. I am part of its military education team at Royal Air Force College and Royal Air Force Halton. I am also chair of the American Politics Group, the UK's leading organisation associated with the teaching and research of US politics.

Q197 **The Chair:** Perhaps I can kick off by asking how you would characterise the state and relevance of UK-US intelligence co-operation today. What is working well, and what are the main friction points? Might I start with Sir David Omand?

Professor Sir David Omand: I should say that I am not speaking on behalf of the UK intelligence community—I am retired and these are my own views—but my perception is that intelligence sharing and co-operation with the United States is as good as it ever was. This is co-operation between professionals working on common threats. The United States is patently our closest ally. We visibly enjoy good co-operation in the defence field, security and intelligence matters, and that is just as well given the threats that we face.

I do not need to tell the committee about the long history of the US-UK intelligence relationship. It is based on mutual trust over almost 80 years, but things change. The digital revolution is well under way, and

the co-operation I would highlight between our National Cyber Security Centre and the United States Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency is now relatively new but a really important strand in the relationship, for example, putting out joint advisories on the recent Chinese Volt Typhoon and Salt Typhoon attacks on infrastructure, and of course we have the co-operation between defence intelligence staff in examining the Russian war effort in Ukraine.

I would not describe it necessarily as a friction point, but I have no doubt that concerns crossed the Atlantic about the initial activities of Elon Musk's DOGE and churn in senior posts in the US intelligence community. I hope things are settling down, but perhaps John can tell us.

Hon John O. Brennan: Like David, I have been out of government for some time, but I can speak to my 33 years of service. Without question, the relationship that we have with our British counterparts in intelligence, national security, military, diplomatic and other realms is the best in the world. The extent, depth and sensitivity of that co-operation spans the gamut of intelligence activities, whether they be operational, analytical and so forth. I had no qualms whatever about sharing our most sensitive secrets with my British counterparts. I worked very closely with MI6, MI5 and GCHQ. It is something that I think is embedded in the DNA of American and British intelligence professionals. We rely on each other; we treat each other like brothers and sisters in what we do and what we share with them, because there is a real alignment of values and principles between our countries as well as between our services.

As David mentioned, there may be concerns now about where things are going in the United States. I do not have any first-hand knowledge of that, but I can tell you that the professionals I worked with before, who are still in the various US agencies of the intelligence community, feel very passionately that their British colleagues are their closest colleagues. They are the ones we can really rely on and we work with them across the board. I would like to think that, irrespective of what types of concerns there might be as far as politicisation is concerned, the people do the work, whether it be in Washington or overseas. I worked in Saudi Arabia and worked very closely with my British counterpart while there. Again, it extends across the Atlantic, but also in various places around the world where British and American intelligence officers are working hand in glove with one another.

Dr Dafydd Townley: I am not quite sure I can contradict anything these two gentlemen have said. There is still a deep operational, collaborative relationship between the two nations that is extremely important for both nations. Both nations benefit from the relationship. At a professional level, there is a great deal of respect on both sides for the capabilities of the institutions that share intelligence. As has been intimated already, if there are any concerns or friction points, it is at the political level, not the professional level, that the UK might need to consider.

Q198 **Lord Robertson of Port Ellen:** First, I declare an interest as senior counsellor with the Cohen Group in Washington.

Clearly, there have been major shifts in political leadership over the years. At the present moment the leadership of the intelligence organisations in the United States is interesting, to put it mildly. Perhaps you could venture a view about whether these fairly political—with a capital “P”—changes and shifts in leadership affect the organisation further down. Do you think they have an effect from time to time?

Hon John O. Brennan: There have certainly been reports of perturbations in these agencies as a result of some of those political appointees. A lot of that was early on because the individuals who were appointed did not have a great deal of experience with intelligence or in the intelligence community. They are probably learning more about the organisations they run and the intelligence community overall. It is a large, complex intelligence community. I know that a number of individuals have decided to retire or leave throughout the national security community as a result of some of their concerns, but I am not inside these agencies. I would like to think that a lot of my colleagues will continue to do their work because it is so critical that they do so in facing challenges around the globe. I think a lot of people are just trying to keep their head down and focus on their professional responsibilities. The political winds in Washington blow all the time. They are blowing rather strongly these days, but a lot of intelligence professionals understand how to avoid getting caught up in those winds.

Professor Sir David Omand: Perhaps I could add a historical note. If you were to take the nadir of US-UK relationships at the political level, it would probably be the breakdown in 1956 between US President Eisenhower and our Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, over the Suez debacle. I found it remarkable that, during that, GCHQ and its US counterpart, the National Security Agency, were working hand in glove as one studying the Soviet intervention in Hungary, for example, despite the waves lashing the surface at that time. I am confident that the professionals will be able to get on with what the professionals should do.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: When I was in Washington some of the people I met said that civil servants at the moment were behaving like hostages, unable to say anything in case they said something out of turn. Does that suggest it might be a characteristic inside the intelligence agencies?

