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Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Defending Global Britain in a competitive age, HC 265

Tuesday 25 May 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 25 May 2021.

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Sarah Atherton; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar.

Questions 1 - 28

Witnesses

I: Professor Patrick Porter, Professor of International Security and Strategy, University of Birmingham; Dr David Blagden, Senior Lecturer in International Security, University of Exeter.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Patrick Porter and Dr David Blagden.

Chair: Welcome to this Defence Committee hearing. We are now focusing on the integrated review and defending global Britain in a competitive age. The purpose of this session is to explore whether the integrated review, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, and the defence Command Paper deliver on the strategic direction and the capabilities required to enable the UK armed forces to fulfil the role expected of them.

We have two witnesses here today. Thank you very much indeed for your time. Professor Patrick Porter is professor of international security and strategy at the University of Birmingham, and Dr David Blagden is senior lecturer in international security at the University of Exeter. Sirs, thank you very much for your time this morning, which is much appreciated. We will begin with a general question about the integrated review.

Q1 **Gavin Robinson:** Good morning, gentlemen. Professor Porter, do you agree with the integrated review's assessment of the national security and international environment?

Professor Porter: I partly agree. There is only so much that you can expect from documents written for public consumption. The review makes some very important points about the harsher and more multipolar world that the country is entering, with greater constraints, greater hostility and the fragmentation of international power. I welcome some of their recommendations, particularly the primacy of the Royal Navy, bolstering credibility of the nuclear deterrent, and the need to take a more holistic and synthetic view of things both at home and abroad, all the way from the security of the Union to the stability of the Euro-Atlantic world.

Where I disagree is that the IR and the Command Paper are, in a sense, caught between two different visions that do not quite fit together. There is a certain ambiguity here. On the one hand, it is the vision of global Britain implicitly as a major power—the use of “superpower” is not unknown in this exercise—helping to shape the order of the future, helping to champion and defend liberal values, and forming coalitions with other democracies to define the international system.

On the other hand, there are the constraints of a middle power, where Britain recognises that it is not in the top tier and that it has to make hard decisions, still with limited resources. Ultimately, there is a means/ends imbalance, which even increased funding this time has not quite corrected. The review ends up leaning too heavily on an assumption about coalitions in the future and about the power of technology to correct for deficiencies. Ultimately, Britain is still trying to do a lot with not enough.

Q2 **Gavin Robinson:** David, do you agree?



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Dr Blagden: I do, in many ways. The review gets the biggest thing right, which is that the terms “multipolarity” and “the return of great power competition” are now sloshing around. If you go back just 11 years to that national security strategy and SDSR of 2010—the fiscal bloodbath one in the aftermath of the financial crisis—there was a whole bunch of assumptions that they were really quite open and explicit about. “This is a western-dominated system. Maybe we will have to do some major war-fighting again one day. We are keeping a nuclear arsenal as a hedge against a dangerous future”.

Basically it was a vision of a counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency sort of world in which western primacy, which really means American primacy, along with Britain being *primus inter pares* of American allies and a crucial ally to the United States, would really be dominating the international system. The rest of security policy was trying to mop up the mess around that.

If you fast forward to today, it recognises that that era of western dominance is waning, or perhaps has waned, and a whole bunch of things that maybe once followed from that western dominated order are now in flux. That said, like Patrick, I would also say that, notwithstanding getting that big thing right, there are some real tensions in what the review is trying to do, which will probably come out more in subsequent questions.

Q3 **Gavin Robinson:** Building on some of your comments, do you believe that the integrated review clearly prioritises the most severe threats and risks to the UK?

Dr Blagden: Yes and no. If we talk about a multipolar international system, we are talking about Russia and China really, both of which are prominent in the integrated review. They are not themselves the same kind of powers, if you like. A lot of people would say, “Hang on a second; Russia is not really a great power in the same way.” We hear all these tropes about a GDP the size of Italy, a demographic decline and all the rest of it. Certainly in functional terms, Russia is a great power, particularly within our region, in terms of its ability to balance western preferences and the way it uses its strategy. In purchasing power parity terms, its GDP is closer to that of Germany, so it can buy the sorts of forces that it wants.

Russia and China are not exactly the same kind of power. One thing that is quite interesting in this document is the way it wishes them apart. China is a much, much more powerful power than Russia, but we also want and need continuing commercial engagement with China, so we say things like, “It is a strategic challenge,” or whatever it is we say. I forget the exact terminology. The document is much happier to label Russia as a straight-up adversary. In that sense, it gets the big things right. I have some other questions about its determination to shove them together in some ways. Perhaps one approach to strategy might be thinking about how we unpick these two adversaries and try to stop them being natural allies.



Q4 **Gavin Robinson:** Picking up on that further, the integrated review commits to reviewing the national security risk assessment methodology and that may then allow for greater delineation between the two. How do you believe it should be updated? How regularly should these reviews be conducted and what is the best approach?

Dr Blagden: The role of the national security risk assessment in this is really interesting. If you go back to the previous two NSS and SDSR processes, as they were in 2010 and 2015, there was a public summary of the NSRA stuck on the end. At least the premise was that these strategy documents followed from the national security risk assessment. This time we are doing it the other way round. This is the strategy document saying, "We are going to update the NSRA." Maybe they are just revealing that, in 2010 and 2015, it was all a lie, and actually the strategy documents were written and then they said, "Let us make it look like it follows from the NSRA." Perhaps that is a little unfair, but certainly they are saying the NSRA is going to follow from the strategy rather than the strategy following from the NSRA.

