

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Defending global Britain in a competitive age, HC 1333

Tuesday 23 March 2021

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Members present: Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Sarah Atherton; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1 – 60

Witnesses

[I:](#) Lord Richards of Herstmonceux GCB CBE DSO DL, Chief of Defence Staff, Ministry of Defence (2010-13); Lord Houghton of Richmond GCB CBE DL, Chief of Defence Staff, Ministry of Defence (2013-16).



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Richards of Herstmonceux and Lord Houghton of Richmond.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this Defence Select Committee inquiry into the Government's integrated review looking at defending global Britain in a competitive age. I am delighted to have two very senior guests with us today to look at the documents that have been produced, General Lord David Richards and General Lord Nick Houghton, who are both former heads of the armed forces. I am very grateful for your time this afternoon.

General Richards, two documents were produced in the last week. We first have *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, which sets out the ambitions of Britain, or global Britain, if you like; it also marks out the threats as well. We then have the response—the defence command paper that sits with that. Just taking those two documents to open up our discussion, how would you rate this one in clarifying what “global Britain” means and the threats that we face, sir?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: The idea of an integrated review is, in principle, a very good one, and the analysis is excellent. I can see its academic pedigree and I congratulate the authors. You cannot really divorce the two papers. One can only judge the adequacy or not of the second paper, the command paper, in light of the policy and strategy, which I will come back to briefly, that informs its deductions, or should inform its deductions. Are Britain's global ambitions deliverable in practice with the resources that are being allocated to them? I am not that certain, and obviously we will get into the detail during this session.

The first thing we have to do—this is an answer to the first question—is agree what the primary mission is. I infer that it is state-on-state war fighting or deterring such events. Self-evidently, we can only do this with allies, principally NATO. How we will increase our contribution, influence and leadership role in NATO while concurrently exercising much-needed extra leverage over our European allies is rather left unexplained.

There are a couple of catchphrases that I note, including “nimble”. I do not particularly like that word; I prefer “agile”. There is “high readiness” and so on. They are used as if they are new. You are all very interested in defence. I was involved in two operations myself, though there were many others, in East Timor and Sierra Leone that were both the apotheosis of nimble; that was nothing to do with me, by the way. We went from crash to bang right out in the Far East in under seven days, and in Sierra Leone within 36 hours in 2000. The idea that this is new is just not right. The one reason we were able to do it was that we had troops, ships and capability to chuck at it, and excellent command and control as well.

There are many other things I could talk about, but those are a few observations. The key thing that we must get to during this session, I



would argue, is whether we have enough resources to meet the intent of the first paper, if one can elicit what that is. I am a little worried as to whether I have got that right, but I think it is state-on-state war fighting. Then it is about what we cannot do, which is almost as important.

When we come onto the second paper I have a lot of questions, because, if I may observe, it is quite short on detail.

Q2 Chair: That is very helpful indeed. We certainly will explore the resources questions. General Houghton, what are your initial thoughts?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: You have started us off in quite a good place, because the key issue of any review to me is to translate, on the one hand, the narrative, the global security context and the ambition, into the other hand, which is a programme of sustainably affordable and relevant capability. At first blush, I am quite content with both papers. My comment on the integrated review is that it is very good on the description of the rise in complexity of the global security situation. It is also quite sensible about national ambition within that. It certainly has none of the hubris of the 2015 review.

One thing that I am not certain the integrated review paper does well is analysing the true scale of the threat. To me, it is possible to have an increased number of threats and a more complex situation but actually a reduction in real risk. You might want to explore this, but it is quite possible that we can become more anxious but not in greater peril, if you see what I mean. Therefore, I am not certain that they brought out the true nature of the risk we face, but they were very good at telling us how much more complicated the defence context is.

When it comes to the defence command paper itself, there is some very good phraseology that the Secretary of State has used, if he is true to it. I have every view that at least he hopes to be, because he says that, if anything, it is an honest assessment of what we can and will do: match money to credible ambition, turn hollow forces into credible ones and not be overambitious and under-resourced. If that sort of determination is carried forward into the actual programme of sustainably affordable defence capability, that will be a very good result.

As my colleague David has said, there is not sufficient detail in the defence command paper yet to indicate whether or not that sustainably affordable challenge can be brought off. That is all I need to say to start with.

Q3 Chair: Thank you for that. That is very helpful. You mentioned what we can do and what we will do; there is also the question of what we should do. If you do not mind, with your indulgence, not wishing to trivialise the threats, I just want to play a very short quickfire game with you. Please give us single answers: increasing, decreasing or staying the same. Please do not give us hypotheticals or long answers. We can return to those issues if you like. Let us play the game about changing threats. If



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you were advising the Prime Minister about global threats over the next five to 10 years, would you say China's aggression and influence will be increasing, decreasing or staying the same?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: It will stay the same.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: It will stay the same.

Q4 **Chair:** What about Russia?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: It will stay the same

Lord Houghton of Richmond: It will stay the same, but with the caveat that it is the one that could be an irrational actor.

Q5 **Chair:** What about extremism?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: It is coming back.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I do not know whether he means returning or coming down.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: It is coming up; it is coming back.

Chair: There is no conferring.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I was just trying to explain my answer. We never did communicate.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: When you say "extremism", I would say that there will be no change for ideological extremism. Extremism born of things like populism and nationalism is potentially on the increase.

Q6 **Chair:** What about threats in the grey zone?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: They will go up.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: They will go up.

Q7 **Chair:** What about cyber threats?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: They will go up.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: They will go up.

Q8 **Chair:** What about threats from space and threats to our space assets?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: They will go up.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: They will go up.

Q9 **Chair:** Turning to regional stability, would you say that stability in the Middle East is going to get worse, stay the same or get better?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: It is going to stay the same.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: Yes, it will be about the same.



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Q10 **Chair:** What about the Arctic?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I am trying to do one-word answers, unlike my pal, but I would say we want to keep that demilitarised, but it is not. It is going to go up.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I am only not giving one-word answers because I tend to agree with him, but I do not want to give the Committee the impression that I am just some sort of sheep.

Chair: Nobody would think that, General.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: No. It is probably going up because it is becoming more accessible.

Q11 **Chair:** What about the Sahel?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: It is going up.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I think the same.

Q12 **Chair:** What about eastern Europe?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: It is going up.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I think the same.

Q13 **Chair:** Will western collective resolve to stand up to global threats strengthen, weaken or stay the same?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I think it will weaken.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: My sense is it will strengthen. Part of that is the politics of Biden. It will strengthen. There is more residual strength there than we might think.

Q14 **Chair:** Finally, will global institutions' holding of nations to account and advancement of co-operation strengthen, weaken or stay the same?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I fear it will stay the same at best.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I think it will stay the same, because I am a pessimist, but I hope it does not.

Chair: Thank you for doing that. I know it is almost trivial, but I was trying to illustrate the complexity and variety of threats that we face. During the Cold War, it was a single, very clear-cut threat, but you could arguably say the situation is more volatile, simply because of the complexity and lack of clarity or lack of organisation of the West, which is shrinking, to take on these growing threats. Thank you very much indeed.

Q15 **John Spellar:** I will return to the mundane business of asking questions. It is always good for the Committee to be reminded of our operations in Sierra Leone and East Timor. The question is about which, if any, other



country would have been able to operate in that sort of timescale with that sort of effect. Even the United States might have been constrained in that.

Coming to the integrated review, you have rightly said that there is quite a bit of analysis, but it is not entirely clear how that leads to the conclusions. The question we want to pose to you is whether you think the conclusions give a clear strategic direction to the armed forces to achieve our national security and foreign affairs objectives.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: John, I am afraid that I do not think it does. The Germans, as I suspect we have talked about some time in the past, would always seek, in a grand strategic document like this, something that they might call the guiding intent. What is the intent of this paper? Do we put down clearly what our priorities are and how we should go about achieving them?

The analysis, as Nick said and I said to a degree, is actually jolly good, but it is this latter point about the plan or the strategy that comes out of it that I am afraid I do not yet get. I can infer things, but it is so important, as you again rightly say, because the second paper should be predicated on a clear understanding of what the armed forces' priorities will be and where in particular in the world they will be. Let us discuss it, because I am not certain.