Hon John O. Brennan: I have heard that as well from people who work in the Federal Government, not just in the intelligence community but in the policy agencies, because of the massive firings that have taken place in so many departments and agencies. I do think that there are people who are concerned about their livelihoods and their ability to continue in their work. Maybe they are keeping their heads down. I would like to think that my former colleagues will continue to provide the intelligence assessments analysis that will be objective, evidence-based and presented to US policymakers irrespective of what the policy drawers might be coming out of the White House. That is their obligation as intelligence officers. I hope they will be able to continue to do that. I do

not know whether their policy overseers will resent that type of independence, but the integrity of the intelligence process is critical not just to US national security but to British national security. Even though US intelligence has made mistakes over the years—we all know about them; British intelligence has as well—there was a sense of very strong integrity attached to it. I think my former British colleagues will have to ask themselves whether they will be confident that the same integrity and objectivity is going to be the hallmark of US intelligence. I would like to think it is.

One of my experiences when I was at the CIA and the White House was that we worked very closely with our British colleagues in using intelligence to go after al-Qaeda and destroy terrorist organisations. I remember having extensive conversations with my British counterparts. They wanted to know the intelligence basis and rules of engagement, because they did not want to be contributing to something that they could not support with their professional responsibilities. We were very much aligned on that issue once they understood exactly what we were doing. I would like to think that the rules of engagement and intelligence basis for what the US is doing around the globe will still be strong and that our British colleagues can continue to count on us.

Professor Sir David Omand: I suggest it would be worth the committee's time looking at the ethical code that the Government Office for Science has published for professional scientific advice—the same applies to professional military advice—which is based on the ability to speak truth to power, communicating results and intentions honestly based on rigour, respect and responsibility. That is what we were used to, and I hope that is what we will continue to be used to. It is really important.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The British or American Government?

Professor Sir David Omand: The British Government. That resulted from arguments between government Ministers and scientists over many years about the independence, integrity and scientific advice being produced. As a result, we have this code and I would like to think it applies just as much to intelligence analysts and intelligence officers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Chair: Is there an American equivalent?

Hon John O. Brennan: To that study? I do not know. I know that in the past there had been attempts to review this and make sure that that type of rigour and scrutiny is applied not just to intelligence but to the scientific basis, medical issues and other types of things. I would like to think that that is continuing. My experience over 30-plus years is a bit dated. I am hoping that some of these very fundamental principles and foundations of national security and intelligence will continue to be in evidence.

Professor Sir David Omand: To round that off, the scientific code is based on the principle that, here, Ministers are in charge and they make the decisions, but they have an obligation to be open to receiving professional advice and a duty to try to understand what it is before they make their decisions, even when the message is unwelcome and disturbing. We have seen cases on the other side of the Atlantic where perhaps there is some doubt, but I remain an optimist that this will work its way out.

Q199 **Lord Alderdice:** I want to press you on the last remark you made. My background is in medicine. It is quite clear that a number of decisions taken at a very senior level in healthcare in the United States are completely contrary, consciously, to all the scientific evidence. It seems to me that, in the face of repeated episodes like that, simply to continue to be optimistic may be unwise.

Professor Sir David Omand: To elaborate my answer, I rest it on the depth of the professional relationships between those in the intelligence community to which John has referred. You will get difficulties if you have elected politicians who do not want to listen to particular kinds of answers. That need not in any way affect the integrity of intelligence officers striving to arrive at the best explanation of the facts and intelligence presented to them on the activities of our adversaries, but I entirely take your point.

Baroness Crawley: I think several of us would imagine that, as far as the new regime in the US is concerned, it is not just an unwillingness to listen to civil servants, whether they be in the health department or intelligence services. The new regime has come in with a plan and it wants that plan to go through across all departments of the presidency. It is very difficult for individual professionals to put their heads above the parapet when it comes to quite a political, with a capital "P" as George says, agenda for change that is being put in front of them.

Professor Sir David Omand: I would not want the committee to understand my answers as meaning in any way that the United Kingdom agencies are not at all times going to remain accountable to the Secretaries of State as the 1989 and 1994 Acts provide. There is no independent duty on them. They are the servants of the Government of the day, but we all have to use the influence we can bring to bear and, whatever plan there might be and whatever merits it might have, it has to be constrained by reality. It is an easy thing for me to say, but, looking at our experience over here, we have had Prime Ministers who have tended to build a wall from the top level of bricks downwards, hoping that somebody will fill in the gaps underneath. So we have some experience of this as well.