The public, unclassified national risk register is out. That came out in 2020. One of the really interesting things about that is that it is very domestic-centric. That document is open about the fact that it is written by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the Cabinet Office. If you look at it, it is heavily focused on domestic risks, such as pandemics, flooding, natural disasters, terrorism and serious crime, and then there is a malicious attacks section at the end, whereas the integrated review and the defence Command Paper, unsurprisingly, are very much the other way round, so heavily focused on external threats, and, "Oh, by the way, we are going to have to respond to some civil contingencies and those sorts of things."

In terms of actually revising the methodology, some important progress has been made. That national risk register, for example, uses exponential scaling to look at the severity of some of the situations it could face. If you go back to the 2015 iteration, it was this very crude linear diagram and you were left saying, "Hang on a second; you are comparing flooding with nuclear war. These are not even apples and oranges. These are apples and elephants."

At least the national risk register now has this exponential scaling to recognise that something like nuclear war would be a lot worse even than a very bad natural disaster, for example, but there are other steps that could still be taken, and it is hard to know what will be taken, because the NSRA is a classified process. I published a paper on this in 2018, which has a list of recommendations for how it could be tweaked, if anyone wants to look at it, but I will not keep rambling about it now.

Q5 **Gavin Robinson:** Professor Porter, you were nodding, smiling and smirking at times during that response. Can I assume that you agree with Dr David's overall assessment?



Professor Porter: Forgive me; that is my natural demeanour, sorry. I do agree and I would also add a point about the assessment of risk. This is not unique to Britain, and Britain has tried to do a good job of this, but a common issue among major powers is the tendency to think about threats and disorder as coming from somewhere else, the main critique being, “We did not get in early enough and quickly enough to prevent it”.

One problem that lies through these documents is the assumption that a forward, active and globally persistent presence necessarily will both prevent disorder spreading and clearly signal Britain’s benign intent. The world is a tougher place than that. A forward presence can signal hostility rather than stability, and it can signal ill intention, not benevolence. I am sure we are going to get on to this. In an area of access, area denial, long-range anti-ship missiles and precision munitions, globally spread forward presence can present targets as well as deterrents, so there needs to be a bit more thinking about the interactive nature and the security dilemma problems that come in handling risks.

Q6 **Chair:** Before we go on to look at the specifics of our military focus, you touched on the nuclear deterrent. You hinted that you were pleased to see the numbers going up. It seemed a bit clunky, the way this was rolled out. There was an absence of justification as to why. Can you give us your view on why you think it was right to increase the number of nuclear warheads?

Professor Porter: The main rationale, as I understand it, that has been given in public is anticipating the expected improvement in Russia’s ballistic missile defence posture and wanting to keep track in that competition. There is a more compelling argument for why it is desirable and prudent to do this, which is that it reverses a tendency over the last few decades increasingly towards not just partial disarmament, but also giving off an overall image of being a reluctant nuclear power, which raises doubts about Britain’s willingness to use nuclear weapons in extremis. An incremental addition to the nuclear arsenal makes it harder for any adversary to make the gamble that Britain would, in the final analysis, be reluctant to use them.

In other words, it is that terrifying balancing act that comes in a nuclear world of looking stable enough not to be presenting an imminent threat, but determined and willing enough to use them if they really have to. This helps to get the balance back towards that and, if I may say—others will disagree with this—moving hopefully towards a world in which we finally admit that the nuclear revolution is irrevocable and irreversible, and living with that world as it is, rather than maintaining the fiction of ultimate disarmament.

Q7 **Chair:** Just to advance that, if the Russia threat is increasing, they now have low-yield battlefield tactical nuclear weapons. We do not have any. I worry that in our lifetimes we might see one of these used, simply because they are so effective. It would be a gamechanger, but you could easily see it happening. Should our nuclear arsenal then advance to



include such systems?

Professor Porter: I can see both sides of the argument. I would be reluctant to take that step. I recognise the potential battlefield advantages of that. I think it is too destabilising, but making the current nuclear posture more credible, as well as providing enough of a ladder of conventional escalation for Britain to have in NATO—

Q8 **Chair:** How would we respond if one was used in eastern Europe where British troops were participating in some NATO exercise?

Professor Porter: I would personally recommend non-nuclear escalation and non-nuclear movement on the ground. There are other ways of responding, but I would also want it to be a real doubt in Moscow's mind that Britain would not actually proceed to strategic use in that situation.

Q9 **Chair:** No, it would be in response, I take it.

Professor Porter: Yes.

Chair: I do not want to wander down this avenue too much. Let us now turn to where we are focusing around the world today.

Q10 **Stuart Anderson:** Hello to you both. You have both in the past said you have been sceptical about the tilt to the Indo-Pacific. Has anything in the integrated review or *Global Britain in a Competitive Age* changed your mind on the UK needing to focus on the Euro-Atlantic?