Q16 **John Spellar:** Just before I bring General Houghton in, would it be fair to say that, during the period of the Cold War, our whole strategy and doctrine was based on "The Threat", with capital Ts. We knew what that was. It was the Soviet Union, and that assessment operated right the way across the world. Are we clear from these documents today, and therefore obviously in the guidance for the armed forces, what the threat is?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I do not think we are, but, to be fair, as the Chair just brought out in the game that we played, it is very diffuse. There are a lot of different issues out there that today the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister have to contend with. I feel we could do better in establishing the guiding intent. Is it state-on-state warfare or is that so unlikely that we should predicate our structures and our capability on something else? That is what I was hoping to get from it, perhaps slightly naïvely because we have to cover so many different bases.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: It is a very good question, and it is one of the shortcomings in the aggregation of the two documents. It paints this highly complicated global security context, but it does not appear to prioritise what our response should be. A crude analysis of the capability choices would slightly indicate to me—I can tell you why I think this is the case—that we are being more selective in what we are contributing to the hard-power, existential state-on-state threats, and more of our focus, attention, time and money is going into the grey-zone threats that



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ameliorate the security threats that are not existential and sit below the threshold of formalised war.

To give a bit of flesh to that, there is undoubtedly a reduction in the sustainable mass that we can generate and deploy. A slightly modified deterrent with a significant carrier-strike maritime capability and then a little bit of what I have called elsewhere a strategic bet on a more technically sophisticated land element is what we are now offering to that hard power of collective defence against a potentially existential large, hard threat.

Q17 John Spellar: I just want to pursue that, because it really relates to part of the concept of the benefits of persistent engagement, including where the document talks about providing training, capacity-building and education to our allies. Within that, do the benefits outweigh the costs in terms of focusing on the main mission?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I am not absolutely certain that the focus on some of that is not actually to do with the regionalised or proxy elements of this new grey-zone threat as opposed to the hard threat itself.

My own view is that they are right to deprioritise the existential threat in respect of Russia or China, but for different reasons. If we take Russia, the deterrence of that is still the collective undertaking of NATO. NATO, in hard power terms, still exceeds Russia 12-to-one in military terms and 20-to-one in spending terms. Our difficulty there is managing what effectively, in both economic and demographic terms, is a declining power in such a way that we do not mismanage and miscalculate and become the architects of some rash action on their behalf.

Similarly vis-à-vis China, China is worrying in respect of geopolitical competition vis-à-vis the United States, but I do not see that as an existential defence threat to the United Kingdom or to Europe. It is more a geopolitical issue of accommodation.

That is a bit of a long answer, but the paperwork would have been right to conclude that the hard-power threat is not one that needs a disproportionate amount of resources in terms of whatever is being made available. It is the grey-zone threats that are the up arrow.

It does not really say that in so many words. Perhaps it is taking a chapter from the principles of our nuclear deterrent by being deliberately ambiguous, but I do not think it is not trying to be that; it is failing to be clear.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Nick has gone into a number of other very important areas, like how we deal with Russia and China. On the specifics of your question, this idea of persistent engagement in places like Africa, the Middle East and so on certainly has a role, not least to keep people motivated and interested. Otherwise, they become armed



forces that are there to deter, presumably. It plays that important role as well as a strategic one, which is meant to remind our friends and allies, particularly in the Commonwealth, one would hope, that there is an alternative to China.

What I would like to see is a strategy that is as much if not more to do with money and depriving China of advantage in non-military ways, where they are in danger of overpowering us over the next 10 to 15 years. Chips, rare metals and all these sorts of things could be much more important to counter China's strategy than deploying a carrier now and again with a couple of frigates to help protect it. It is important, but it poses a much bigger question within that concept.

Q18 Chair: Just on that note, will any of these documents affect China's behaviour or Russia's behaviour? Are they going to look at these documents and say, "We are concerned about them"?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I do not think China will. Listening, as best as I can, to friends of mine in the Far East and what they think about the carrier deployment, they are not worried about that in the slightest. You may be about to come on to it, but for me that poses risk without great strategic advantage. I would have preferred us to focus much more unequivocally on the Euro-Atlantic area in our maritime, land and air forces, freeing up American assets, if necessary, to focus on China on our collective behalf. I imagine you are going to get on to that.

Russia will certainly not be worried by what we are doing. It will see that we are going to have a much smaller conventional force. As I have said elsewhere, it could suddenly be an asymmetric attraction to those countries with very large armed forces to use those in a more traditional way while we neuter each other in the more high-tech areas.

Chair: Thank you for that. Let us look at some of the conflicts we might engage in.

Q19 Stuart Anderson: Hello, Generals. You both mentioned at the beginning that you thought there would be a rise in the grey-zone threats. General Houghton, you mentioned the time and money invested in the grey zone as part of this review. Let us look outside of that. What I am trying to establish at the moment is whether the UK will realistically retain the capabilities required to deploy to larger and more complex, high-intensity conflicts. General Houghton, that is first to you, please.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: It will not. You are not suggesting that sort of conflict is a grey-zone conflict, are you?

Q20 Stuart Anderson: No, not at all. What I am saying is that there has been a large focus on that, as you have both pointed out. Will we retain the capabilities to operate in the more complex, high-intensity conflicts?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: We appear to be reducing down to a set of armed forces that is sort of one-shot, with quite long notice and not



long sustainment. You have to be specific to context and scenario to say, “Could we do that? Could we not do that?” It looks like one result of this review, in terms of the numbers that have been reduced in terms of straightforward platforms and boots on the ground, is that we are less able to deploy to conflicts at scale.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I would agree with that analysis. To be fair, we probably did not possess it anyway; we talked it up. You will be the experts on the politics of this, but I know that in 2017 Britain, along with other NATO nations, committed something like two war-fighting divisions to NATO, knowing full well that actually we have not been able to do that sort of thing for a while. This is a game I remember playing as a colonel when we went over to Brussels to get our annual report and get our bottom spanked for not being good enough.

If you want to get into the detail, I am worried that the one so-called war-fighting division that is left is actually not very fightable. I commanded an armoured brigade. It had two type-58 tank armoured regiments. It had two armoured infantry battalions with a whole load of Warrior armoured fighting vehicles. These new ones in due course will get new tanks, and I am sure they will be jolly good, but a tank alone does not enable you to fight that brigade or division if there are going to be no armoured infantry fighting vehicles and nothing with a turret. I know the Army is puzzled about how it would use an ASV, a sort of wheeled FV430—hopefully it will work a bit better—with limited artillery and engineers. Although we are keeping alive the spirit of fighting in a high-intensity war on the land, how you actually do it is another thing altogether. The Army will come up with solutions. I just hope they are doable.

As far as air is concerned, the reduction in planned numbers of aircraft is worrying. The attrition rate on aircraft in high-intensity conflict can be considerable. I wonder whether those have been thought through properly. There is going to be a reduction in Typhoon numbers. In terms of helicopters, there is going to be a big reduction in Chinooks.

We should not be under any illusions. We are now able to plug the black hole. Thank goodness the Prime Minister pushed this increase through, by the way, because I do not know what we would be talking about otherwise. The black hole has to be filled, and you then have to pay for the new grey-zone activity, the high-end and high-tech stuff. There was not going to be enough, inevitably, even with the increase, to pay for a really joined-up war-fighting capability. That is what we are now discussing. How do you make what is left work convincingly to the point that you deter a potential enemy?

Q21 **Stuart Anderson:** It is an interesting point. Thank you for expanding on that. When we asked, you both said that, no, we could not retain the capability. General Richards, you said that, if we are honest, we did not have it previously. When did we actually have that capability? Would it



have been one decade ago or two decades ago?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: When I was a brigade commander in the late 1990s, around that time we had four divisions deployed to the British Army of the Rhine. They were all capable, joined-up divisions, though the kit of that era was probably nothing like what we would want now. We slowly wound that down, but in 2003 there was a very convincing performance in the desert. Could we have done it with more than one division? No. If you have five years' warning, you can do these things, but it is different from a standing start. By then we were down to one very capable war-fighting division. Nick can agree or not.

What worries me now is that we are cobbling together forces and making the best of a job, hoping that other things like cyber will compensate. My big worry is that in the mid-2020s, by the way, there will be a big dip before hopefully we start building up again in the way anticipated in this review.

Stuart Anderson: It would be a perfect scenario if we were given that five years' notice, but I do not somehow think we will be.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: No.

Q22 **Stuart Anderson:** Could you explain to the Committee what the challenges are to seamlessly moving between operating and war-fighting in practice?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: That is what good training does for you. Again, I assume the Army is going to find it harder to afford to do the sort of very realistic training that leads to high readiness. We were at high states of readiness. The training in Canada and so on that Nick and I both went through was as good as you can get. It was not far off war in terms of its realism and the demands made on the people.

Training is very important, but there are all sorts of other things that professionals will talk about, such as sustainability. Nick has already mentioned that. There is also logistics. After the Second World War, General Bradley famously said that amateurs talk about strategy and professionals talk about logistics. Those are the sorts of things one has to focus on. It is a state of mind.

