

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

Oral evidence: National security machinery

Monday 21 June 2021

4 pm

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Margaret Beckett (The Chair); Lord Brennan; Tobias Elwood; Richard Graham; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Baroness Hodgson of Abinger; Darren Jones; Lord King of Bridgwater; Lord Laming; Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho; Baroness Neville-Jones; Bob Stewart.

Evidence Session No. 5

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 97 - 119

Witnesses

[I](#): Lt Gen (retired) HR McMaster, former US National Security Adviser.

[II](#): Joe Griffin, Director General, Education & Justice, Scottish Government; Reg Kilpatrick, Director General, Covid Co-ordination, Welsh Government.

Examination of witness

Lt Gen HR McMaster.

Q97 **The Chair:** General McMaster, welcome, and thank you very much indeed for agreeing to give evidence to our committee. This is the fifth evidence session in our inquiry into the national security machinery here in the UK, prompted by looking previously at how that machinery handled the Covid outbreak, given that that was one of the tier 1 risks in our national risk assessment. We are very keen to hear from you about your experience of the American system, on which to a large degree our system was based. To begin with, how do you feel the recent change in Administration has affected the United States international outlook and the approach to national security?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Chair Beckett, thank you for the privilege of being with you. I think that your system has the same characteristics as ours,

in that the National Security Council staff really functions in a way the President wants it to function. The new Administration have demonstrated key elements of continuity in foreign policy and national security, but have diverged from certain policies of the Trump Administration. Paradoxically, they have continued the policy toward China in a way that has a high degree of continuity and is very beneficial to all of us in the free world. They have also demonstrated continuity in Afghanistan, which I think is a disaster for all of us in the free world, and we are watching that disaster unfold.

The Biden Administration have continued some of the predilections of the Obama Administration, in particular the view of the Middle East as mainly a mess to be avoided under the mistaken belief that things cannot get worse there. As we know, they always seem to be able to get worse in the Middle East if we disengage from the very complex problems there, in particular the disastrous sectarian civil war that we are witnessing across the region that both strengthens jihadist terrorist organisations and allows Iran to pursue its hegemonic designs in the region, to threaten Israel with destruction and to keep the Arab world perpetually weak by keeping it enmeshed in conflict, from Lebanon to Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

In certain other cross-cutting areas, the Administration have continued to improve on and implement strategies developed during the Trump Administration, especially in space and on the recognition that space is not a benign environment; it is indeed a competitive domain. Of course, we have seen how the attacker has the advantage in cyber space, and the need for additional reforms in the area of cybersecurity. When we consider the threat to all of us from the most destructive weapons on earth, it is encouraging to see efforts to rekindle the negotiations, strategic security and dialogue associated with nuclear weapons. That dialogue would have to include China in addition to Russia. We need a multinational focus on non-proliferation as well. I saw your excellent report on biodefence, and, of course, we have all realised as we continue to cope with this pandemic that biosecurity is an area that requires additional emphasis.

In the economic dimension of competitions, and the inescapable fact these days that we are competing with China's effort to export its authoritarian mercantilist model, initiatives in the area of technology, and greater co-operation among allies in the development of cutting-edge technologies that are relevant to defence and relevant to remaining competitive in the emerging data-driven global economy and in advanced manufacturing, are all very positive as well.

I would say that it is mixed. New Administrations oftentimes try to define their foreign policy mainly as an opposition to the Administration who have gone before them, but there are striking continuities, both good and bad, in the Biden Administration's approach.

Q98 The Chair: You said quite a bit about cross-cutting issues and your sense of some of the priorities. What challenge do you think the NSC will face in trying to co-ordinate your Government's response to those cross-cutting

issues? What are the biggest difficulties?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: The biggest difficulty is breaking down the stovepipes or the cylinders of excellence across our ministries, departments and agencies. The way to do that is through an effective, collaborative process that is oriented to commonly understood priorities, and an approach to framing the cross-cutting challenges to national and international security, to our prosperity and to our influence in the world. The way to do that is for the National Security Council staff to recognise that its principal duty is to run a process that fosters integration of efforts across departments and agencies. It has to be a process that begins with thinking about the challenge on its own terms.

This is a step that is often skipped in Washington. I do not think there is the same problem in the UK, because you do not have as much of a bottom-up process that engages departments, agencies and ministries at the lowest levels. I have seen a tendency toward bottom-up assessments on Iran, for example, or on what to do about an increasingly aggressive Chinese Communist Party, or how to compete more effectively in space or cyber space. There is a tendency to begin those discussions at lower levels in departments or in agencies without a clear framing of the challenge.