Professor Porter: It has not. Let me just emphasise one thing. I am an Indo-Pacific tilt sceptic, but I also believe that there are important contributions that NATO states can make to the overall international position without the tilt. In other words, it is not that Asia does not matter and it is not that America's defence burdens do not matter, but countries like Britain can make an indirect assistance to that by doing their jobs in the Euro-Atlantic to enable the US increasingly to focus on its prioritisation of Asia.

Secondly, my fears remain that the tilt, while not adding enough weight into that theatre to be meaningful, does enough to promise what Britain may not be able to deliver on in a crisis, but also dangerously thins out Britain's ability to project power sustainably with enough weight over time in the Euro-Atlantic. It comes down to a larger disagreement with the whole concept of global Britain. It is enough for Britain to be an international actor, as well as for the Mediterranean, for continental Europe in its air and sea approaches, and in particular for NATO's eastern flank. It spreads existing forces too thinly for not enough advantage.

Q11 **Stuart Anderson:** Doctor, I would be keen to hear your views on that point.

Dr Blagden: I share many of Patrick's sentiments on this. People who have been a bit critical of the tilt get accused of being idiots and not realising that east Asia is the game in town and the new centre of



economic activity, and just how powerful China is becoming and how much further it could still rise. The response to that is, "Yes, and the power best equipped to balance that is the United States and other Asian powers in the region", places like South Korea and Japan. One thing the United States would really like, among many, would be to not have to look after the Euro weenies, effectively, and to have European powers that looked after their Euro-Atlantic home region, so it could fully pivot.

When we think about the sorts of influence activities China has been engaged in, there are a lot of steps that European states could take, whether it comes to funding of infrastructure, comms networks or not allowing states that are particularly in need of external investment to be picked off, with the involvement of belt and road leading all the way to Italy or whatever. There are various non-military things that could still make an important contribution to that overall US-led balancing effort.

Q12 **Stuart Anderson:** Could I just probe that point? It is a very credible point about not allowing smaller states to be picked off. Considering when China started down the route of the infrastructure investment and supporting smaller states, are we a bit too far down that route now?

Dr Blagden: Yes, possibly. It would be somewhat hypocritical for us to just say smaller states as well, because, going back within the last decade in this country, there was a real impetus to basically use the Chinese state as a PFI fund. That is effectively what the Hinkley Point nuclear projects and stuff like that is. In the New Labour years, we said it was PFI. Now we say, "We will not use private banks. We will use Chinese savers to build infrastructure without paying for it from general taxation, but then instead be repaying to Chinese state firms or paying over the odds for electricity."

This goes to a broader disconnect in strategy with certain Departments of State having some priorities and others having other priorities, which is always an issue. In terms of what that means for future strategy, it does not mean you could not try to roll back from it. The fact that you are already up to your knees in the quicksand does not mean you should go up to your neck.

Then I was making the point about involvement in east Asia. When we look at the original debates about the British withdrawal from the east of Suez in the 1960s, which never really happened because we never really left the east of Suez, but it was certainly a very big totemic moment, one of the concerns was penny packeting, so forces that were big enough to get you into trouble, but not big enough to meaningfully resolve or reduce the trouble once you were entangled in it. I have some of those concerns about the Indo-Pacific move.

If it is just a river-class patrol vessel in Singapore doing a little bit of presence, to host a cocktail party or as a useful focal point for the ambassador in wherever to use, and you build a bit of regional situational awareness, that is fine in many ways. It is not especially consequential



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either way. Once you start putting more substantial forces into more sensitive areas of that region, you face the opportunity costs of all those forces not being in other places in the world where you might need those forces, and you run into becoming entangled in a region that could see very escalatory conflict dynamics very quickly.

Stuart Anderson: Thank you for the points there.

Q13 **Richard Drax:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. The integrated review commits the National Security Adviser to “reviewing national security mechanisms and processes” to ensure the IR objectives are implemented. Where should they start?

Professor Porter: I would start with the budgetary shortfalls that are a legacy from the last few defence reviews and the Ministry of Defence’s difficulties in meeting targets. Understandably, there are vague points in the review about what exactly is going to be funded on time and with what, so I would want to start with that. I would also want to start trying to do some digging down into one of the big assumptions, which is that global persistent presence, especially in Asia, and visibility therefore make Britain relevant and give Britain influence.

I would want to ask some hard questions about what we mean by influence. Does it mean getting people to do what they are doing already, does it mean getting people to do what they are otherwise reluctant to do or does it just mean in this sense providing additional support, even notional support, to allies and partners in Asia, and them being grateful for it, but not actually making that much of a difference?

At a time when you have a limited surface fleet and one that is facing some near-term reduction, what exactly is the result of spreading it out more globally? Is that actually getting the kind of influence and leverage that is expected of it? That is genuinely an open question. If it turns out that it is not, I would suggest it is time for a reassessment. David will have further views, but that is just two areas.

Dr Blagden: Absolutely, it is good that the bureaucratic machinery, as we like to call it, is regularly looked at and tried to help work. In some ways, it really is a thankless job, because you are asking an official, admittedly a very senior one, to try to make Cabinet or Government work better.

