

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

Oral evidence: Undersea cables: follow-up, HC 148

Monday 18 May 2026

5.30 pm

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Members present: Matt Western (The Chair); Lord Arbuthnot of Edrom; Lord Boateng; Dame Karen Bradley; Liam Byrne; Sarah Champion; Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi; Bill Esterson; Lord Godson; Lord Hutton of Furness; Lord Jack of Courance; Baroness Kidron; Mike Martin; Edward Morello; Lord Sedwill; Lord Tunncliffe; Baroness Tyler of Enfield; Lord Watts.

Questions 21 - 31

Witnesses

I: Elisabeth Braw, Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council; John Wrottesley, Executive Director, European Subsea Cables Association.

Examination of witnesses

Elisabeth Braw and John Wrottesley.

Q21 **The Chair:** Order, order. Welcome back to today's meeting and our second panel. Can I just ask witnesses to introduce themselves?

Elisabeth Braw: I am a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. I work on grey zone threats, and I am the author of the upcoming book *Undersea War*, which is about cables and pipelines.

John Wrottesley: Good afternoon, everyone. I am executive director with the European Subsea Cables Association.

Q22 **The Chair:** You sat through the first session, I am sure with great interest. Thank you for joining us again. What was your take on what you heard?

Elisabeth Braw: I thought there were some excellent and detailed questions. A couple that stood out concerned repair capability, which is a very specific and concrete area where the UK could make progress, despite the general threat situation remaining what it is.

The Chair: You are not convinced?

Elisabeth Braw: I thought there might be opportunities to be a bit more creative in thinking about repair capability. John may talk more about the situation when it comes to what is available on the market. But if we focus just on ships, that misses half the point—the other point being the repair crews, and there are just not enough of them. That is an area where the UK Government, this committee and the industry could maybe communicate more actively with the public about the fact that we need more repair men and women. It is possibly one of the most indispensable professions. If we do not have enough repair crews, modern life will stop. But there is an opportunity here for specific UK government action, which is that not everybody has to be an extremely sophisticated joiner—the people who repair the cables. You can be a jointing assistant, for example. What if the UK Government were to offer training courses for people to volunteer as jointing assistants? Then we would have highly skilled jointers who could be brought on to repair vessels, possibly bought by the Government. Also, members of the public could essentially volunteer their time, just as you do in the military reserves, as jointing assistants. This would not even be expensive because they would, again, volunteer their time.

The Chair: We will come back to that in a little bit.

John Wrottesley: The point on sovereign repair capability is interesting. There was a direct ask in the report about a sovereign repair ship, and we find it quite reassuring generally in industry that the Government and DSIT have taken a slightly measured approach to this to look at all the options available, because it is not quite as simple as a ship. As Elisabeth says, it is more about people and some of the other capabilities and options that might be there. A ship is, of course, an important part of that but it is important that any changes made do not cause particular distortions to the market or to the existing cable repair ecosystem. But a lot of work is going on in promoting skills and people—the next generation of professionals coming through. This is one of the most important things happening within industry.

In terms of the government response, looking at what can be done in the future, it is probably the right approach that all options are currently being looked at, including some creative approaches in maintenance zones and capabilities. This directly gets to the heart of the question of “business as usual” and peacetime or potential conflict-type situations. With some of this planning in advance and some of the more creative solutions, you can blur those lines, so that there is not quite such a direct difference between a “business as usual” or conflict-type arrangement.

The Chair: Just remind me, the US has the \$10-million-a-year cable security capability. Would you advocate that for the UK?

John Wrottesley: Maybe not exactly that approach. It is one approach that certainly could be looked at. Other countries have different approaches to their own capabilities. The US could be a model but maybe

not exactly the same. But the outcome of the work that DSIT is doing will hopefully come up with a range of options that could work in the UK context.

The Chair: More widely, the EU has stated its ambition and the seriousness it attaches to this area. It committed some €350 million in funding. Do you sense that there is the same seriousness coming from the Government, given what you have said today?

Elisabeth Braw: Probably not. The reason is that the incidents where cables have been damaged have been in EU waters, namely in the Gulf of Finland in the Baltic Sea, not so far in UK waters, although, as we all know, the UK is as vulnerable. But with that, there must be a recognition that today we are in a period where cables are seen as fair game by not just a few actors or Governments but around the world. Just a few days ago, Iranian state media reported, for example, that Iran is considering charging levies on undersea cables. It is worth bearing in mind that nothing like that has happened since cables were invented—by the way, by Victorians and the UK. The UK invented undersea cables. It is worth remembering the UK's leading role, and there is a future leading role for the UK to play in cables.