You need excellent command and control. You can have the best troops and the best kit in the world, but if you do not have very effective command and control with excellent and innovative commanders, it does not matter. All these things come together, but critical too is the politics of it all, as you guys know better than me.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: If I can just complement something David said about the war-fighting division and that sort of construct, I am sure that what this integrated operating concept, particularly the battlefield of the future, is wanting us to imagine is not actually the



deployment of heavy armour at scale with supporting armoured fighting vehicles with weeks of artillery supplies.

In terms of what they are imagining as the future battlefields, what you do not want to do is just to deploy lots of targets on the ground, which will then get destroyed by the superior technical competence of your enemy flying ISTAR and precision drones. The way in which the chief of defence describes it to us in our various briefings is that this is more a game of hide and seek on the battlefield, where the organisation with the greater data and information superiority and the greater precision and weight of aerial strike will dominate. We are not comparing like with like in how they are imagining that the character of a future land battle might be. In a way, we have to ditch some of our baggage about high-intensity operations of the traditional division in the fight, as it were.

In terms of whether or not this all going to work, this is a bit of a strategic bet, as I say. There are different conversations that are happening in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. What is the legal framework within which some of this autonomous battlefield works? What are the ethical and moral considerations of having autonomous and robotic warfare? It is quite a long way before this will actually be realised, but that is what we are being invited to consider.

Stuart Anderson: Thank you, Generals. You touch on a very interesting point on the ethics of this. I am sure we will come on to that later on.

Q23 **Chair:** On General Houghton's point that it will take a while for this equipment, assets and capabilities to materialise, we have possibly an opportunity to step forward. Saudi Arabia is looking for a ceasefire with the Houthis. It announced that last night. Yemen could easily be a place where, if there was a political solution, you would see Britain, as the United Nations Security Council penholder, wanting to step forward to play an active stabilisation role.

General Richards, when you were commanding in Afghanistan, first, how many years were you there for?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I was just under a year actually commanding ISAF and the expansion, but I have obviously been there a number of other times too.

Q24 **Chair:** How many brigades rotated through during that period?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: In my year or so, two brigades came through.

Q25 **Chair:** You need to have the capability to replace, to have relief in place, to be able to put forward a brigade. I just wonder whether you have a comment on the Security Force Assistance Brigade, which is on page 52 of the report. It sounds very much like a positive idea for experts who do stabilisation and post-conflict security to be able to move in. Were we to go into somewhere like Yemen, which I presume would not be too



dissimilar to somewhere like Bosnia, for example, but probably more dangerous, you would need to have a relief in place. You would need to have another brigade and the ability to keep that presence going.

Is there a concern that we are becoming too niche or too bespoke? Are we moving away from Charles Krulak's three-block war, if you are familiar with his work? Do you have a view on that, General?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Yes, I do. I would say a couple of things. First, Nick mentioned earlier this idea about how sustainable we are in the future with a smaller armed force. Thinking of Yemen, for example, and going back to my experience in Afghanistan, we went into Afghanistan rather like we did into Basra, expecting to wear berets as if we were in Northern Ireland. I learned even in Sierra Leone that stabilisation troops, whether they are wearing blue berets or not, must be fighting troops. They have to be very well trained and they have to have all the kit, because suddenly one of those groups or forces that you are trying to keep apart from each other turns on you, and you are fighting a war. At a low tactical level, you are fighting a little war.

I am not even certain, except in the most relatively benign of environments, that this force or new brigade, which I have not had a proper look at yet, is really appropriate to high-end stabilisation or peacekeeping of the sort we are talking about. Yemen would certainly be in that category. Like you, I have heard that that is a possible option in which people are trying to persuade us to become involved.

Chair: It will be dangerous because al-Qaeda is very much based there, as Daesh is as well.

Q26 **Mr Francois:** General David, good afternoon. In terms of this brigade, if you remember the old rule of three, you would have one brigade in theatre, one brigade in work-up training waiting to go and a third brigade that had recently come back from theatre recuperating. If you only had one brigade, realistically, if it had three battalions or equivalent units, that might be enough to sustain one battalion in theatre at one time with the second training ready to go and the third recuperating. Otherwise, you are going to need three brigades to sustain one, are you not?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Yes, if that is the scale that one is talking about. It is also why, if you remember, I said at the beginning that it would be very helpful if we really properly understood the guiding intent of the new structure. Is it state-on-state war? If so, we should be bigger for all the reasons we have discussed, with the requirement for numbers and mass still. If it is for all these other operations, like stabilisation and the sorts of things we were just talking about, the structure and the size could well be wrong, because you cannot do the sorts of things you are articulating, absolutely correctly.

The other thing, as I said, to emphasise is that you have to be able to fight in these environments. No responsible general or political leader should ever again send British troops into the sort of environment in



which they might be required to fight—they should often make that assumption—unless absolutely convinced that is not going to be the case. Even from my experience in Sierra Leone, I watched some very capable UN troops be completely suckered by the Revolutionary United Front. They had their kit taken off them and they were skinned alive in one or two cases. You just cannot take that risk anymore. That requires combat-capable troops, whatever you call them.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I do not think either the Security Force Assistance Brigade or the Ranger Regiment is a fighting formation.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: No.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: They are administrative groupings, which effectively will be administrative headquarters, based in the UK, that cycles people through either certain military tasks or certain security assistance tasks. They are separate from the brigaded structure of your putative division. We should not get too carried away with what they are able to do as fighting formations. I do not think that is how they are conceived of at all.

Q27 **Mr Francois:** Can I just follow up on that? The point I am seeking to establish is that, even with the most modern of technology, there are still some human factors that remain relatively constant. If you are going to have any kind of enduring deployment of more than just a few weeks and months, you need three lots of it: one ready to go, one there and one recently having come back. Even very modern technology does not still relieve you of that human reality, does it?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: No, it does not. You are right. These are more conceived as trickle-posted small-unit endeavours in relatively peaceful circumstances. They are not meant to be war-fighting formations, even as a one-off. We should not cast them in that light. One is never quite certain how this will all roll out in the future, but certainly from what I have unpacked from it that is the case.

Something also struck me about the business of another Afghanistan or something like that. David will be interested in this as well. We are currently still in the shadow of something of a political aversion to getting stuck in something like an Afghanistan or an Iraq again. David had it on his watch with “no boots on the ground” in Libya. I had the performance of the aversion to extending the RAF’s zone of operation above Syria in the aftermath of the chemical attacks on its own people.

Dare I say it, there is an element, I am guessing, that this more precise contribution to hard power, this less dense battlefield and this selective set of specialisations is more the taste of a country that wants to do selective things rather than revisit our recent past, where a couple of operations became socially very unpopular and politically very toxic.

Q28 **Chair:** Yes, that is a very important point. There is what we can do, what



we will do and what we should do, given the vacuum of western leadership, which is being taken advantage of by non-state and state adversaries. It is about that political will. You mentioned Syria. Do you agree that the absence of a post-operational plan after we defeated the caliphate has meant that the enemy is stuck in detention camps, not by any state but by allies who are unable to process them? They can now regroup to fight again. Unfortunately, it is a similar pattern that we have seen in Iraq and Libya as well. We do not have a grand strategy and an integrated approach, using non-military means as well, to resolve the conflict completely.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I agree. I was thinking of a Rwanda. Would we just stand by and watch another genocide? I am sure we would all say no. Can we actually do that in the future quickly and effectively? I am not certain. I am with you entirely. There are lots of other things: humanitarian intervention or stabilisation before a problem gets to the point where it might become a state-on-state issue. We should have acted in Syria, arguably, earlier on. Our failure to do so persuaded Russia to get in there, and it achieved a huge strategic advantage as a result.

People may say that they do not want to do this—I am sure they do not want to repeat Afghanistan—but historically these things keep coming around. As a result of the series of decisions that we are discussing, we are undoubtedly less able to do so. This is why I keep coming back to what the guiding intent is. Is it state-on-state warfare with allies? If so, in terms of marks out of 10, we would not be doing too badly, albeit that I would like to see more conventional while we make the full transition to the more clever stuff. If it is all the other things that we have done, whether we want to repeat them or not, if we feel we ought to retain the capability, it is not going to be as good as we have at the moment.

Q29 Richard Drax: Welcome to you both this afternoon. Can we speak soldier to soldier, or former soldier to former soldier? I want to cut straight to the chase, if I may. We have all been listening, over the last two days, about what we have, what we would like to have and what we cannot have. It all boils down to money, at the end of the day.

In your time, sirs, I would be interested to know, now that you have left, what you did behind the scenes to ask for a significant increase in the budget, which is now 2%; in my day, it was 5.5%. We now have more expensive kit, and that seems to be coming at the expense of the critical mass, which is a reduction in the size of the Army. General Houghton, you talked about selective things. In history we do not always have the chance or opportunity to be selective. As you have said, General Richards, we get dragged into things because we want to stand by our allies, there is a call from NATO or there is a massacre in Rwanda and we feel a moral obligation to go.