If we look at the tensions we have seen, and think back to the middle of the last decade, we had a real tension between what you might call the Osborne doctrine, when it was George Osborne’s Treasury that was really big on deep economic engagement with China, and other Ministries of State that, at the same time, were saying, “Hang on; China is engaged in some sorts of activities that we really might not like”. You have other Ministries of State, such as the Foreign Office, the MoD and the agencies, raising questions about Chinese behaviour in cyberspace or whatever it is. Asking an official to resolve those deep political contradictions is in



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some ways likely to be beyond them, however brilliant or good their access or whatever.

In some ways, you need to have a situation in which the Government, meaning the Prime Minister within Cabinet and Cabinet itself, make these choices about national strategic priorities. We often talk about national interests. One of the annoying things about national interests is that they sometimes contradict each other. We want to be both rich and secure. When it comes to something like China, unfortunately, they might point in opposite directions. You can have deep economic engagement with China and get richer, or you could shut China out of everything and be a bit more secure, but those two things stand in a bit of tension.

The polity, the British public, or whatever you want to call it, wants both of those things. It wants to be both rich and secure, so you need the top level of Government to say, "This is the trade-off we are going to make," embody that in the National Security Council, which is a political body precisely because those are the people with that elected mandate to make these kinds of trade-offs and face the electorate over the choices they make, and then be in a situation of saying, "Okay, bureaucratic machinery, these are the trade-offs we have made. You now need to go and implement them." If you simply get a brilliant official to say, "Go and tinker with some bureaucratic organs," you are not fundamentally going to resolve those sorts of tensions.

Q14 **Richard Drax:** David, that is very interesting. You actually pre-empted my next question, which I will move on to, because it reinforces what you are hinting at. Are existing Whitehall structures capable of delivering an integrated response to the threats set out in the integrated review? You have very seriously raised that point in saying it is a very difficult conundrum.

Dr Blagden: It is a difficult conundrum, yes. Regular, empowered and consequential meetings of the National Security Council can be very valuable in that direction. The NSC, since it has existed, has faced various criticisms: that it just ends up as a short-term crisis management function or that it is predominantly engaged in media presentation. Then we have seen criticisms of it not meeting altogether. It needs to come from that level. The FCDO, the MoD, etc. are full of brilliant people, but they have a mandate to discharge a particular policy portfolio. If you just sit them in a room, give them typewriters and expect them to write Shakespeare without a political direction from the top, that is going to remain fairly fraught.

Professor Porter: I was lucky enough to be part of a briefing group with some of the folks involved in drawing this up. To give them their credit, they are no fools. They realise there are trade-offs here that do not fully get addressed, partly because there is a reluctance to fully address them and that has to be worked out.



One of those is the constant thing about liberal values versus the balance of power abroad. For example, at times the Secretary of State for Defence says, "We must actively champion those values of liberty, justice and tolerance," but at other times, in order, for example, to get Iran to the negotiating table or contain a rising China, that is going to involve balancing coalitions with some pretty authoritarian regimes. In order to tackle climate change and reduce carbon emissions, that is going to involve probably muting criticism of human rights records. There are arms sales to all sorts of despots, which we undertake partly for revenue and partly in order to create balances.

I am not saying that is an easy one to resolve, but it is something that not even a particular structure can necessarily go about doing. I am personally in favour of veering more towards a favourable balance of power in which Britain's institutions can be secure, but others will disagree. There is a general reluctance to really try to make a decision either way on that very grand strategic question.

Q15 Richard Drax: This is not going to work, is it, unless the Prime Minister and very senior members of the Government are crystal clear what the aim is militarily, strategically and on trade, and think it all out before they tell their advisers, "This is the direction we want to take"?

Professor Porter: I would say so. My fear is that, as with a lot of Governments, crystal clarity is arrived at, but usually by virtue of a crisis when it is too late. It is better to have tried to anticipate that a few miles up the track and make some decisions in advance, but, yes, I agree.

Q16 John Spellar: Taking the integrated review and the defence and security industrial strategy together, do they make clear the role that the armed forces and, indeed, our defence industry will play in achieving our national security and foreign affairs objectives? You are smiling, Patrick, so go first.

Professor Porter: I am sorry; I should stop smiling. There are some good things on this in the review, such as the emphasis more towards an onshore capability and an industrial base, however partial and however inadequate, at a time when we have seen the vulnerability of global supply chains, and the emphasis more on sovereign ownership of capabilities, manufacturing and all of those things.

What is less clear is the number of tasks that are being expected of the armed forces, particularly with the reduction in the Army's size but also the near-term cuts to the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, all the way to something that is very difficult, which is expecting the armed forces to exercise a persistent diplomatic effect actively all the time. That is not a profile a country has to choose for its armed forces. Armed forces can have a more conservative and more limited role of deterring and responding to major threats, rather than supplementing the work of British ambassadors, British envoys, British companies, etc. There is this sort of ambition.



One of the golden thread words that go through this review is the word “relevance”, but that seems to be freighted with an assumption that, in order to be relevant, an armed force has to be actively used all the time, whereas I would want to challenge that. To be relevant, it is important that armed forces are robust and survivable, and can be applied quickly with weight in an important theatre, in order, primarily, to deter. Just as a police force does not have to justify itself by making arrests every 10 minutes but acts as a deterrent, the same goes for armed forces, but there is a much more ambitious and demanding thing being put on our armed forces at a time when there are quite debilitating near-term cuts. There is something unbalanced there.