Design thinking has tremendous relevance to a competent approach to foreign policy and national security, and that has to begin at the top level, the Cabinet level. This is an opportunity for Ministers to come around a framing paper that is designed to engage all of them in that common understanding. The key elements of it are just a description of the challenge on its own terms. That can be provided most often by our intelligence agencies and officials. Then it is very important to identify what is at stake, especially since citizens in both our countries are more and more sceptical about engagements abroad. We have to inventory vital interests of ours which are at stake associated with the challenge, and then, very importantly, to view the challenge through the lens of those vital interests, and craft overarching goals and more specific objectives. Oftentimes, our policy and security decision-making is undermined by lack of clarity in objectives. You then wind up in an Alice in Wonderland situation where any road will get you there, and we tend to confuse activity with progress.

Also very important in the framing of challenges is the identification of assumptions, which is also a step that is often skipped. Most important are assumptions having to do with the degree of agency and influence or authorship over the future that we and like-minded partners enjoy. We have to understand those limitations so that we can test whether our goals and objectives are achievable and we can assess effectively the risks and costs of action. It is very important to make assumptions about how our actions will drive counteractions in complex environments and from adversaries and rivals. It is important to identify the obstacles to progress that we have to work to overcome and the opportunities that we can exploit, and then meet those challenges.

I saw that your committee is working hard on trying to establish a strategic focus: how do you get out of the day to day and look further? The framing is a way to do that. The discussion, among Ministers initially, has to be just about the framing. Do not talk about what you will do next. Once you agree on the framing, you can ask the question, "How do we integrate the efforts of all departments and agencies? How do we integrate all elements of national power with the efforts of like-minded partners to overcome the obstacles and to take advantage of the opportunities?" Now you have the foundation for a competent approach to foreign policy and national security, oriented on relatively well-defined challenges and opportunities that you have prioritised up front.

Finally, prioritisation itself is immensely important. When I came into the White House, quite unexpectedly, in February 2017, I worked with Cabinet officials on a list of 16 first-order challenges to national and international security and got agreement on those first. We then began to schedule framing sessions. After the framing sessions, I would bring that framing to the President and say, "Do you agree with this?" Once he did, I issued what we called a Cabinet memo to begin to turn the efforts of our departments and agencies in the direction of a new policy.

Then the policy co-ordinating committees, Assistant Secretary level for us, having listened in to that session, had some good guidance to go with for the development of what we called integrated strategies, but those strategies would have to come with multiple options for implementation so that the President and the heads of departments and agencies could assess differences in risk and mitigation and residual risk, and what costs would be associated with those courses of action and whether we had the resources. They would certainly be evaluated based on the degree to which we were confident that the strategies were adequate to accomplish the goals and objectives. There was a logical bridge between the definition of the challenge, the goals and objectives and what we were doing, which is oftentimes also absent. Afghanistan is a tremendous example of a delusional policy based on Afghanistan and an enemy, the Taliban, as we might like it to be rather than as it is in reality.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is illuminating. There are some depressing similarities. You call them stovepipes; we call them silos, but we are talking about the same problem.

Q99 **Baroness Hodgson of Abinger:** Good afternoon, General. During your tenure as the US national security adviser, what was your impression of the functioning of the UK NSC and national security system in tackling similar security issues?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Thank you, Lady Hodgson. I really think that it was quite positive. I got a chance to work with my old friend, Mark Sedwill, whom I served with in Afghanistan. So, first of all, it was wonderful to work with an old friend.

We took a novel approach to integrating our efforts with our like-minded partners, and it worked very well for us. We first had a discussion among

the Quint, which is the US, the UK, France, Germany and Italy, about how we could better integrate our efforts on what we regarded as the top five challenges to our national security and international security. We identified those top five challenges, and then we assigned each of them to one of our National Security Council staff or the equivalents. Then we took it upon ourselves to frame those complex challenges from a multinational perspective and to brief that back to the Quint with an emphasis on the key sequential and simultaneous actions we could take that would be synergistic and complementary to one another.