Bearing that in mind, is it not time for politicians—and I really do aim my gun at them, actually—to say, “We need 4% or 5% to be spent”? That is a minimum requirement to keep our armed forces at the sort of level that



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this country not only needs and requires but is expected, by other countries, not least our NATO allies, to spend on our defence.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: As you know, Richard, soldier to soldier, human to human and Brit to Brit, I am with you 100%. This is the central conundrum of the work we are talking about. Are our ambitions achievable given the amount of money, as a country, we are prepared to put in to delivering on them? That is what you have just said. I fear the answer is no.

Nobody should think that the chiefs, who are nobly defending and explaining these papers, by the way, wanted to reduce the Army, the Air Force or even the Navy by the amount they have. The Navy probably come out of it best, but they do not have everything that they know they ought to have. In order to do all that, yes, we need a political decision on how much you are prepared to pay to achieve our ambitions and deliver the armed forces that we might all agree are at least theoretically required. If not, we ought to cut our cloth accordingly.

I am worried that global Britain, as much as I am with it in principle as a patriotic chap, is not deliverable in defence terms, and we ought to be centring our effort on NATO and the Euro-Atlantic area, which are militarily deliverable and hugely strategically influential, and not risk penny-packaging our more limited forces around the world and not necessarily gaining any extra influence, because they do not have the sufficient mass in any particular place to gain that influence.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: One of the things that the Defence Secretary is saying in his foreword to the defence command paper is that he is attempting to match money to credible ambition. Therefore, he is saying, "Brace, brace. We are going to get rid of all this stuff. We are going to get rid of loads and loads of planes, hundreds of tanks and armoured fighting vehicles. We are going to pension off obsolete type 23 frigates. We are no longer going to pretend that we have, in size terms, the huge amount of capabilities we have. We are going to harness the money we have in a more selective and focused way". You slightly have to read into the detail of it to extract that analysis from it, but it comes out quite clearly to me.

One of the problems, though, is that the nature of the residual architecture of defence is still one that was determined five, 10, 15 or 20 years ago. It still clings to the totemic capabilities of a strategic power. Out of this amount of money, we still have to both run and renew a nuclear deterrent and we have invested in these two carriers and the significant number of fifth-generation of aircraft to go on them. Frankly, there is not that much left over. Although it does not say, "Nuclear plus carrier strike capability equals not much left over, and we will have to run a lot down and be quite specific about what we can do", to me that is the inevitable conclusion from this.



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I am with David. To suggest that chiefs, while they are serving, do not let their political masters know the impact this is having on capability, and therefore risk, is to do a disservice to what we do behind the scenes. Publicly, I believe you have a duty to show integrity towards your political masters. Dare I say it, in the world of information management and information perception, it would be semi-traitorous not to stick to the narrative, but while cautioning the political masters on quite what the reality was.

Going back to your fundamental point, as this gets picked over and turned into the programme and we now have a run of very awkward public presentational issues for the Government about the size of the Army, the number of ships, the number of tanks and all those sort of things, that will be the evidence that we are trying to balance resource with ambition. In a way, therefore, we cannot have it both ways. This is something that is matching money to credible ambition. It is turning hollowed-out forces into credible ones, but not at the same scale. It is attempting to balance the books. Whether or not that survives contact with the next 10 years, I have no idea.

Q30 Richard Drax: I have been rather naughty and taken up the Committee's time, because I was curious to get an answer on that particular question. Let me get back to the one I was meant to ask you. Do you both agree with the integrated review's assessment of the national security situation and international environment?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: Yes, I do, because I do buy in to this fact that, for whatever reason, we have never enjoyed such a period of relatively little violence in the history of humankind on this planet. You would not think that by reading the newspapers or necessarily by reading these documents. We are living in all-time levels of peace. We have not crossed the threshold of formalised warfare at international scale for over 70 years.

We have to ask ourselves why this is the case. Some of it is to do with residual effectiveness of deterrents; some of it is creeping moral factors. The basic issue is that it is not really in anybody's self-interest to do it. Therefore, the competitive and adversarial nature of the relationships between states is now played out below the threshold of formalised war. That is why you have proxy terrorism, political assassination, bots undermining elections, strategic misinformation, cyberattacks and all these things. This is in the grey zone.

It is absolutely right that the natural order of things between nations is to be adversarial, but short of conflict, in order to achieve competitive advantage in what is quite an unstable situation globally. Much of that instability is not due to geopolitical things; it is due to what I sometimes describe as the inherent instabilities and changes of a dynamic planet. It is all about demography, population growth, global warming, climate change, migration and the continued inequality between nations and within nations.



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All these things create a very competitive environment where nations want to claim some elements of strategic advantage. A little subset of this is the vaccination issue, as we speak. Are many of our erstwhile friends now our enemies, our rivals, our competitors or what? They have captured all that quite well. Have we analysed every element of it? No.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Very quickly, the complexity of the current environment is brought out really well in the first paper. My worries are more specific. It talks about Russia as an active threat. Nick is quite right to say that we have not been in a hot war for a long time. The reason is that we were very good at deterring any such risks. We need to look at how we do that, whether it is through troop numbers and so on, as we have been discussing, or through these grey zone capabilities.

As far as China is concerned, which is identified as the other big issue, I am not certain that we should be seeking to play a major role militarily. There are more sophisticated ways. I mentioned one, which is to free up American forces to focus on China on our collective behalf.

We have two contradictory goals at the moment with respect to China: competition and co-operation. I want to see the strategy that will allow us and other likeminded countries to deliver on that. Whether we like it or not, in probably seven or eight years China is going to be the biggest economic power in the world. Not too long after, whether or not it is the most effective, it will be the biggest military power in the world. We have to come to terms with China and find a way of working with it. I am not certain that sending the carrier strike group is going to be particularly helpful in that respect.

Q31 **Richard Drax:** Can a mere former captain ask very humbly for a very brief answer from you both on this final question from me? Is a 10-year horizon long enough for defence-planning purposes?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: Of course, 10 years is not the full horizon. We are best in class, as it were, at having global strategic trends analysis that goes out 30 years. That is translated in a 10-year plan in terms of what is costed within the equipment programme. The balance of always having a costed programme out to 10 years in the context of a rolling set of global strategic trends that go out 30 years is quite appropriate.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Who knows what the world is going to look like in 30 years? We need to use our understanding of military history and strategic priorities to make sure we are as balanced as possible. We know certain trends will continue. I have just mentioned China. It would be interesting to see whether our political leaders and diplomats can somehow draw us back together with China and of course with Russia. That is the most important way of avoiding future wars.

Q32 **Sarah Atherton:** General Houghton and General Richards, I would like



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to explore further, following Richard's questioning, the UK's position on China. I am referring back to the Chair's quickfire threat escalator quiz at the beginning. You both said that, over the next timeframe, the threat from China would remain the same. However, you said that the threat from space, cyber and the grey zone would increase. Can I just explore your thoughts on China's capabilities and potency within the sub-threshold?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: Take information and ideology. China does not so much have to undermine the west as propose a wholly separate and somewhat make-believe version of itself. It is a propaganda machine rather than a misinformation machine. The scale of the Chinese cyber capacity is huge. It is quite clear that China wants to become the most dominant technological power. It has embarked on an element of both resource and economic imperialism through its ideas of the belt and road and all that.

By design, China will not wish to default to military domination by use of force of arms, though it might intimidate and coerce by them. It has a far longer-term strategy to achieve its end. This is why, as David was just saying, we would be foolish to turn it into an enemy. It is the strategic challenge of the age to work out how you accommodate it. Much of what it seeks to do is based, paradoxically, on significant internal vulnerabilities. China is a nation of 1.3 billion people, over half of whom are on the breadline and who measure their affection for the current regime in the inches of improvement their lives can take over their lifetime. Therefore, much of the external motivations of China are driven by an internal necessity to keep its own population quiescent.

This describes a beast that you have to accommodate and not declare war on. I absolutely agree that sending a carrier group is not necessarily the best way of seeking accommodation.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Just to add to that, China has no history of external aggression. I am sure many of you are just as expert as me, if not more expert than me, on this, but quite rightly people like us have done a bit of buffing up on it in the last few years, have we not? What the Chinese Communist Party wants to do is to remain in power. In order to do that, it needs an increasingly prosperous population who will continue to give it their support. Economic dominance is the key to the Communist Party's survival and remaining in power. Just like us, it will continue to grow its military capability, because, behind that, there must be the implied ability to enforce its will if other countries stand up against it. That is where we must always have that as a fallback.