Q17 John Spellar: That moves seamlessly to the question of whether the objective of “sustaining strategic advantage through science and technology” is either achievable or sustainable. What is your view of that?

Professor Porter: It is achievable, but the ambition that seems to come out of these documents is not just that there will be an advantage or an edge. That is okay and that plays to some of Britain’s strengths historically. Britain is not historically technophobic. It is technosceptic, but some of the greatest advancements have come from these shores.

Where I worry is the idea that technology can do something much more demanding, which is to be a substitute for mass and a replacement for large-scale capability, and to create agility. This vague term, “a culture of innovation”, almost expects technological wonders to be enough to replace the absence of enough numbers. When you are in a crisis, particularly in a world where forward bases and fleets are targets as much as they are resources, and the key to winning a war or surviving is fighting through after the first round of devastating attacks, you are going to need reserve power. Technology cannot do enough to make up for that.

Q18 John Spellar: As they say, it is not you who decides whether you are a combatant; it is the enemy who decides whether you are a combatant. Finally on that—the other part of the question—is it financially sustainable?

Professor Porter: The more limited ambition of maintaining an advantage is, but this is part of a wider picture where there just is not a large enough defence budget for all the things and the geographic range of things Britain wants to do. That then raises an uncomfortable wider issue of the general economic settlement of the country, which is something I am sure members here have been thinking about.

John Spellar: Indeed.

Dr Blagden: I will try to bundle a bit of a response to the three things you threw at Patrick. In terms of thinking about this trade-off between domestic industrial strategy and international activism, and then the



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relationship to science and technology, one thing that is pleasing about this desire to try to sustain some defence industry is a recognition lacking from previous reviews that certain alliances might not always be forever.

We have done this thing in UK grand strategy over recent years of treating the United States as just naturally and permanently aligned with the interests of the UK. That would not even have to change all that much for it to have some implications. The United States does not need to have a big split with NATO for it to suddenly have somewhat different foreign policy priorities or not be in a position to shoulder all of its allies' security burdens simultaneously, if that is what is going on.

With a return to multipolarity, that is the logical corollary: that the United States ultimately would not be able to sustain all of its allies' defence simultaneously. Wanting that ability to build your own stuff or not be wholly in hoc to the foreign policy priorities of foreign powers, whether that be the United States, European producers or whatever, has a lot to recommend it.

One trade-off that comes with that, though, is that you can end up in situations where you are in danger of jeopardising a capability for the near or intermediate term on the promise of a future industrial project. The review is a bit weaselly about F-35 numbers. It says, "We want to grow beyond the current 48 F-35s that are ordered, but let us leave it at that". Say we end up with only 48, 50, 60 or maybe up to 70 F-35s. You are driving these two aircraft carriers around the sea, and maybe one of them is training and maintaining, so they do not both need full air groups. But, if you are also talking about the F-35 being the replacement for the Tornado in the RAF's ground strike role, you really are talking about a quite modest pot of strike aircraft, with the promise of Tempest down the road and the promise of this domestic next generation thing, so that we are rolling back on F-35 in the present.

You can end up in this continual "jam tomorrow" cycle, which is so familiar to UK defence: "This review is bad, but wait until 2020, wait until 2025 or wait until 2030." It is always, "Future force—10 years' time—will look like this, but in the meantime present force looks a bit like it has all these holes in, like a Swiss cheese."

The other thing on science and technology goes to this question of how a modestly sized or modestly populated state that is not that big, but has relatively good capital and technology concentrations, can exercise a lot of strategic power. Absolutely, that technological sophistication is going to be your relative edge.

Again, we come back to some obvious stuff about different bureaucratic organs of states having different priorities. Patrick and I are both biased because we work for universities, but we are seeing a lot in the press at the moment about potential cuts to the universities. The UK is not yet even meeting the OECD average of R&D funding. If you want to be a science and tech superpower, not even being at the OECD average for



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R&D spending while the Treasury circles above your universities sector means you could have some cross-purposes going on.

John Spellar: Thank you very much. The 10-year horizon has historical precedent, but not necessarily an encouraging one in that regard.

Q19 **Mr Francois:** David, to follow up on what you have said, you used the phrase “jam tomorrow”. When we have spoken among the Committee, it is certainly a concern we all share that, at the end of the integrated review period, our armed forces look like they are in really good shape, but we sacrifice quite a lot of capability in the meantime in order to fund being able to get there. This is just to say that your concerns are very similar to some of ours.

You talked about ever fewer units. For instance, the Government have just made the very welcome announcement that they are going to go ahead with the upgrade to the Challenger 3 main battle tank, but they are going to upgrade only 150 tanks, which is enough to equip just over two regiments. We will have a very modern main battle tank, but we will have very few of them in relative terms. Is this a trend that worries you as you look at the integrated review: that, in simple terms, we end up with ever fewer units with ever more capable equipment? At the end of the day, mass is important and the more you use, the less you use. Stalin had a point, did he not?

Dr Blagden: Yes, absolutely. It is a real concern. It is a particular concern with the cuts in the numbers of people, because British defence documents always talk about being more flexible and adaptable than the last one and yet, if you want to talk about the most flexible or adaptable platform that a military has, it is the people.