Hon John O. Brennan: Every Administration in the United States has come in with a policy agenda. The policy agenda of the current Administration is certainly a very strong one—in the view of many it is very radical—and it is moving swiftly. In the policy departments and agencies, there is an obligation on the part of individuals who work there

to carry out those policies, but the intelligence community, whether you are talking about the CIA or NSA, or the law enforcement community—the FBI and Department of Justice—is supposed to be policy neutral. They can certainly respond to policy requests of the White House in wanting more intelligence on this or that matter, but they are supposed to fulfil their obligations as professionals.

When I swore my oath of allegiance to the country it was to carry out my professional responsibilities with the integrity and honesty expected of me. When I would go to the White House as the CIA director I was frequently the skunk at the garden party, because I would bring intelligence that might have been at odds with some of the views of policymakers sitting round the table. Although I was challenged on it, I think they very much appreciated that objective input; they needed to hear the views of the intelligence community. I am not a fly on the wall in the White House situation room, but I would like to think that the intelligence leadership is still bringing forward the important intelligence that policymakers need, even if it is diametrically opposed to the policy interest. That is their obligation.

Dr Dafydd Townley: To build on what John is saying, every Administration comes with its own plan. What has happened in the past is that there tends to be a significant amount of continuity from the previous Administration. We tend to take it for granted, as we have for the past 80 years, that the United States will be an erstwhile supporter of the UK in its security. We are certainly raising some questions at this moment maybe about its commitment to NATO and various other things. What we are seeing is an Administration who have made some very sharp turns in policy, which have taken many people by surprise, although perhaps it was fairly well advertised in various different policy manuals that they published prior to the election. That has taken us by surprise, but at the professional level I think there is still a commitment from those officers on both sides of the water to ensure that this relationship continues and to share vital information to both nations.

Q200 **Lord Darroch of Kew:** I have two further supplementaries to Lord Robertson's original question. First, two of you on the panel were leaders of intelligence communities—intelligence agencies. I just wonder whether there is anything you think leaders can do that you did, or your successors should be doing, to protect their agencies and their communities from the sort of political winds that you describe, strong as they are at the moment, or is it just a matter of carrying on what you normally do until directly ordered to stop or change it? Are there pre-emptive things you can do to insulate and protect the intelligence-sharing process and what the agencies do from political interference?

Professor Sir David Omand: The most important thing is to try to develop a mature relationship with the political level and use every opportunity to push the message that the professionals are there and ready to help. They will produce assessments. Sometimes those assessments will not be to the liking of the powers that be, but, "Accept

it, Minister. Read it. You don't have to act on it, but, if you decide not to, be clear about why". This is very obvious.

I can recall that on one occasion when I was a member of the Joint Intelligence Committee we wrote a formal assessment—a JIC paper—on our forecast of what the poppy crop in Afghanistan would be the following year, based on a great deal of intelligence with overhead surveys and all the rest of it. We issued this. The furious reaction from the powers that be was, "You're predicting the failure of British policy, because you say the poppy crop is going to go up", to which we said, when we met in the JIC, "That's exactly what we are predicting and we stand by our judgment". We were, of course, right on that occasion; we might not have been. But it is in the DNA of the British system. I thought it was firmly in the DNA of the American system. I hope that some of that is still there.

Hon John O. Brennan: Also, I think it is critical for the intelligence leadership to be talking to their troops all the time about their responsibilities and obligations. I would do that on a regular basis. After the 2016 presidential election I held town halls and talked to them about their obligations. We all had a lot of concerns with the first Trump Administration coming in about what they would do. I said, "You really have an obligation to your fellow American citizens to continue to carry out your professional duties with great integrity, objectivity and honesty". It is important for them to reinforce that all the time in word, deed and action. The CIA intelligence workforce is very sophisticated and will pick up signals from the leadership.

The Chair: I am afraid we have to suspend operations. Those of us who are going to vote will be back as soon as we can.

Sitting suspended.

The Chair: Lord Darroch, you were in mid-flow.

Lord Darroch of Kew: Thank you. This is primarily for John, but others may want to comment. John, you travel a lot in Europe. People probably ask you directly about the reliability of America now as an ally and as a leader. Would you be prepared to say how you think things might look in five or 10 years' time? How confident are you that the intelligence relationship that we are discussing will be as strong in 10 years' time as it is at the moment given the political winds that are blowing, not just in America but with the populism in Europe as well?

Hon John O. Brennan: Obviously, I do not have a crystal ball. I would like to think that it is going to remain strong. As David mentioned, the relationship has weathered the political strains that have happened over the years. There is something profoundly different going on in the United States right now in the current Administration. It is having a very strong impact. If I was in charge of British intelligence, I would be looking, hoping and trying to do everything possible to keep that relationship strong and be able to see whether there is any discernible difference in

the quality, integrity and objectivity of the analysis and intelligence that is coming out as well as the types of operational collaboration. My British counterparts obviously do not have the global presence that we have, but they have exquisite capabilities in certain areas that we rely on heavily. So I think there will be a strong interest on the part of American professional intelligence officers to keep those relationships alive, and to try to strengthen them, not just with the UK but with a lot of our other European counterparts, because we rely on those partnerships.