Cables have survived since the 1850s with Governments around the world accepting that, "Yes, they are there for the taking if you want to take them, but we are not going to interfere with them because we all need them". I think that consensus is declining. The UK does not have to wait until there is an incident. There have been several incidents along the lines of what has happened in the Baltic Sea, including in the Gulf of Finland, and maybe that realisation will hopefully translate into more action.

The Chair: I am conscious of time and sorry we were starting so late for this panel session. There are just a few topics that I am keen that we should get through. Lord Watts?

Q23 **Lord Watts:** How confident are you that the jointers that you have would go out at a time of crisis, and that the Royal Navy would be able to provide the back-up services that were required for them to do it safely?

John Wrottesley: As it stands at the moment, I am not particularly confident. That is one of the areas that needs to be looked at in focused detail. This links to the sovereign repair capability. It is about people and how that works together, whether it is reservists or some other sort of integration between defence and "business as usual" activity to make sure that you have trained jointers, personnel and people available at those times that are more uncertain. That needs to be closely looked at. But to stay on the same point, this is also something that the European Commission and the cable security toolbox focus on. It is something that Ireland is looking at as well. It is an international engagement piece but the same principles and challenges apply in terms of personnel skills, vessels and so on. It is part of the reason why just a ship might not be

the answer but there might be other solutions that can be looked at when everybody is looking to invest in the same places.

Q24 **Lord Jack of Courance:** In the last session you would have heard that we talked about landing station security. What is your assessment of the Government's progress to boost that? You may both answer.

John Wrottesley: I understand that DSIT has sent out letters to landing station operators. More work is being done there. I do not know exactly what.

Lord Jack of Courance: They have to respond by the end of the year, I think they said.

John Wrottesley: Yes.

Lord Jack of Courance: Is that just part of the progress? I mean, when they respond, do the Government then respond again or is DSIT looking for a firm plan?

John Wrottesley: That might be a question for DSIT rather than for me. But cable landing station security is something the industry is looking closely at as well. There has been a recent industry recommendation published by the ICPC on cable landing station front hall and beach manhole security specifically, so there is a bit of a momentum there between the work that DSIT is doing, the ICPC and industry together.

Lord Jack of Courance: Are there practical obstacles that need addressing? I am thinking, for instance, of local planning authority approval if further security upgrades need to be made. Would those be issues?

John Wrottesley: For additional building, potentially. I do not know what those would be, necessarily. Part of the challenge of development of cable infrastructure generally is the regulatory and permitting environment, which does not always take into account strategic needs. Maybe I am getting on to a slightly different topic, because that is not something for local authorities but more at a national level.

Lord Jack of Courance: It sort of is, because cables are reserved to the UK Government. But, rather like with nuclear or the grid, cables are reserved but the planning is devolved. This may be a question for a Minister but maybe that should be reserved to the UK. Planning should be reserved alongside whatever has been reserved rather than giving that power away.

John Wrottesley: It certainly can create challenges in any of these developments. The planning process might review certain policy aspects. It is the same for national level marine licensing, for example. It looks at specific areas but might not consider the strategic importance of subsea cables to the UK in that decision-making process. That is something missing.

Q25 **The Chair:** Is there a lot of money in cables? In all seriousness, in terms of upgrading security, how profitable are they for the owners of the cables? How willing are they to seriously upgrade the security themselves?

John Wrottesley: I do not know whether I can answer that question well.

The Chair: Is there a 10% margin or do you not know?

John Wrottesley: I do not know. It would be beyond me to comment.

Elisabeth Braw: It depends on how you want them to upgrade security. Is it through sensors? I know they are not keen on sensors. There is also the issue of how exactly whatever the sensors pick up would be used. Where would it go? Who would be the custodian of that information? Sensors, for example, are one solution that seems to make sense when you first consider it, and then it opens all kinds of other vulnerabilities. So, it depends on what cable owners are being asked to do. Hypothetically, if we think about the biggest cable owners today, companies like Google could do anything. They have the money to do anything. They could even have their own cable defence fleets but that would clearly not be desirable.

Q26 **Liam Byrne:** John, when a company goes to lay a cable, presumably it has to get some kind of planning permission.