I should just say, whether it is cyber or whatever, that this will play out in various different ways, as Nick said. In the conventional or semi-conventional military sphere, hypersonic missiles and top-attack ballistic missiles mean that large platforms are very vulnerable when push comes to shove. I want to make sure that this has been thought



through and that, when accidents or miscalculation happen, we are ready for it and do not take any unnecessary risks.

Q33 **Sarah Atherton:** Since the 2015 SDSR, the Government's position on China has shifted slightly from being a leading partner in the West to now being seen now as more of a threat as well as a partner in some areas in the integrated review. Has the UK been too late to recognise China's growing military modernisation and assertiveness, particularly in the Indo-Pacific? Is it the right assessment at the right time?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: They probably have been a little late, but understandably so. We are trying to achieve two contradictory goals: competition and co-operation. I have not seen a strategy yet. The term "strategy" is being bandied around all the time now. A strategy is really a plan to deliver on policy. We have the policy—competition and co-operation. Let us now see the plan or the strategy to deliver on it. I have not yet seen it.

We are a little late on understanding that China is going to be massive. At the risk of boring you, I give talks like you all do, and for at least eight years I have been saying that the biggest grand strategic issue of this century is how gracefully—I am not certain "gracefully" is necessarily the right word—the United States accepts this. That is, as Nick just said, the big issue.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I do not have much to say to that. In many ways, fundamentally, the problem about China is a values-based aversion. That is our problem. That is why it is quite difficult to accommodate them. The accommodation is not, dare I say it, so much the UK's or the rest of Europe's. Quite a lot of Europe are already rather dependent on China for other things. It is America that has to somehow accept that China is their geopolitical adversary or challenger, and no good will come of this becoming adversarial in a military, kinetic or warlike sense. Some form of accommodation has to be achieved. We can do our bit as a convening power, but probably only America can be the architects of how this is brought about.

Q34 **Chair:** Can I just advance Sarah's questioning there? General Richards, you spoke about the transfer of superpower status. It is called the Thucydides trap. There is only one real recent example in the last millennia where that has been peaceful, and that is from the British Empire to the United States.

I invite you to go back, perhaps, to the quiz that we did at the beginning. Surprisingly to me, you both said that you saw the aggression or influence of China as staying the same. Maybe the velocity will stay the same and not increase, but surely, given the way you are speaking at the moment, their influence across the world, technologically, militarily and economically, is growing. If it is not checked in some way, will we not slide towards a bipolar world?



Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Yes, I did not interpret your question in quite that way.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: No, I did not.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I also have faith, maybe misplaced, that we will find ways around this. I see the slide that you are talking about as something we should strive hugely to avoid. We will accommodate China, and both parties are going to have to find a way through. Otherwise, god help us.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I feel slightly the same. When you said, "Is it increasing?" I thought you meant, "Is it going to get bigger?" It does not have to get bigger, because China is very happy with the pace of track they are on. The thing that has to happen is that we have to somehow determine what the accommodation is.

Chair: I will edit your answers appropriately and give you the results at the end of the session.

Q35 **Mr Francois:** General Nick, if I heard you correctly earlier, you said you thought that Russia was more likely to act in some potentially rash manner or as the result of a miscalculation than China. We are always taught to regard China as a country with a long horizon that takes carefully planned steps over a period of time. I tend to agree with your juxtaposition there. Is there not also a practical reality of geography? Even if we deploy a carrier battle group into the South China Sea, it takes weeks to get there.

If we are going to be involved in the future in some form of containment of China, potentially, is the reality not that for us as the United Kingdom we are only going to play a relatively small part in a much larger operation led by the United States and perhaps supported by other allies such as, for instance, Australia? In other words, should we not be humble about the actual real difference we can make in the Indo-Pacific region, even with two aircraft carriers?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: To be honest, the noises off—the information policy that is surrounding this carrier deployment—are already attempting to down-tune the military significance of it. I sense that the way the narrative is accompanying this now is that this is almost a diplomatic and soft-power gesture of solidarity with our friends in the region to say, "We are with you, and we recognise the fact that the accommodation of China is something we must all join together in".

It is also signalling the fact that the United Kingdom is a global power, or a global-looking nation—an outward-looking nation—and it recognises that that part of the world is, in economic terms, the most dynamic. This is the Asia-Pacific century, and we want to be a part of that.

It is slightly a counterbalance of old Europe in decline and America stalling. Asia-Pacific is the place to have interests in and all the rest of it.



Rather than it necessarily being a gesture of binary geopolitics against China, it is a gesture of the UK's place in the world with its allies in that part of the world, because of the importance of that part of the world. I have made a bit of a meal of that, but you understand what I mean.

Q36 Mr Francois: Nevertheless, it is a reality that, for the next two or three years or so, we will be one, if I am right, of only three nations on earth to have two serviceable large aircraft carriers that we could theoretically surge together, if we had to, although we would be pushed to do it. There is the United States, us and China. Russia only has one and India only has one that is now fully in service. On the one hand, we do have a capability, but my point is that we need to be humble about where we really fit in to the wider Indo-Pacific strategy. At the very most, we are only ever going to be playing some kind of supporting role. That is not to denigrate the Royal Navy in any way, because my father served in it.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Can I just add to that? You are absolutely spot on that we should be focusing on the Euro-Atlantic area. Tactically, something might crop up while that carrier is deployed. It is for your Committee to have a close look at this, but, as I understand it, we only have the resources to deploy one carrier at a time. I remember that debate when I was CDS. If that has changed and we do have the ability to deploy them concurrently, I would quite like to know; I am sure you would too. You mentioned the word "surge".

The focus and effort should be the Euro-Atlantic area, NATO and what the review described as the most active threat, which is Russia. I am ever mindful of a wonderful phrase from Theodore Roosevelt, which you will remember: that in affairs of foreign policy and defence strategy, you should always carry a big stick and talk softly. There is a little risk, I am afraid, that we might do the opposite. We should not. We have to be very careful. The only way we can take on big competitors like China or Russia, if ever we do, is with allies.

By the way, NATO needs a lot of sorting out. I was told the other day that in Estonia, for example, there are battalion-size units that cannot talk to each other because their radios do not match. That is really a bit worrying. In your search for humility, Mark, those are the sorts of things we could be getting on with very usefully.

Chair: We have spoken about our desire or our willingness to step forward, and perhaps we have been a bit hesitant over the last number of years. The West has certainly become risk-averse, and that has been exploited by our adversaries. Can we now turn to the Whitehall structures to see whether we are ready to take on more?

Q37 Gavin Robinson: Good afternoon, Generals. Perhaps, General Richards, I could bring this question to you in the first instance for introspection. Although you have talked about the dichotomy between competition and co-operation, I just wonder what your view is on Whitehall's ability to properly discern the threats from state-based actors and deliver an



integrated response to those.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: The delivery of an integrated response is hugely complex. It is not new conceptually, by the way. We have been trying to do this certainly since the introduction of the National Security Council, which was a great innovation, by the way.

I have been rather critical, along with others, of the COBRA system. Nick and I, and I suspect one or two of you, have spent countless hours in COBRA. It is a pretty 19th-century approach to the exercise of sophisticated command and control in these very challenging times. Therefore, one of the very good things to come out of the paper is what is being called at the moment the situation centre, but I am worried that it is still not ambitious enough in its scale and scope. I would like to see what I have called, when I have done a bit of work on this, a national command and communications centre. In a civil crisis or military crisis, in today's era we have to be extremely well trained with a very good understanding of how you exercise command and control.

In that sphere, political leaders, as much as military and civilian leaders, have to be very good at their job and trained in it. I believe that our relevant Cabinet Ministers need to be trained in the exercise of command and control in a crisis, whether it is a war or something below that, or an epidemic. This situation centre is a great first step, but that is what I would suggest that you could well focus on, with great interest and benefit to all of us. We could hone that to become the sort of thing that will enable this country to manage crises in the future.

Q38 **Gavin Robinson:** Outside of the crisis point, do the individual components within Whitehall talk to one another and engage with one another regularly enough and routinely enough to have an organised approach to state-based threats?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Nick will have his own view, and things move depending on personalities. When I was CDS, I created a committee below the political one in which we had MI6, GCHQ, DFID, the Foreign Office and the national security adviser; it was chaired by the CDS. I do not know whether they still have that. I was trying to tackle the very issue you are putting your finger on: the approach was not very good. We agreed certain processes and so on.

That is the sort of thing I would hope to see morph into this situation centre. By the way, "situation centre" is not a good term for it. That suggests they are not actively exercising command and control, as I would call it. There is probably a better term, but you know what I mean. In terms of the criticism, however justified or not, of the early days of the epidemic, I really feel for the Prime Minister. He was trying to manage our country's response to that with this antediluvian system, which you are putting your finger on.