One of the things that I hope people in the Trump Administration recognise is that US national security and our prosperity really depends on this international coalition that we have put together over the years, and that we should be very careful about taking actions that will diminish those relationships. Yes, our European partners will be hurt because the flow of intelligence may not be as strong or as constant, but US national security will also be hurt in the process. It is hard for me to look out five to 10 years, but there is a fundamental reordering of that global chess board, and intelligence cannot help but be wrapped up in that.

Professor Sir David Omand: We have some agency. We are not just passive in the face of what has been discussed. It behoves us to keep up our niche capabilities to make sure that we are not only able to look after our own key objectives but work with partners to make sure we can do it even better. Without going into classified details, we do have significant assets. We have some very clever people. We have a tradition of innovation. We can keep that up and fund it properly, and if we do that we will continue to be very attractive partners for the United States.

I say that not just from a UK perspective but looking at a NATO perspective. If the United States is squaring up to China, which appears to be the tone, and China is developing month by month its relationship with Russia, were there ever, God help us, to be a major conflict, someone has to look after the North Atlantic and the High North, because the United States does not have the capability to do all that—and that has to be NATO. We are a prime actor in NATO, and the intelligence that we can provide and inject along with our Canadian and American partners is really important. I quite accept that not all these arguments are always rational, but on any rational argument the relationship has national security value both to the United States and to the United Kingdom.

Hon John O. Brennan: I am confident that in five or 10 years Russia will be a threat to the United States and to the United Kingdom. China will be a threat on the intelligence and the technological front. Those shared risks and those shared threats will keep the relationship strong. Will it go through some changes? Probably, but there will be that shared concern about the threat that is emanating from Russia and China.

Dr Dafydd Townley: It is too early to say that there are long-term implications to the UK-US intelligence relationship. The United States is currently in political turmoil. Its political processes and institutions are being challenged. What we know as being normal ways of conducting politics and policy in the United States are certainly being replaced by

other means at the moment. However, as far as the UK and US are concerned, in the short term certainly, the commonalities that John has just talked about, the common denominators in terms of the threats that we have, will keep us together. The bellwether is probably not going to be until 2028 with the next presidential election. This Administration may well be a step out of tune rather than a complete turn for a long-term change that would have a long-term impact on the US-UK relationship.

Q201 Baroness Blackstone: So far, we have talked in pretty general terms about the depth and the strength of the intelligence relationship between the US and the UK, and you have all emphasised the professionalism, objectivity, integrity and so on of the intelligence services. Can we turn to the more practical issues about the actual influence of the intelligence services on policy and the shared intelligence between the two countries? If we take two topical examples, namely Ukraine and China, can you tell us what the influence has been particularly in those two big political issues—the war in Ukraine and the relationship with China?

Professor Sir David Omand: If we start with Ukraine, very close working between the military intelligence staffs, defence intelligence staffs, of the US and the UK arrived at common views of what was to be expected from President Putin after he had massed his tanks around Ukraine and conducted his major military exercise. Intelligence saw through the public rhetoric from Moscow that there was no intention, of course, to intervene directly in Ukraine. Both Governments made that public. Significantly, the French Government and the German Government did not believe the warnings. The Ukrainian military clearly did and made its deployments accordingly. Even President Zelensky himself found it difficult to accept that Moscow was about to launch what it did, was determined to overthrow his Government and, indeed, had a plot to assassinate him. All of that emerged from intelligence. A great deal of it was put into the public domain, which is very unusual.

That is a very good case study where transatlantic intelligence working came up with the right answer—the correct answer. Not all our partners with whom the evidence was shared believed that assessment. The head of the French military intelligence, the DRM, was subsequently dismissed by the French President for not having warned him of this. You can perhaps understand that if—as we know he had—President Putin had been conducting conversations with President Macron assuring him that he had no such intention, and then the intelligence comes in very clearly pointing to that outcome, it would be difficult to accept that information.

Ukraine is a good case study of joint working across the Atlantic. The one part of the assessment that was probably not entirely on the ball was that the Russians would make bigger gains than in fact they were able to, and their botched operation on Kyiv was a result of bad Russian intelligence about the Ukrainian will to resist. That would be my comment on Ukraine.