John Wrottesley: Are you talking about planning permission or the general consenting process?

Liam Byrne: If I want to go and lay a cable, who says yes or no?

John Wrottesley: It would be a combination of the Marine Management Organisation looking at the landing at the coast and, out to 12 nautical miles, the Crown Estate. Various different entities are involved.

Liam Byrne: What sort of duties are imposed on me, for example, to repair the cable if it breaks, or is it just a carte blanche to put the cable down?

John Wrottesley: No, there would be repair obligations to keep it in good condition.

Liam Byrne: What about fixing it if it breaks?

John Wrottesley: In terms of being required to fix it if it breaks, I do not know. I would need to check, to be honest.

Liam Byrne: Do I need to insure the cable?

John Wrottesley: That is where the maintenance zones or maintenance agreements come in. Really, it is more of a self-insurance that owners pay to have those vessels on standby rather than paying insurance premiums to recover costs.

Liam Byrne: So what economic incentive is there on the cable owners to invest in getting more repair ships in place?

John Wrottesley: In terms of repair ships, that is driven by the number of cable faults. We have seen the number of faults coming down over the years, and we are quite well served on cable repair.

Liam Byrne: If we now have this new peril to these cables, and we are basically being told that the Royal Navy has to spend a load of money building new ships and investing in underwater drones to protect them all, you have an externality there that it does not seem that the cable owners are stepping up to.

John Wrottesley: The cable owners would be very focused on keeping cables in good condition. That is why they pay to have their ships on standby.

Liam Byrne: But what if they have Russians cutting them? What are they going to do about putting in place repair capability to fix that sort of problem?

John Wrottesley: The difficulty then comes, as we talked about, between “business as usual” versus a conflict-type situation, when vessels and personnel might be less willing to go to sea. That is really where the roles of industry versus Government and defence need to be understood. Anything during a peacetime situation would be a responsibility for industry to repair, and it has shown that it does that quite well. We have enough ships for that purpose.

Liam Byrne: Are we at peace now or are we not?

John Wrottesley: That is not for me to answer.

Liam Byrne: Well, I think Ministers are pretty clear that we are not at peace, so we as a committee have to try to understand where the burden falls for investing in repair ships and where the taxpayer has to pick up the bill. I am interested in where you think the balance lies.

Elisabeth Braw: I can come in. The first thing to remember is that there is a difference in costs when a data cable breaks compared to a power cable. A power cable is much more expensive to repair. All cable owners do their best to keep their cables in good order because cables are expensive to buy and install in the first place, and if one breaks then they try to fix it. The biggest problem is with power cables—for example, the operators of Estlink 2 lost around €50 million when it was hit by that ship on Christmas Day 2024. They can pick up that cost at once, but what if it happens several times? What sort of cable operator would be willing to put a cable on the seabed under such circumstances? I do not know how that could possibly make sense from a business perspective. Data cables are quicker and much easier to repair but that is still an added cost for them.

Then, as John says, we come to a situation where repair crews have to go out in, let us say, adversarial conditions. That is exactly what we have seen in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz: installation crews—not repair crews this time, but installation crews—have not been able to go in because it is too dangerous. What if repair crews could not go in because the situation was too hostile? That brings us to the question of insurance that was asked earlier.

Liam Byrne: Before we get on to hostile situations, let me give you the case study of a place that is not that hostile, but which is a long way away, called Orkney. The cable repairs there took a month, which feels like a long period of time. The question we are interested in is the public policy goal of how to make sure that, when cables are damaged or broken by hostile action, someone repairs them quickly. I am interested in whether you think we need more vessels or more reservists. Is there a lack of clarity about who exactly should be paying for all this?

John Wrottesley: As it stands, the cable repair ecosystem is market-driven, so industry repairs cables when they are damaged. I would say that a month for repair is pretty good in dynamic marine conditions—operating at sea, getting cables, picking up spares, sailing a ship up and getting it repaired.