Q39 **Gavin Robinson:** General Houghton, without wishing to preclude any



reflections you may have on that, I would maybe just introduce a new angle. This integrated review commits the national security adviser to reviewing national security mechanisms and processes to ensure the integrated review objectives are implemented. What advice do you have for them and where should they start?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I will give you some of my reflections, and then I will flow into your point there. David is absolutely right on the National Security Council. Even since his time and into mine, we then convened a National Security Council (Officials), which effectively was the PUSs of all the relevant Departments, the CDS and all that. That was a far better forum, because the NSC tends to deal only with present-tense crisis rather than future-tense planning. The National Security Council (Officials) got ahead of some of that.

The quality of cross-Whitehall discussion and integration, although not perfect, was considerably improved on in the time I was there, and it bore startlingly good comparison with any other nation I had come across, other than somewhere like Russia—they are organised to do it, but that is a different issue—and probably China.

The thing I would most worry about, rather than the overseas dimension of military operations and integrating them, is domestic resilience, which is a grey-zone issue. It will be reinforced by the lessons learned from Covid. Within the United Kingdom, we do not remotely have a mechanism for the command and control of crises of whatever sort. All the ones I have borne close witness to, whether it was foot-and-mouth, fuel strikes, ambulance strikes or Olympics security, were all invented on the hoof.

Everything we had that used to be, for those with a long memory and of the same age as me, the machinery of government in war disappeared in Maggie Thatcher's time. There is none of that. You can cascade that down the devolved methodologies of not just the four nations of our union but local government. I remember one winter when there were huge floods all over the country. Whichever the brigade was in York, they broke out most of the then TA into sandbagging. The line of the River Ouse runs through about a dozen local authorities. There were metropolitan boroughs and district councils and county councils. Richmond came up about three times. There was no layered command and control authority to deal with this. There was a little bunch of chaos everywhere.

When the military first got involved in foot-and-mouth, a staff sergeant would appear at a particular incident point and say, "Who is in charge?" and 14 different people pointed in a different direction. Nobody was in charge. That is anecdotal, but it makes the point. If we are really bought in to the grey-zone threat to national resilience, we ought to seriously consider the degree to which we are going to reform the command and control of the devolved elements of our country's administration. That would be the big thing that I would offer.

Q40 **Gavin Robinson:** That is where you think the national security adviser



should start internally: in co-ordinating the various aspects or tiers of government within our country.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: At the moment, and perhaps for very good reasons, it is chaotic from the military perspective of attempting to run an operation. If we believe this stuff, then we ought to at least address how feasible certain improvements are.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Could I just elaborate a little? That is why the situation centre, which I think means command and control or could be turned into a command and control hub, has so much potential. In that respect, Gavin, the national security adviser should be looking at how they can exploit that very good idea to make it the sort of thing Nick and I are talking about.

Nick may have inadvertently put his finger on it. In this day and age, as much as we do not like lots of it, what China and Russia are doing is the model for what you have to roughly be if you are going to compete successfully. It has to be that slick.

Q41 **Chair:** Just to explore that one step further, the one Department that is trained in strategic planning and looks at emergency response and so forth is the MoD, the Ministry of Defence, when it comes to these national crises. We have bumped into a little bit of stigma attached to calling in and including the MoD. There is almost a sense that you have failed if you have had to resort to using the MoD, because another Whitehall Department has not managed something itself. Have you picked this up yourselves at all?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: There is no doubt about it. There has been a historic aversion among Government Departments across Whitehall to call the military in to solve their problem, until it has become a crisis and the Prime Minister has done it by fatwa. The classic example of that to me will always be foot-and-mouth. Tony Blair was the Prime Minister and Nick Brown was the Minister; I think the Ministry was then MAFF. He wanted the Minister to be responsible for it for as long as possible, but only when they were up against an election stop did we send the military in; we took over the MAFF with a logistic brigade headquarters.

Going back to David's point and my point about the SitCen and all that, it is quite impossible for COBRA, as a strategic headquarters, to control tactical activity on the ground. It has to have some form of an intermediary headquarters at what we call the operational level in order to convert strategic objectives into tactical action in order to meet them. What you need is the gearing mechanism of an operational level. That is what we put into the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to resolve foot-and-mouth.

I do not know the degree to which an operational level was introduced into vaccine deployment. I do not know. It certainly was not evident early



on in Covid. There is an awful lot about military doctrine of operational-level command that needs to be imitated within civilian government.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Nick was involved in foot-and-mouth; my example was the Olympics. It was left to the last minute. I remember saying to a certain Cabinet Minister, "If you do not tell me to do this now, we will not be able to do it". They put it off and they put it off, because of this reluctance, which you are quite rightly drawing attention to, to commit us. Thanks to some magnificent low-level leadership we did crack it, but it was a close-run thing for that reason.

Q42 **Mr Francois:** I have two very quick points. First, Generals, I seem to remember it was sometimes a case of what you might call departmental pride, perhaps. Departments wanted to think they could handle a problem without having to fall back on the military. Secondly, I seem to recall that sometimes it was a question of who was going to end up paying for it. There were quite a lot of debates about, if the military were brought in, whose budget would that ultimately fall on.

Anyway, rather than getting bogged down in that, I just wanted to ask about the SitCen or whatever it finally becomes known as. Let us call it that just for the moment, as a working title. There has been some criticism in the media that this may cost several million pounds to fit out and create. Given that we are told there is an extra £16 billion for defence over the next four years, as former Chiefs of the Defence Staff, would you agree that spending a few million pounds in order to allow our strategic leaders the best possible access to information and data on which to take hopefully good decisions, often under pressure, is actually money quite well spent?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Without doubt, yes. This reveals a huge ignorance about the critical importance of command and control. As I said earlier, without sounding too pompous, it does not matter how good your kit is or how good your soldiers, sailors and airmen are. If you cannot exercise effective command and control quickly, spontaneously and efficiently, it is all for nothing. It is a vital part of the overall investment, and I am a huge supporter of it. What worries me is that SitCen will do no more than be a situation centre. It has to become a national command and communications centre of the type we are discussing.

Q43 **Mr Francois:** In the US, the national command authority is ultimately the President of the United States, but we can see the sort of facility you are moving towards, General David. General Nick, would you agree that spending a few million pounds on a facility like that is probably money well spent?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: Yes, with a qualification around what it is that we are describing. I am not yet certain. If you remember when Osama bin Laden got taken out, the SitCen was just a few people stood



around watching a Predator feed. It is probably not worth spending a few million pounds on a Predator feed.

I need it defining better. Because of the demands on bandwidth, feeds of data and all that, people think about £2 million, but they are hopefully not spending that on curtains and chairs. They would be using it to enable the thing with real-time information. That is where the expense would be, and it would be money well spent.

Q44 Mr Francois: For want of a better name, if we called it a strategic command centre, to pluck something out of the air, hopefully we would all agree that the money would be well spent on such a facility.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: Yes.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Yes, it should be exactly that sort of term. The essence is effective command and control. I am sure, as Gavin was talking about earlier, the national security adviser will have to develop this. Picking up the Chair's point—I say this in all humility—one organisation that does understand effective command and control is the armed forces. They need to be able to draw in some experts from there to guide them. That would not necessarily be to end up commanding it, because there obviously has to be civilian command, but I would probably appoint a jolly good brigadier or general to run it for them in the way I had to end up doing, albeit I was wearing uniform, in somewhere like Afghanistan. It is a key niche capability that we need to develop.

Mr Francois: General, I would argue that the other organisation that understands that principle is called the Whips' Office, but that is a debate for another day. Let us call it the strategic command centre for the moment as a working title.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: That will do me.

Chair: I know the Prime Minister tunes in to listen to our discussions, so I hope he has picked that up. My example is actually being stuck on the M27 in a snowdrift. I was there for about eight hours, and eventually I resorted to texting General Patrick Sanders saying, "Why are you boys not out?" He said, "We would love to. We pre-positioned because we saw the snowstorm was coming in, but we have not been given the green light by Hampshire COBRA", the local COBRA there. It was not until 11 pm, when they realised they could not cope, that they finally gave the call to the armed forces, by which time it was absolutely too late and we were there until about 5 am, but there we go.

Let us now move to capabilities, which have expanded from the three traditional services to cyber and space.

Q45 Derek Twigg: I will pose my first question to Lord General Richards. David, in your autobiography, one of the things that struck me was when you wrote that you hope that future Governments do not get themselves into a position where, when the moment comes, we are unable to act.