Hon John O. Brennan: I was the director of the CIA when the Russians seized Crimea. I went out to visit Kyiv about six weeks afterwards to work with my Ukrainian counterparts. At that time, the Russians had

penetrated the Ukrainian intelligence security services and military services, so we had a real challenge of how we were going to help the Ukrainians while the Russians were still in a lot of the systems. I worked very closely with my British counterparts to explain to them exactly what we were going to do to be able to help the Ukrainians rid themselves of that Russian influence and Russian presence, and what we were going to do to try to ensure that they had the intelligence they needed, because intelligence has really been the bloodstream of Ukrainian defence and opposition to the Russian invasion. We were able to optimise our respective contributions. The British-US relationship in Ukraine was closer than any other in terms of the intelligence sharing and the apportionment of the types of support that we were providing to the Ukrainians.

On China, we regularly have had conversations and briefings with one another about all the various ways that the Chinese are trying to use their technology to get into systems. I do not have to remind this group about Huawei and how they used those companies and parastatals and others to find ways to spy, and to collect and steal intellectual property and other things. That working relationship between US intelligence agencies and British intelligence agencies is critical to be able to keep a lot of our systems safe. Since I left government, AI has exploded, and I am sure that that is another area. I would like to think that our respective intelligence agencies are still working very closely on the counterintelligence threat that China poses.

Dr Dafydd Townley: If the United Kingdom wants to present a united front with the United States, the shared assessments have to be reliable and—how can I say it? I want to say they have to come from a good place, but that is probably not the right phrase—have to be shared in the right frame of mind. There was some indication or reports earlier in the year that some intelligence around the peace negotiations was being withheld from non-US intelligence agencies. That would be a concern, I would suspect, for some allies of the United States, who would be making policy decisions that are not fully informed. However, I still think that at a professional level—and we keep going back to this—as far as Ukraine is concerned, both the US intelligence community and the UK intelligence community have shared objectives that tend to align with those of both Governments, and that will continue for the foreseeable future.

Professor Sir David Omand: The important question in intelligence analysis is continuity. It was as a result of the years and years of study on both sides of the Atlantic of Russian exercises—first Red Army exercises and then the Russian army—that detected the difference between an exercise and what was being observed, the steps being taken that would not take place in an exercise, and that this was for real. That is the kind of granular intelligence that can make a real difference in policy, but it comes from years of patient work.

Baroness Blackstone: Are there any particular areas in either the Ukraine example or the China example where the two countries' intelligence services have not really agreed, or are they completely at one

in all this?

Hon John O. Brennan: Again, my knowledge is dated on this. There are some issues related to Chinese technologies. Huawei is one. There can be significant input from US intelligence, but UK policymakers have to make their decisions as well in terms of how they are going to react to the intelligence. I do not recall real splits between US and British intelligence on some of the key issues, whether we are talking about Ukraine, China, Iran, North Korea or other issues. There is great compatibility. I am not saying there are not areas of different emphasis or concern or whatever, but I do not recall an issue that we were at odds on.

Professor Sir David Omand: The difference is sometimes the emphasis. From the British side, we observe that the Chinese attacks on US infrastructure, the so-called Volt Typhoon campaign, were achieved by rather good hacking and spear phishing to get in. It was not because of the use of Huawei or any other form of Chinese technology, which is not allowed certainly in military networks. We probably put the emphasis more on those skills rather than achieving the success through infiltrating technology. But that could be an avenue. There is no fundamental difference, but you will find some differences. It was the same during the Cold War when we would take slightly different views about whether the Soviet Union had deliberately violated an arms control treaty by testing a missile slightly beyond its range. When the experts get together, who because of the nature of the relationship that John has explained can share very sensitive information, most of those differences eventually evaporate when you get down to the technical details.

Baroness Blackstone: The somewhat different positions taken by the two Governments from time to time in both those areas have nothing to do with differences in intelligence advice that has been provided.

Professor Sir David Omand: I would be very surprised if that were to be the case. These are policy differences in so far as they are differences. Actually, I do not think they are really great differences.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: The intelligence communities can of course get it spectacularly wrong, as indeed the KGB did, or the SVR did in the case of Ukraine. Before the invasion of Ukraine, because of the widespread circulation of the intelligence that they were going to attack, I heard an individual Russian say in London, "I don't think he's going to invade, but every day he doesn't invade he loses a bit of credibility". Do you think that it is possible that by publicising so heavily the fact that he was about to invade Ukraine he might well have provoked one thin-skinned individual who I used to deal with into doing something that had not been planned?