There is a balance here. If you have a small number of cable faults but a large number of cable ships, and you have a lot of cable ships sitting around not doing very much, you will have a loss of skills—people forget how to undertake these activities, and so on—and the commercial model does not necessarily stack up in the same way. When it comes to looking at anything beyond that, having additional capacity beyond what is required commercially is a different conversation, and that is a cost that would probably need to be looked at nationally because there would not necessarily be a need for the typical base case for cable repair. Again, that does not necessarily need to be a vessel, although it could be, but all these questions need to be explored in the round. It could be being part of the maintenance agreements and structures or something else in order to make sure that, if there is a conflict-type situation, there is the ability to access cables and sail and operate a ship to be able to do the repair in those more uncertain circumstances. It does not just have to be war or a large conflict; it can also be—the Red Sea is not necessarily a good example—somewhere where there is heightened tension that might cause uncertainty and make operators less willing to sail vessels in those circumstances.

Q27 The Chair: I was struck by the fact that it seems to take 10 years to train a jointer. What is so specialist about that? Think about how long it takes to train a brain surgeon. Ten years seems an incredible length of time, and you are talking about the lack of capacity in the skills that we have. That is terrifying, is it not?

John Wrottesley: I am sure that if there was a concerted effort then those training timescales could be accelerated, but typically that is how long it takes to train a competent jointer who needs sea time experience,

the ability to do the technical work of jointing and everything that goes along with it.

The Chair: I do not mean to diminish the task, but they are putting two cables together like an electrician would do for British Telecom or whatever. Is that what actually happens—they bring the cables up on to the ship and then sew them back together somehow?

John Wrottesley: Yes, splicing is done on board the vessel, but it is highly specialised in the marine environment. You have the dynamics of cable handling. You have huge lengths of cable in the sea and cables under tension brought on to the back deck of the ship. There is a lot of specialist expertise that goes along with that. Still, there certainly needs to be consideration about how we can improve capacity and bring new people in who are willing to go offshore and work in this industry.

The Chair: Is it well paid?

John Wrottesley: I understand so.

Elisabeth Braw: It is just that not enough people know about this profession. It is out of sight.

The Chair: We are doing our best. That is why I am asking how well it is paid, maybe to get a few more people interested in doing it, because we clearly need the capacity.

Elisabeth Braw: But no one realises that the profession exists until a cable in their neighbourhood is broken. At that point, they can think of nothing but splicers, or rather jointers who can splice.

John Wrottesley: There is widespread recognition that it is harder to persuade people to work offshore. I think the Navy and other maritime industries have this challenge as well.

The Chair: It worked in the oil industry, did it not? I call Lord Hutton.

Q28 **Lord Hutton of Furness:** Can we turn our attention to our future undersea infrastructure? Are you both concerned that future cable routes might have the effect of creating clusters of high-value targets, possibly creating greater vulnerabilities? Is industry doing anything to reduce this possible risk?

John Wrottesley: Through the design, planning and routeing of systems, industry is always obsessed with resilience. It looks at burial protection and geographic diversity to make sure that there is physical separation between cables. You do not want to end up in a situation where you have choke points and clustering. Unfortunately, we have a limited amount of seabed, and a lot of other development is taking place as well, so there may be some areas that become increasingly congested around the UK. There are areas that are relatively congested already.

There is a lot of work in those areas. I think the report mentioned the marine delivery route map that the Crown Estate is looking at, and it is

looking at protecting strategic space for future telecoms and subsea telecoms cable routeing to make sure that they are not prevented from landing in the UK, and that might end up with a limited effect of clustering. Of course that is not the intention, but the opposite of that would be having blockades where no cables could come ashore at all. In future, those might need some level of additional scrutiny or the prohibition of particular activities in that area.

Lord Hutton of Furness: Do you think the security risk of such a policy is being given serious attention?

John Wrottesley: In what way?

Lord Hutton of Furness: You referred to the marine delivery route map and talked about an unintended consequence, but it is pretty obvious that this is a really serious risk. Then why are we doing it?

John Wrottesley: It is being very directly looked at. The alternative of doing nothing means that you will end up with large areas where there are no route options left for cables, whereas this is looking at making sure strategically that we have safeguarded the future by ensuring that there are areas left.

Lord Hutton of Furness: Are we managing that risk properly?

John Wrottesley: I think so at the moment, yes.

Lord Hutton of Furness: And what about industry? My question was about what industry will do to help reduce the risk of that.

John Wrottesley: Industry will always continue to aim for geographic diversity and well-protected and well-buried cables, for all of those reasons which are more about protecting their own assets.

Lord Hutton of Furness: So you naturally favour route diversification?

John Wrottesley: Yes.

Lord Hutton of Furness: Do you think Government is engaging with you properly on that?