In terms of the integrated review, has it led to the correct balance of capabilities across the UK armed forces? Will new investments deliver the information-age capabilities to fill the gaps left by those that have been retired? Within that, I suppose my overarching question is about how much resilience it gives our armed forces?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I am sure the direction of travel that the command paper identifies and invests in is broadly correct. My worry is the pace of focus on the grey area, cyber, AI and all that sort of stuff. In the interim, certainly over the next 10 to 15 years, more conventional—I would say “traditional” but that sounds pejorative, so let us call it “conventional”—warfare will continue to be a major risk. That is what a lot of our competitors are still investing in. Not that I am wishing or expecting Russia or China to start world war three, but I am thinking of countries like that.

In that respect we are going to take a risk, particularly in the next 10 years. As I said, in the mid-2020s, I see a significant dip in conventional capability before the new capabilities have been properly grown. In that period, an adventurous Russia—I am not saying it will try to seize Paris or Berlin—might just be tempted to cause trouble by seizing a chunk of Estonia or one of the other Baltic states. That becomes a real problem for us. That is what I would focus on.

Q46 **Derek Twigg:** How does going down to an Army of 72,500 troops help that? A lot of people who do not follow defence or military history closely will not realise that only a very small proportion of that 72,500 will be frontline fighting troops.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: We are agreeing. That is the risk I am talking about. At the end of the day—we got at this earlier—there has been a political decision about how much money our country can afford to spend on defence. It is 2% of GDP, and in the short term GDP is going down. The Prime Minister took a really bold and welcome decision to increase it beyond what would otherwise have been the case, but it is still insufficient to allow us to do all the things that you are inferring we ought to be doing.

It is not only numbers. It is the capability; it is the kit. As I said earlier, I do not know how a future commander of the armoured brigade or armoured infantry brigade—whatever it is going to be called—is going to fight that brigade. He has no armoured infantry fighting vehicles. It is all that together, but I can see that you have to take difficult decisions if that is all the money you have. The chiefs have sought to keep a bit of everything while buying into the new areas. There is never going to be enough of it.

Q47 **Derek Twigg:** Would it be fair to say, therefore, that the resilience of our armed forces is very much weakened?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Without doubt, yes. There is talk of the reserves compensating to a degree, but there has been talk of that



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for the last 10 years and it has not really come off. If we are talking about and prizing high readiness and nimbleness, which is what the Secretary of State was talking about, the reserves are not so good at that. They are good over a long duration of preparation, where you can train them up and then deploy them.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: To be honest, we are slightly repeating ourselves. Just for emphasis, this is why the Government and the paperwork admit that in terms of mass sustainability and simultaneity, doing lots of things at the same time, we are taking a step back, because we are going to have to give up an awful lot of stuff.

The defence command paper and the attendant announcement prepare us for that. That is against a strategic risk assessment that we can probably afford to do less in terms of a hard-power contribution, because those are against threats for which it is collective alliance action that works. Our contribution there is the deterrent, the carrier strike and a more selective capability for this automated battlefield for the future whilst we have swung many of the new bits behind the grey-area threats.

We have to accept the fact that part and parcel of what this thing is attempting to tell us is that we are matching money to credible ambition. We will have less of these forces, but at least they will be credible and able to do what they say they do.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I am just going to interrupt, if I may, because I very rarely disagree with Nick, but I may on this issue of "credible". I am banging on about the new brigades, but I am not certain they are too credible in the eyes of a professional soldier. They seem to be a bit of a mismatch and of the military making the best of a slightly dodgy job. I would focus a bit on that. We do not have to debate it because I suspect Nick agrees with some of what I have just said.

The other thing that you, as a Committee, would really benefit from looking at is this next 10 years, because everything Nick has so articulately summed up is going to be the case, but it is not going to be there for about 10 years. There is a gap in the middle where we are vulnerable. It rather reminds me of the 1930s; let us not overdo it, but we are not very good at what we would like to be good at, and yet we have got rid of the other stuff too.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: The "credible" word is the Secretary of State's.

Derek Twigg: Yes, I know.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: It is he who is saying this is credible.

Derek Twigg: That is part of the reason I have asked the question, because I do not think it is credible.

Chair: Let us look at how this is landing with our friends and allies.



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Q48 **Mr Francois:** I have one technical point, Generals. The White Paper makes much of the use of brigade combat teams, which is essentially an American concept. It talks it up quite a lot. In layman's terms, for anyone watching this who is not overly familiar with military jargon, what is the difference between a British brigade and a brigade combat team? How will these brigade combat teams be different or better than what we have been used to in the past?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I am as baffled as I think you are. It is just another term. There are a few new terms that have been introduced that are of that ilk. The Americans use "brigade combat team" in the way we would "all-arms brigade", for example.

Q49 **Mr Francois:** General Nick, are you aware of any fundamental difference?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: There probably will be some technical definition: that a combat team is an extraction of selected capability from within a brigade to form a combat team for a specific purpose. Do not quote me on that. It is an Americanism. To be honest, I had not particularly quarried that one out of the report. It is giving the idea that you have brigades that are designed to function; a combat team is something that is an extraction of that for a specific purpose.

Mr Francois: Does that mean it would be smaller, if it is an extraction?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: Yes, most likely, but it could be an extraction from more than one. What I am saying is it is more bespoke than generic.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: This issue of size is important. When I was a brigade commander, I had four major units, artillery engineers, etc. We are now talking about maybe two—an armoured regiment and a Boxer battalion in a brigade. They are much smaller. Hopefully, they will compensate. I have total faith that the Chief of the General Staff and his senior officers are all over this to make it work. They are undoubtedly going to be smaller, and we just have to hope that drone technology and all those things will compensate for the lack of more traditional capability.

Mr Francois: Perhaps as our inquiry progresses we will have an opportunity to ask currently serving officers—no disrespect—about what this concept is.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Yes. It is very important.

Q50 **Mr Francois:** On a higher level than that, how do you believe that our allies—not just the United States, but including the United States—are likely to react to these changes, and particularly to the changes in the command paper?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I heard what Mike Mullen and one or two others said. They will be disappointed by the size of the Army in particular. There is something about size, numbers and the ability to



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deploy and sustain meaningful operations, as all of you, in different ways, brought out. There is no good gainsaying it. The fact is that there is another 15% reduction in the size of the Army. I slightly resent the fact that we have only been able to recruit 76,000 versus 82,000, but we are now being told it is only a reduction of 3,000 or 4,000. That is a pretty contrived argument. A reduction to 72,000 will have an effect on the Army's ability, in particular, to mount and sustain operations of all kinds. The bet is that new technology will compensate over time, only, I think, in a state-on-state, war-fighting environment.

I am in a group of quite a lot of ex-military and diplomats that have been discussing it, and I have accelerated one or two things as a result of this appearance. On the whole, our European allies are disappointed, because these people, who are like-minded, hoped that we would start to influence Europe more by taking a conspicuous leadership role in NATO. That is not apparently going to happen, or at least it would appear not, because, although the paper talks up NATO, we are emotionally more focused on south-east Asia and being global post Brexit. That is a big lost opportunity to invest again, almost without notice, in Europe and our influence and leadership role within Europe. That would be my immediate rejoinder to your question.

Q51 **Mr Francois:** Both of you, as former Chiefs of the Defence Staff, would have had interlocutors of your equivalent rank around the world, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the United States; your opinion really matters. General Nick, what is your view about how our allies, including but not limited to the United States, will view this?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: The United States will look happily at the amount of money but quizzically at the scale of what it gets us. David Williams, my predecessor, along with his American opposite number, resurfaced the idea of having annual meetings of the combined chiefs; it was quite a nice idea. After David had gone, Joe Biden came and briefed us on one of those. It was in the run-up to one of the NATO summits, and it was about the amount of money that we were or were not about to be spending on defence. His simple words were, "America holds you to a higher account". They do not want us to be the NATO 2% minimum. They expect more of Britain.

With Biden now as President, I think he will be quite powerful. It will not be as it was with Trump, where there was middle America, who were all fed up with paying 3.6% of GDP to be the external security guarantor for the rest of the world. Biden is still a bit of the same mood. He will hold us to a higher account.

David and I had a chance to have a quick chat with the chairman of a military committee, a chap known to you, and they had briefed the military committee on the outcome of this review. In terms of European allies, the word from that was that they were quite impressed with it. They had bought the narrative: there is more money; there is more technology; there is still an ability to service current NATO emergent



doctrine, because they have just revamped the strategic doctrine of NATO.

If I did have a cry, in terms of the slight diminution that I feel that we have made on the hard-power side, there is still enormous capacity to make NATO more efficient given the amount of capability that sits within the alliance. It just is not generated on an effective war-fighting footing. It is more done on some sort of seasonal rotation of having about a 10th of it available at any one time. Some nations ought to specialise and accept the fact that that is part of collective deterrence. There is so much inefficiency institutionalised into NATO. That is one of the things that we ought to get at as a nation.