Hon John O. Brennan: It might have been, but the forces that they were arraying along Ukraine's borders and the different types of units that they had there, including bloodmobiles and other types of things, really did give the indication that the Russians were planning to move in. I take your point that at some point Putin has to deliver or retreat. The

FSB had responsibility for Ukraine. The FSB had retained it, not the SVR. I do think the Russian intelligence was bad. Although the Russian military really looks good on paper, prior to Ukraine it had no real battlefield experience, except for 13 days in Georgia or whatever. Unlike the US and the coalition military in Afghanistan and Iraq, where you have combined arms, and you bring land, air and NATO forces together and you integrate technology and different units, the Russians never had that experience. When they lumbered into Ukraine, they thought that Ukraine was just going to roll over. US intelligence and British intelligence overestimated the ability of Russia just to roll over Ukrainian troops and underestimated badly the Ukrainian willingness and commitment to fight, which was really fuelled by intelligence that came from the United States, the United Kingdom and others.

Professor Sir David Omand: The story that somehow we provoked Putin into his military attack on Kyiv sounds to me exactly like the kind of propaganda that comes out all the time from Moscow and Russian sources. It would take a great deal of persuasion and a lot of inside intelligence to convince me, particularly when, as I say, we know that he had planned an assassination and we know that he had planned a false flag operation to give him the rationale for his invasion, all of that before we went public with the intelligence. So I am afraid I do not buy that story.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Neither do I, but never mind. I put it to you because it is important and one individual can make a huge difference.

Q202 **Lord Alderdice:** We have concentrated on the question in the last little while on agreement or otherwise on the questions of Ukraine and China, but of course these are not the only issues over the years. Can you recall any situations where there was a divergence of view between the intelligence agencies of the United Kingdom and the United States? If so, what were the mechanisms that were used to try to reach an understanding with each other on such divergent views?

Professor Sir David Omand: I cite the 1983 Able Archer episode in which the NATO nuclear exercise Able Archer triggered a certain nervousness in the Kremlin. Some Soviet forces were put on greater standby. The British assessment focused on what we believed to be increasing paranoia on the part of the ageing Soviet leadership that the United States was preparing itself for a first strike. The American analysts took a different view, at least initially. That episode rather neatly illustrates how it got sorted out.

At stake here was the very secret information that the late Oleg Gordievsky was providing via a special channel that was opened up between the chief of SIS and the director of the CIA to enable that extremely sensitive intelligence to be passed after Gordievsky had been exfiltrated from Moscow. He briefed President Reagan himself. It is an interesting case because at the heart of some of the Soviet concerns was the fact that President Reagan had turned the volume control up on US

military activity vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and it had noticed that, and that US security and readiness had been increased after the bombing of the marine barracks in Beirut. These were all overinterpreted by Moscow. Gordievsky was able to put a very interesting and very well-informed context to that. One of the things that happened was that an 11-page memo was written by the head of London Station with the help of the British analysts supporting the Joint Intelligence Committee and sent across the Atlantic for Casey, the director of the CIA, to show to the President.

When things get slightly difficult, there are mechanisms, and there are plenty of historical precedents for how the analysts share very sensitive information to try to deal with initial differences in assessment.

Hon John O. Brennan: I can remember some subtle differences in the counterterrorism realm in terms of the US intelligence that undergirded some of the operational actions that were taken, but I am hard-pressed to think of examples that I can discuss in an open, unclassified setting. I am still obligated to respect my security obligations despite the fact that I no longer have a security clearance.

Q203 **Baroness Coussins:** How do you think the integrity of the operational co-operation that you have described is holding up in the changing face of some of the intelligence challenges that are emerging and developing? I am thinking of things like hybrid warfare, cyberattacks, disinformation and the increasing presence of non-state actors. How has the co-operation between our intelligence agencies been adjusting itself to deal with those kinds of threats? Are there any specific areas of difficulty? How are they being addressed?

Professor Sir David Omand: I would highlight to the committee the speed at which things happen these days. Writing an elegant memorandum and then having it peer reviewed on the other side of the Atlantic still goes on and is still very necessary, but if you are dealing with the digital area and, say, attribution of cyberattacks and so on it has to be done online. The existence of very secure online communications across the Atlantic between our communities is just one of the ways in which they have had to adapt to the speed of response expected by the customers for intelligence.

Hon John O. Brennan: I do not know about recent adaptations, but the first time I really met David and worked closely with him was back in 2003. In the aftermath of 9/11, both the United States Government, the Administration, and the British Government recognised that we needed to better integrate intelligence that is collected by the various agencies so that you create new knowledge by identifying correlations in that. I had the honour to set up what is called the National Counterterrorism Center in May 2003. There was a stand-up of the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, JTAC, at the same time, basically within days of each other. I worked very closely with David, and he was a real proponent of trying to ensure that not only did we better integrate US and UK agencies and data and our databases, but we also share more across the Atlantic. So there

was very active engagement between NCTC and JTAC. In fact, we had officers who were positioned in both agencies, as we were adapting not just to the growing threat of al-Qaeda but the growing technological capabilities that we needed to harness to ensure that we had as much advance notice or ability to identify those threats to us.