People can do anything. They have brains. They can think of new ways to use whatever: “Crap, they are coming towards us. Pick up a shovel and hit them.” This is a choice that a person can make, whereas if you have put your eggs in one basket with a particular technological vision of the future, and that technological vision of the future turns out to not be quite right—if the technology has some loophole that makes easily counterable, does not quite materialise in the way that you expected or whatever—what you have sacrificed is the ultimate flexible and adaptable piece of kit, which is people who can come up with new ways of doing things on the hoof. Yes, that is a problem.

The other concern I see, which goes to a point that you were making about offensive capability when you were talking to the French admiral previously, is that, although we have small numbers of exquisite platforms, even they sometimes lack what you might call lethality. I am not a ground forces expert, but when you look at naval forces, and you look at destroyers, an obsolete anti-ship missile or the Type 26 having the Mark 41 vertical launch silo—but we do not currently have any plans to put anything in it, so we are going to be carrying around tubes of fresh



air connected to an exquisite radar system—there might be question marks.

The Americans call it distributed lethality. They have had this realisation. They wanted their platforms. “We are going to have fewer warships. Let us make sure every warship can at least have a go at doing whatever it might come across on the high seas”. The Royal Navy, despite being a lot smaller, is still preserving with this idea: “These particular units are uniquely good at this particular thing that we think they might do. By providing the beautiful edifice of a task group, getting to choose where it does its operations and then making sure all the correct units are there at the exact right moment in time, this edifice will look beautiful”. If you say, “Okay, hang on a second; what if there is not one of those there or what if it does not quite unfold like that?”, you have some very exquisite platforms that cannot even do things a little bit outside of their core remit.

Yes, I agree with you. If you are going to go to really small numbers and exquisite kit, that has problems because they might not be there, and we do not even seem to make them especially good at doing things outside what we hope they will end up doing.

Professor Porter: Also, redundancy is a really important part of the ability to fight at all and the will to fight. If you have, as David says, an exquisite but small force, that becomes very quickly the thing you want to preserve and protect, and, therefore, it encourages risk aversion. That means having a thinned-out high-tech force that you almost dare not use and that might not survive the first round of a clash. It is pretty hard to make that a relevant force.

Q20 **Mr Francois:** Patrick, you have stopped grinning, which worries me. Let me see if I can worry you some more, just quickly. I am looking at the Chair here, but it is fair to say another of the things that concerns the whole Committee is our procurement record. It is somewhat chequered, to put it mildly. Just as one example, there have been some critical press reports this weekend about the lack of progress on the Ajax programme, which is this new very high-tech reconnaissance vehicle for the Army. It looks like we have spent a great deal of money. It is still not in service, other than a few engineering variants. What is happening to that?

Patrick, you have said you would like to see a larger defence budget, but isn't the first thing to do to spend whatever you have more efficiently? If we have a problem with thinning out, which we are all agreeing we do, isn't one of the priorities for the Department surely to achieve more bang for the buck, and to become much better at procuring the equipment that it is currently being given money for? At the moment you could say we are in the worst of both worlds. We are thinning out to buy some very expensive equipment in smaller numbers, and yet we are not even succeeding in buying those properly or efficiently. Is there more that we could do there to improve our national security?



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Professor Porter: I absolutely agree that there are efficiencies needed. Defence is ultimately a form of consumption and it is always going to be vulnerable to those things, but my understanding is that the MOD is looking very seriously at some of the improvements in accountability and contracting. I am not a technical expert on that, but I agree with you that it seems to be a perennial issue that there are always these overruns and delays, which is even more of a problem if you believe the environment around you is becoming ever more competitive and dangerous.

Q21 **Mr Francois:** I will give you one more example quickly. The Defence Secretary wrote a very good article in the *Sunday Telegraph* about Russian submarine activity in the Atlantic, including the waters around the United Kingdom. I completely agree with him, but the Astute attack submarine programme is horribly late, so we are having to run on the Trafalgars, which are great boats but pretty old and knackered now, because BAE Systems has done such a poor job in keeping Astute to time. This is a very serious matter and it is something the Americans look on us to do very well in the Atlantic. Is that not yet another example of where our procurement system has let us down?

Professor Porter: It may well be. I am British now, so I am glad to say "us". What has also let us down is long-term assumptions about the future of war and international politics. I remember, for example, the Chancellor of the Exchequer saying back in 2010, "Major war and major competition is hardly likely in the future. We need to be relevant to the wars of today", but the lead times are long and strategic judgments are not just for the here and now. They are for the worst case or for the "back to the future" world that we are in at the moment.

This has to go beyond Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. We do not know what is coming, but we keep on reading about, for example, the return of instability or even fascism in continental Europe. This is about the next 30 years, and the absolutely unforeseen and the unknown could be coming at us. As well as the procurement problems you are rightly identifying, there are the long-term grand strategic assumptions about the world around us.

Q22 **Mr Francois:** In fairness to industry, when the National Security Council was created by the coalition Government in 2010, it then produced a national security strategy, as I recall, that said that there was no existential threat to the security of the United Kingdom. It was almost a return to the 10-year rule of the 1920s and early 1930s, was it not, for those with a sense of history? Then by 2015 we are talking about competition. Now we are talking about increased competition, though we still talk in euphemisms. In the 1980s, we talked about a threat from the Soviet Union to NATO and the United Kingdom. Now we play tunes on the word "competition".