Q52 **Mr Francois:** I do not disagree with your last comment in any way. Can I be slightly cheeky and turn the telescope around? I have asked you what our allies would make of these documents, and in particular the defence White Paper. What do you think our adversaries will make of them?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: To be honest, I do not think they will blink much, partly because in this grey zone you are not looking at a single state to look at the organogram of the UK's military, to really give an instantaneous reaction. The nuclear issue will catch Russia's eye because it is so specific to that particular threat. I do not know what they will make of it, but if it has failed to catch their eye, it has slightly missed the deterrent trick. Dare I say it, they will get the general shift towards the protection of the amelioration of the grey-zone threat.

The fact that we are going to get rid of some Hawks, tranche-1 Typhoons and obsolete frigates will not worry them much. There will not be a huge reaction. They will think we have the strategic context, an interesting thing on the nuclear and clearly there is going to be quite a lot of investment to ameliorate the threats of grey-zone activity. That will be interesting.

Q53 **Mr Francois:** On the nuclear point, I remember you gave an interview a few years ago, in which you were asked why we pay billions of pounds for a nuclear deterrent that we never use, to which you replied, I thought rather well, that we use it every day and it helps to keep us safe. Your point about Russia and the nuclear point was well made. General David, how do you think this will go down in Moscow, Beijing and perhaps Tehran?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: They are still rather numbers-obsessed, for some of the reasons we have been agreeing. They will see it as a real-terms reduction in capability in the short to medium term, which it is, but they will see us growing into something more capable in the longer term, in the 2030s and onwards. They will have mixed views. I am sure they will have a sophisticated response to it.

I continue to draw notice to this next 10 years or so, when we continue this transition from, if you like, the industrial to the information age in



terms of capability, and we do not have enough of either in a crisis. It brings me back to Nick's emphasis on allies, and on NATO in particular. That is where we ought to be focusing our attention. If we played it right and exerted a leadership role in that, to resolve all these inefficiencies within NATO, that would have been time well spent and could have been emphasised much more within the review.

Q54 Mr Francois: Do you think that there will be a period of vulnerability as we go through the change? As our armed forces evolve, is there a bit of a gap in the middle where we could have a vulnerability?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Yes. That is exactly what I am saying. It could go on for longer. If we do not have the new Challengers until whenever they eventually come into service, we will end up with a wheeled APC. These are just things within one niche part of the Army, these brigades. The Navy, in due course, will look pretty good, and rightly so. I am a big advocate of a good maritime strategy, albeit I am a little sceptical about how we are using the carriers in the short term, as we have discussed. If Tempest plays right, that will be a great new capability, but there is a period between now and that era when we are vulnerable and allies become even more important.

Mr Francois: Perhaps we can look at that in more detail as our inquiry evolves.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: Just on that, this does not mention the issue of political will. You can have all the great kit in the world, but if you do not have the political will to use it—dare I say it, that is what has gone a little bit walkabout—it is all to no avail.

Q55 Chair: This is what I mentioned before, when I said it is about what we can do, what we will do, and what we should do. Mark mentioned the nuclear deterrent. We are seeing the numbers rise from 180 to 260. I understand it is the W76 that it refers to, not the W93. Three reasons have now been teased out. I do not think this has been messaged particularly well, but, like all weapon systems they are advancing, we are seeing low-yield tactical warheads being developed and we are also seeing better air defences against nuclear weapons, so therefore you need to use more to get to a particular target, and there are more countries and states joining the nuclear club. Do you see that as justification to increase our nuclear stockpile from 180 to 260?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: If I am frank, it worries me. How does it affect the non-proliferation treaty? Are we talking about being more prepared to actually use nuclear weapons, which is what I gather some in the USA are now? My bottom line is this is a proper, open debate in this country, and I would suggest your Committee could well lead that very usefully.

Q56 Chair: It is, because there is also a hint that we could use it to respond to non-nuclear threats, such as mass biochemical or indeed cyber-attacks. Again, that is a conversation for the nation to have, even



though it may make sense given the variety of threats that we face.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I am hoping that this has been given an awful lot of very studious thought by some very clever people. Never lose sight of the fact that one of the five policy principles is ambiguity about the circumstances in which we would use them; that is ambiguity by design.

There has been a bit of prominence about enhancements to Russian ballistic missile defence capability, but there is the proclaimed Russian doctrine of “Escalate to stabilise”, which is a recognition of Russia’s own weakness: that it could find itself in a position where it might be being overrun, and would use tactical nuclear weapons at a very low level to escalate the level of violence in order to impose a stabilisation. There need to be options in the nuclear arsenal to deter that particular piece of doctrine. I agree that they probably now have a little bit of a running presentational issue.

Q57 **Chair:** I have two separate questions on two subjects. My first question is to do with tanks, armoured fighting vehicles and dismounted infantry. There is a decision being made to reduce the number of tanks but get rid of the Warrior completely. Is this a little bit like sending Lancasters out but without Hurricanes and Spitfires? Would you have perhaps used this moment to have gone the way that the US Marine Corps has gone and ditch the tank completely?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: I have already mentioned this at least twice, so I apologise, but, yes, it does not make much sense to me, if you accept that you are going to try to fight that as a brigade in the traditional sense. I can only think they think there is something else that is going to compensate. I went through an era, like Nick did, when we had FV430 vehicles; along came the Warrior, at last, with its turret, and you could play a proper integrated role at battle group and company combat team level. That seems a very difficult thing to achieve with Boxer.

Logically, you are right. If you cannot fight an armoured battle in the true sense—armoured artillery, engineers, infantry in the way we said, and tanks—there is a case for going the whole hog down a different route altogether. I would emphasise that I think it is premature to do so.

Q58 **Chair:** General Houghton, all 14 C-130 Hercules aircraft are being removed. Could you state whether this is going to cause concern for our special forces, not least with the Ranger capability being brought in as well?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: There will be some emotional and sentimental concern, but the pundits who are very close to the capability balance reckon the A400M is better, because it has greater capability, but it still able to fill that somewhat niche Hercules role. My sense is that there was something quite attractive about the relatively small size of the Hercules, its nimbleness and all that, as compared to the A400M. It is



one of those things that we are slightly applying lipstick to the reality that there will be some diminution in flexibility, but it is not remotely a showstopper.

Q59 **Chair:** That is very helpful. Finally, to General Richards, thought leadership, statecraft and what Britain can bring to the table in this period of perhaps western absence of leadership is something that Britain was proud of in the past. Is it something that we need to rekindle?

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: Yes. In a way, Brexit, whether you were a Brexiteer or not, has given us a great opportunity to do that. You can see it happening and playing out in parts of the world other than in Europe, for reasons we all understand. We are well positioned to do so. The absence of multilateralism and multinationalism is a huge omission. Do we need another Peace of Westphalia or Congress of Vienna? My understanding, however critical, to some degree, Nick and I and your questions have sounded, is that Number 10 and the Prime Minister are very much on the case in that respect, and we have some great opportunities this year to demonstrate it.

Chair: Thank you. I am afraid the word “Brexit” has prompted Mark Francois to want to ask a question.

Q60 **Mr Francois:** It really was not on that, General. Because we hear so much now about the integrated operating concept and the idea that all of these different bits of kit are going to be perfectly networked and able to talk to each other extremely effectively, is it fair to say that the actual equipment to make that happen—the electronic spine that actually connects all of these things together—will be fundamental to the integrated operating concept working and that, if there is a problem with programmes like LE TacCIS, MORPHEUS and others, which are designed to provide that, you are going to have a real problem making the whole thing work?

By the way, it has been great to have you both. Maybe at the end you will say something like, “It is goodnight from me and it is goodnight from him”.

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux: You are absolutely on the money. It is a vulnerability while it is also a great strength. We have to protect against the risk as much as exploit the opportunity.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I would agree with that as my “goodbye from him” comment. Although your questions have rightly asked us to be critical about this review, in a constructive way, it puts us in a far better place than we might have been. The key will be in the maintenance of a stable funding platform for defence at the currently promised level that gives that defence programme some stability. There will be some added risk in the middle of this decade, but, given the available money, the ambition is sensibly better in balance than I have known it, albeit it is a reduced capability across the board.



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Chair: Thank you, gentlemen. The results are in: according to your quickfire answers on the threat picture, the world is indeed getting more dangerous and more volatile. Net threats are increasing, according to you, gentlemen, and so I suspect we are in for a bumpy decade.

That brings us to a close for this first Defence Select Committee hearing on the integrated review. Can I very much thank General Lord Nick Houghton and General Lord David Richards for your time this afternoon? Thank you to Committee members and the staff here. We are looking forward to our next session on Tuesday 13 April; we will be inviting the Defence Secretary and the current Chief of the Defence Staff. That brings to a close this session. Thank you very much, everyone.