I would like to think that that same type of adaptation is taking place in the respective intelligence communities, and that when we do it in the US we are thinking about how we are going to better interact with our British counterparts. The closeness of the values and the professionalism of both intelligence communities is really on a par. There is great mutual respect, as was mentioned earlier. You have the greatest confidence that you can do it with your British counterparts. If you were going to do it with anybody, it would be with the British. I am hoping that that will still be the case going forward.

Professor Sir David Omand: I can remember John inviting me across the Atlantic to visit his new centre as it was being constructed on a greenfield site, a centre from which, in my view, you could have managed a major military campaign with no expense spared. Over here, Eliza Manningham-Buller, the director-general of the Security Service, kindly made available part of her floor space so that we could put everyone together. In some ways, it is easier for us because we are smaller. It is a huge disadvantage for the UK to be smaller in many ways, but in one respect it is easier for us to try things out and pull things together. If you have 18 separate agencies, as the United States has, it is probably—

Hon John O. Brennan: I remember seeing you on the screen; we were communicating with one another on a classified system and network, and that was the first time that we were able to do that. Sometimes crises bring innovation and opportunity. I would like to think that with all the crises going on around the world there are new opportunities for that type of collaboration, but you have to have leaders who really believe in the value of that relationship.

Baroness Coussins: Dr Townley, I think you were going to add something there.

Dr Dafydd Townley: From a scholar's perspective of the intelligence community on both sides of the Atlantic there has been innovation driven by necessity. In part, that is a recognition that, certainly with the emergent technological threats through cyberspace, there are really no territorial boundaries because the networks are inevitably interlinked. That is the nature of it. That has meant that threats to critical national infrastructure have had to be addressed by both nations in partnership. We have seen CISA, the federal agency that is responsible for the cybersecurity of national infrastructure in the US, open its one and only embassy in London. That is an indication of the strength of partnership and the recognition on both sides of the Atlantic that they need to work together in this. It has been relatively successful. I am not privy to classified reports, but there are obviously significant numbers of cyberattacks every day, the vast majority of which are unsuccessful. That

is partly down to that relationship and that information sharing between agencies such as the National Security Agency and GCHQ, which communicate on a regular basis in terms of threats and also solutions. That is important as well.

- Q204 **Baroness Crawley:** How significant is the UK-US intelligence collaboration more broadly, in particular for the Five Eyes, the Nine Eyes, the Fourteen Eyes and NATO intelligence frameworks? Do you see that it is essential for us to maintain this strong relationship for us to be able to operate effectively in those frameworks?

Hon John O. Brennan: There are many different channels, and you pointed out a number of them. Five Eyes is a very important group of five countries that share a lot, but a lot happens bilaterally between countries and between services, just like we release a lot of things to NATO and to multilateral organisations. We reserve, I guess, the most sensitive things for our British counterparts. That is the way it was. There are all these different ways to share intelligence. It is not just sending reports across the Atlantic in the digital world; it is also the interactions, the briefings. Whenever I would travel overseas, I would inevitably stop in London, either on the way out or on the way back, to talk to my counterparts. It is that constant interaction that I have, and it is at all various levels and it is taking place around the globe.

When I was stationed in Saudi Arabia, I was the chief US intelligence official there. My British counterpart was somebody with whom, if not weekly, certainly several times a month, I would get together and talk to. We would share. We would go into our classified settings in our respective embassies. That is taking place around the globe. I tend to put the British intelligence services at the top of the heap. We have very close relationships with a lot of the others, the Five Eyes and the other Europeans. Maybe it is the history of the relationship that goes back to the days of the OSS and what happened at Ditchley and other places that was the genesis of the closeness that developed.

- Q205 **Lord Robertson of Port Ellen:** I read Colin Powell's last book before he died where he deals with the famous occasion when he addressed the United Nations with the "slam dunk" evidence at that time and confesses that he had been sold this intelligence. How did the intelligence agencies get it so wrong?

Hon John O. Brennan: A very bad source was the basis for the intelligence that came out about these mobile biolabs and some of the CW. He is now publicly referred to as "Curveball". He is somebody who was a source from several years before. There were some questions about the initial vetting. The analyst who put together the assessment did not go back and validate and verify the information that was there, and it was not corroborated. Unfortunately, it drove some of the intelligence. There were people in the Bush Administration who were gung-ho to go and invade Iraq before 9/11 and before the assessment, so they were looking for opportunities. We talked outside in the hall how, in the Pentagon, Secretary Rumsfeld had put together his own intelligence

group to provide the basis. A lot of the claims about the relationship between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein were bogus. There had been a number of corrective steps taken as a result of that. A WMD commission was set up in the United States about the CIA practices and the intelligence community practices regarding validation and vetting and re-verification of those sources. It is very rigorous now. I would not expect a similar type of mistake to be made. When you are dealing with human sources and you are dealing with a lot of different intelligence and a lot of times it is contradictory, it is up to the analysts to make those judgments.