Nevertheless, the competition seems to be increasing and yet some would argue that we are not doing enough to match it. David, what is your view on the whole "bang for the buck" issue, as you used the phrase



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yourself? Should we be doing better with our procurement?

Dr Blagden: I am not a specialist in this either. There are two quick observations I would make. One is about the role of regularity. One of the things we saw, for example, when they started trying to build the A-boats is the huge amounts of early complications and delays because it was a long time since we had built a submarine. These are hugely sophisticated things and the workforce has said, "I cannot just sit in Barrow-in-Furness because they may order another submarine in 10 years. I am going to go and do another thing", so those skills atrophy, fade, wither away and disperse very quickly, and suddenly you are back trying to reinvent how you do this.

My hunch is that there is probably a little bit of that going on with armoured vehicles. Maybe someone can correct me and tell me I am completely wrong on this, but because we have not built or procured an armoured vehicle for quite a long time, you are then back into the trouble of, "We used to be really good at making tanks, but we have not done it for a while, so now we are back into this complication".

Stuff we have seen with the national shipbuilding strategy is quite encouraging in this domain to say, "Let us make sure we are always building a frigate fairly regularly". It does not have to be 10 a year. We are not the PLAN, but if we are just regularly preserving those skills and having regularity to the drumbeat of procuring things, these peaks and troughs of, "We have not done it for ages and, God, now we have to launch a new programme and rediscover how to do it", would hopefully be a bit less.

The other thing is striving for that high-low mix again. If we think about something like anti-submarine warfare, the Astutes are uniquely capable SSNs. The French navy has recently been experimenting with getting offshore patrol vessels with a basic bolt-on towed array system. Again, it goes to this US idea of distributed lethality. Make sure every hull you have can at least do some useful things.

Maybe you say, "The river class has this big flat deck on the back of it. We screw one of these off-the-shelf towed arrays to it or whatever". This then helps you get that little more utility out of what you have in front of you, instead of imagining the beautiful force you will have in 10 years' time. Maybe you can keep only one SSN in the north Atlantic, but you can increase your ASW power a little bit by towing some other towed arrays around on fairly simple platforms, like the French have been experimenting with. It is trying to use high-low mix a little bit to compensate for shortfalls or gaps in the exquisite capability that you wish you had.

Mr Francois: That is the 21st century equivalent of a corvette in World War II, really.

Dr Blagden: Yes.



Q23 **Chair:** Mother platforms with huge versatility is something that we are going to explore. Maybe we should get the hashtag “tubes of fresh air” going, because it is such a frustration. Any frigate or destroyer that has tubes on its front deck should be able to hit land, air or sea targets. It is just wrong that we are not there yet.

You may have read another article in the *Telegraph* by General Sir Patrick Sanders, who talked about regaining the mastery of dark arts. There is no doubt that there has been a tilt to cyber capabilities. That would be welcome for most. He poignantly says, “Do not get caught out bringing a computer to a knife fight”, unless you are going to hand over the computer so you can run away. We are worried, and certainly the Committee is, that we are losing conventional capability with this tilt to cyber. Would you agree with that? Does it really come down to the fact that we are running a peacetime budget of 2.2%, when the threat is back to different but Cold War scenarios, where we were up to 4%?

Professor Porter: Yes.

Dr Blagden: Yes, I would agree with that. I am not going to try to stick my head in the sand and say that cybersecurity is not a real thing. One of my frustrations is that we see people talking about hybrid warfare, the grey zone or whatever as if it was this separate domain, as if international politics, strategy and competition had not always been hybrid, grey or whatever.

We have this interesting development that—touch wood—we have not yet had a cyberattack of real devastating mass casualty level of effectiveness. Is that because potential adversaries cannot do them or is that because potential adversaries are deterred? What then is deterring them? There is a real relationship between conventional force and the hybrid ops you can do or what you can do in the grey zone.

The nice thing about the grey zone is that, if someone is operating in the grey zone, they have consciously chosen not to go out of the grey zone. They have consciously chosen not to escalate, so they are trying to achieve what it is they want to achieve because they fear going above that, which is actually where we would prefer them to stay. It is annoying and irritating, but we would rather they stayed there than escalating to a ground invasion of NATO Europe, for example.

If we look at what happened in Ukraine, it is little green men and there is some comms disruption, cyberattacks and all the rest of it, but also the Russians brought a massive conventional army up to the border, which hugely conditioned what the Ukrainians were able to do in response, because there is this massive conventional force sitting there and some of it coming into Ukraine. Absolutely, cyber is a real concern, but we need to not lose sight of its place within a strategic spectrum that needs to contain conventional power and ultimately nuclear deterrent effect as well, because otherwise you are getting fixated on the low-level stuff and forgetting what it is that stops the worst stuff happening.



Q24 **Chair:** Can I advance that point, Patrick? Very simply, over the next five or 10 years, do you think the world is going to get more dangerous and complex or less?

Professor Porter: More.

Q25 **Chair:** We are just running out of time. The point I am trying to elaborate is this. Maybe the penny has not dropped and, taking us all the way back to the very start of this conversation, the integrated review is in denial as to what is coming over the horizon. We dare not speak the names of the threats and what is actually happening, and prepare for them in the way that we should do. Is that too far or do you think the IR got it about right?