John Wrottesley: Yes, I think so. That is well understood. DSIT has been involved in the development of the marine delivery route map. All those conversations are taking place to balance those various risks.

Lord Hutton of Furness: Thank you, John. What about heightened monitoring and protection for these sensitive sites, particularly where cables come onshore? Who will need to pay for that heightened security around those sites?

John Wrottesley: Again, it depends what the security is for and what is being asked for. Cable owners will pay for monitoring systems on their cables for cable protection purposes. That is to monitor their own assets. In terms of other security measures, maybe at landing stations and so

on, I do not know. It would depend on what was being asked and for what purpose.

Elisabeth Braw: Can I add to that? You mentioned diversification in terms of geography, but one development worth paying attention to is the decrease in ownership diversity. Specifically, the American tech giants are now able through their enormous resources to co-own cables and increasingly own them on their own—not just any cables, but extremely powerful ones. It is worth thinking about what vulnerability that exposes the UK to and what it means for smaller cable owners.

Lord Hutton of Furness: But that is more of a commercial risk you are describing rather than a security risk.

Elisabeth Braw: Well, it is a commercial risk, but if you consider the current geopolitical environment, what would happen if decision-makers in the United States decided they wanted to harm the UK or another European country in a way that was less brutal—along the lines of tariffs or other commercial means? That seems to me an area where they could impose considerable consequences on the UK or whatever other country they wanted to target.

Q29 **Lord Tunnicliffe:** There seems to be frighteningly little redundancy in the system. To give us some feel for that debate, what roughly does a cable cost?

John Wrottesley: Pass. I am not sure of the exact cost.

Lord Tunnicliffe: I do not want the exact cost—the number of noughts will do.

Elisabeth Braw: For example, one cable co-owned by Google that was recently installed cost \$600 million.

Lord Tunnicliffe: That was from where to where?

Elisabeth Braw: I want to say it was between Japan and the United States.

Lord Tunnicliffe: That sounds like peanuts for something so important.

Elisabeth Braw: Well, it is peanuts for a major company.

Lord Tunnicliffe: Or even a small Government.

Elisabeth Braw: So your point is that Governments should own cables.

Q30 **The Chair:** Finally, Ms Braw, you may have heard the Minister say that he was confident in the Navy's ability to track, say, Russian vessels and their proximity to some of our infrastructure and therefore that, in the eventuality of damage to a cable, the intervention would be pretty immediate. Surely, when it comes to a trawler or a less obvious vessel damaging our infrastructure, it is going to take quite some time for a Navy vehicle to attend.

Elisabeth Braw: If it does not happen to be nearby. Thanks to things like Baltic Sentry, there is now more patrolling around cables. But I think the other question is about what happens once that naval or coastguard vessel reaches the site. What are they supposed to do? What are they being asked to do other than document that a vessel may be up to no good? This really gets to the bottom, as it were, of what we are trying to do to protect cables. We can monitor, conduct surveillance and have all these technological tools, but how do we respond when we see something happening? It is interesting that the only country that has been willing to disrupt a cable incident as it was happening is Taiwan. The reason for that, I think, is that it is not party to UNCLOS, for reasons to do with the fact that it is not recognised as a member of the United Nations. If you are not party to UNCLOS, you have a bit more liberty, which on this occasion works to Taiwan's advantage. But for everybody else, what are the vessels supposed to do when they reach that site?

Q31 **Sarah Champion:** Elisabeth, I sense frustration when you are speaking. Do you think that countries, particularly the UK, are aware enough of the risks that undersea cables present, and are they doing enough to protect them?

Elisabeth Braw: I think they are aware, but it is just not clear what anybody can do about it. Now that the consensus that has existed since Victorian times—that undersea cables are supposed to be left alone because it is in everybody's interest and they are not in any way offensive to anybody—is fading, what is anybody supposed to do about it without violating international rules? If you violate international rules to defend against somebody who is violating international rules, then it becomes a bizarre game. This is where the UK Government and other western Governments are caught.

I would also propose to the committee that maybe one of the ideas you could put to the Government is that the UK, as the originator of the global undersea cable system, perhaps has a special role to play in assembling an international coalition of Governments who are willing to stand up for the protection of undersea cables. I submit that that is almost every Government; it is only a small minority of actors out there who are actively trying to cause harm to the cables.

The Chair: Thank you very much, both of you, for your time. Thanks for being flexible, as we started and finished a bit late. That concludes our second panel and our session today. Thank you again.