Professor Sir David Omand: I will point to Lord Butler's report. He got to the bottom of what had gone wrong with the human intelligence on the British side. The subsequent Chilcot report did not really add anything on the intelligence side to what Robin Butler had uncovered. We now talk rather glibly about confirmation bias, for example, seeing what you want to see and expect to see. There was some of that. There was some groupthink. There was perseveration, a wonderful word referring to the human wish to cling to previous ideas even when they are past their sell-by date. Saddam's past record prejudiced, if you like, the analysts to read the worst into the intelligence that was provided. You can put all these things together, as Robin Butler did.

The reforms that were subsequently carried out by the Butler implementation group, which I led, changed the way that we manage intelligence assessment, provided greater training for those who do the assessment, provided new opportunities for validation of human intelligence and new processes. All of that was done. Am I confident that we cannot make a mistake again? No. We will make mistakes because, as Robin Butler said, intelligence is fragmentary, incomplete and sometimes wrong. Would we in such difficult circumstances make such a poor showing of it? No, we would make a very much better job of it, but we might still get it wrong.

Q206 **Lord Grocott:** Almost a word-for-word question to what George Robertson asked is what I was going to ask, but I still think there is quite a possibility of development of it. The word "spectacular" hardly gets close to the misjudgment, whoever's it was, about Iraq's nuclear capability. You cannot get a much bigger issue than that or much bigger with more serious consequences of getting it wrong rather than right.

I would like to know a little bit more about the lessons that have been learned from it. To a layman, the problem with all these subjects is that intelligence by definition is something we know very little about, quite rightly, and it is in everyone's interests that only a limited number of people know about it. It is very difficult to know when things are going well and things are going badly, and it is very difficult to establish a system of political democratic oversight, which at some point there has to be. All those are never-ending problems.

A failure of this sort is so consequential. It is difficult to think of a comparison in some other walk of life. Did anyone get sacked as a result

of this? On the face of it, it looks like such a comic mistake. Stop me if I've got it wrong. One defector or one individual with demonstrable potential axes to grind speaks to politicians who, as you have rightly described I am sure, were pretty open to being persuaded that something needed to be done. As a result of that, without any substantial verification, we all know what ensued as a result. Did anyone get the sack?

The Chair: Can I interject to say that my intelligence tells me that there is about to be a Division? If you would like to answer quickly, we could possibly let you go.

Professor Sir David Omand: First, I would recommend re-reading Robin Butler's report. It is not as you describe. It is a much more complicated and nuanced situation, which is not to say that things did not go wrong—we have all admitted that—but you do have to get into some of the detail. There was the Curveball defector walk-in to the Germans. The Germans did not allow any British or American officer to interview him, and yet issued more than 100 reports from Curveball. The case management of this by them was poor.

In the end, of course, we did not go to war because of faulty intelligence: we went to war because powerful people with a neocon view of the world thought that the Middle East could be transformed by having a democratic regime installed in Iraq. History, perhaps, has not been kind to them. The United Kingdom joined the United States in that venture because our Prime Minister at the time believed, and still believes, that that was the right decision to take. Where the intelligence was so misleading was in relation to the House of Commons where there was the temptation to exaggerate the certainty of what was put forward. Ironically, the nuclear part that you mentioned was one of the parts that Robin Butler said we got most right. It was the evidence on the battlefield chemical weapons and the mobile biological warfare trailers that was misunderstood. Curveball had been a chemical engineer. He had worked on Saddam's BW programme. There was every reason to believe technically in this information. I would have to give credit here to some officers in SIS and MI6 who remained sceptical and who tried their best to test the material that was coming from the German service.

Hon John O. Brennan: The US intelligence got the capabilities wrong, but they did not get the intentions wrong because they never said that Saddam was planning to use them in any imminent way at all. It was the policymakers who in fact took the intelligence about the capability in terms of CW and BW and said, "We have to stop it before they decide to use it". There is a big difference between intentions and capabilities.

Secondly, one of the lessons that the US learned, another Colin Powell quote, was, "you break it, you bought it". What was our day-after plan if we won? That is where the real travesty took place, which was what happened to Iraq after the Iraqi military was vanquished. If we had a better day-after plan, I do not think we would have had the same type of problems that led to ISIS and so much chaos, death and destruction

there. It still would have been bad. The decision to invade Iraq was one of the biggest American blunders of the past century, but it was not all on the intelligence; policymakers share a lot of that blame.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed, gentlemen. If it is all right, we had probably better end the session there. We have really benefited from your input. Thank you so much. We will make sure you receive a transcript of the session.