Professor Porter: It makes an attempt to identify and explain the deterioration in the environment, but then it also does something a little bit wishful, which is to say that, with meagre resources, we can hope that technology and soft power will somehow substitute enough for Britain to be able to security itself, as well as reliable coalitions with the same interests turning up over the horizon to help. Those assumptions could be true, but they are dangerous to rely on.

The underlying driver of what is going on in the world, to me, is not so much a breakdown of rules or norms. We have been breaking those for a long time. What is happening is a material power shift and, with growing power, states want more. They want more recognition and they also sometimes feel more insecure. The problem is that, if you are still in a state, as you have just identified, where it is a resource knife fight between cyber and conventional war, say, that is a bad way to set the table.

Q26 **Chair:** The point I am trying to raise, though, is that for many of us this integrated review does not go far enough. It is like we need an Atlantic Charter 2.0 to recognise where the world is going. I do not know if you read *Global Times*. This is the Chinese outlet. One of their headline features is, "Closer China-Russia ties form new world order, challenge US". That is pretty blunt talking coming from the Communist Party of China. They are not interested in the current rules-based order and the norms and values. They are determined to move forward and take Russia with them. I fear we are in denial and maybe we require a Sputnik moment, going back to the last Cold War. Are we going to have to wait for an acute event, whether it is related to Taiwan or something, for us to really wake up as to where things are going?

Dr Blagden: You are right. In some ways, I have a lot of sympathy for the people involved in drafting the integrated review, because they are not going to be able to go to No. 10 and the Treasury and say, "We want 4% of GDP for defence". Absent some big shock that suddenly makes votes think, "Oh, crap," you are left trying to shuffle the relatively modest means at your disposal as best you can.

Q27 **Chair:** Would you like to read in the memoirs in a couple of years' time



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that these people did privately try to say, "I would recommend this, but I realise I am not going to get it."

Dr Blagden: That would be fascinating to see and commendable in many ways. Ultimately, it is a guns versus butter trade-off. We could spend 10% of GDP on defence, but in the process we would make Britain a less pleasant place to live in. Everything else would have to be drastically cut. If you are cutting domestic goods, eventually you undermine your ability to generate future wealth. For example, you need to spend on education, universities and things like that, because that is ultimately what preserves that ability to keep generating wealth and protection in future. It is all a trade-off.

My slight frustration with the integrated review is that there was this big pot of extra money, which is good, before Christmas, pre-review, but then it does also expand its appetite. It has taken the extra resources and, as Patrick was saying, there is the determination to demonstrate relevance by intensive use.

You could have on Britain's defence budget the military posture of Italy plus a nuclear deterrent. If you wanted to be a consequential regional power in your bit of the world and have a nuclear deterrent, that would probably be enough. Japan has a much bigger surface fleet and submarine fleet for regional sea control purposes on a smaller budget than Britain. It is the scale of the ambition that Britain then has.

If your real focus is balancing great power threats, you strive to preserve concentration of force. If your real focus is winning diplomatic influence, you end up doing dispersal of force. Those are opposite things. You can have a big sea control-type fleet sailing round the north Atlantic or you can have little bitty presence missions everywhere flying the flag and generating influence, but trying to do both of those things leads you into—*[Inaudible.]*

Q28 **Chair:** Finally to Patrick, we have seen Belarus fake a terrorist threat on a plane to pursue somebody, making the calculation that there will be an international condemnation, but assuming they can get away with it. Putin has got Lukashenko's back and President Xi has ever more got Putin's back. Is this scenario a bipolarity of the world we are going towards, which we really need to wake up to, because if we do not, and do not spend that money up front, there will be consequences further down the line?

Professor Porter: That is a great question. I would say two things, one of which you will agree with and one of which may keep you up at night. First, absolutely, it is getting more dangerous. There is multipolar competition. We need to invest properly. We need to do it now and we have to stop telling ourselves pleasant stories.

Secondly, one response to a world where there is forming what looks like a Eurasian partnership and a dangerous coming together of two states is



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recognising that those states are not the same, and it may be possible, if not to actively split them, at least to encourage their historic frictions to come back. Russia is a reactive spoiler that wants buffers and China is a rapidly growing superpower that wants hegemony in Asia. They historically, as neighbours, can fall out. It is important, as well as properly arming and investing, to explore some kind of bilateral way of stabilising the relationship. It is not just to give them everything they want, but there is a prospect here of some good old-fashioned geopolitical splitting.

Chair: I could not agree with you more. If you go back to Peter the Great and the Grand Embassy, Russia traditionally looks to the West. Its money has come this way. If they had a partner over the next 100 years, surely it would be us and not China. It is convenience that brings those two together and it is Putin, rather than Russia. It requires international statecraft and we hope Britain would be part of that leadership to provide that ingenuity, vision and strategic thinking to take us there. At the moment, I do not see very much of it.

Sirs, this has been a fascinating second session and a brilliant morning, in fact. Can I say thank you once again to Professor Patrick Porter and to Dr David Blagden for your time this morning? On behalf of the Committee and everybody here, I very much appreciate your contribution today in allowing us to explore the integrated review and Britain's place in the world.