You can imagine what some of those challenges were: what to do with an increasingly aggressive Vladimir Putin and a Kremlin that was determined to pursue a campaign of disruption, disinformation and denial that was really a sustained campaign of political subversion, associated with an important military element of Russian new-generation warfare; and what to do about an increasingly aggressive Chinese Communist Party. One of the challenges we looked at was the humanitarian and political catastrophe not only centred on the Syrian civil war but in the sectarian civil war across the Middle East. Iran was another topic. Of course, very important to Italy, and all European countries, was the G5 Sahel situation, and the continuation of the conflict in Libya. North Korea was another. Maybe I have too many. Maybe G5 Sahel was connected to the Syrian civil war.

We all went with what we thought our advantage might be in framing. We came up with common documents that could then be integrated into our national-level efforts, and that helped to achieve a degree of unity of effort at the very beginning. Oftentimes, we think of co-ordination with allies and partners as something episodic and we do it right before a summit or some other type of event, but it is very important to have a strong conceptual foundation for how we are to work together. The effort in the Quint was a good model.

Oftentimes, we would be on the phone with each other in advance of maybe Prime Minister May's meeting with one of our difficult friends—Turkey comes to mind—and we would try to ensure that we were all delivering the same message so that we could begin to make progress in areas of common interest and concern. We worked extremely well together. The Skripal poisoning was a great example of that. Some of our friends let us down there in Europe's response; in many countries, it was anaemic. In terms of the US and UK working together, Mark Sedwill and I had our list of phone calls to make. We co-ordinated those efforts—of course, I was working closely with our Department of State on it as well—to marshal a strong international response. There are many other examples. I think we worked extremely well together, and it was one of the best parts of the job.

We will get into this later, but any national security adviser has five key tasks. The first key task is to staff the President or the Prime Minister—to prepare the President or the Prime Minister for their engagements on issues of foreign policy and national security. The second is to run that

process—to run the process that co-ordinates and integrates efforts across departments and agencies, with the idea of giving the President or Prime Minister best analysis. We are not omniscient. It is not our opinion, but it is best analysis and intelligence from across departments and agencies. It is to give multiple options oriented on advancing our vital interests, our security, our prosperity and our influence in the world, oriented to the first-order challenges.

The third task is to communicate: to communicate the President's decisions and policies to relevant audiences. Those can be our Congress, but that is really for Secretaries of Defence and State and the heads of intel, because Congress has direct oversight of those departments. Sometimes, it is international audiences. Sometimes, it is the American public.

The fourth key task is to help to achieve unity of effort with like-minded partners internationally. That effort should be complementary to, and help to reinforce, the efforts of our foreign ministries and departments of state.

Finally, you have to lead an organisation. You have to provide the National Security Council staff with what we in the army would call purpose, motivation and direction, and hopefully set a positive climate where people like to come to work and they feel that they are making a difference.

Those are the five key tasks, and probably the one I enjoyed the most was fostering unity of effort with like-minded partners. Across the Quint, we were quite a tight-knit club, with Christoph Heusgen from Germany, Mariangela Zappia from Italy and Philippe Étienne from France.

Q100 Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Lovely. Thank you. Yes, I can imagine that at times it was very hard to keep the challenges down to five. Following on from that, how useful do you think the UK's recent integrated review is in setting priorities for the UK's NSC and the wider government machinery?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: I am a big fan of it. I think it was extremely well done. I know there were criticisms that it was too ambitious and that there was not enough emphasis on the "how". The "how" can come later. I think the overall approach was fundamentally sound.

I just re-read it at the weekend in preparation for this. What is most important is the recognition that we have to compete much more effectively. The idea of global Britain is right. In my experience, the UK has a very complete and valuable understanding of many of the complex challenges, and has tremendous influence over many of them, not only directly but in the ability to bring in like-minded partners to galvanise multinational efforts.

I am a big fan of it. I think it was exceptionally well done. I know some of my historian friends in the UK were involved. I am a historian, so I am a little bit sympathetic to the historical perspective that it brought as well.

It is a clear document. It acknowledges the realities of the competitions that we are facing, what is at stake and what we have to do together to build a better future for generations of our citizens to come.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you. Lord King, I think the General has just dealt with part of your question, but I am sure that you can—

Lord King of Bridgwater: Find something else to say?

The Chair: You can move on to the first supplementary.

Q101 **Lord King of Bridgwater:** Welcome, General. I am very pleased to see you. It seemed to me that absolutely core to the role of the national security adviser is obviously the relationship with the President, and the question as to whether the President himself has any background experience that gets him forward to the mark. I do not want to talk about your own President.

I had the pleasure of working a bit with Brent Scowcroft. I remember going to meetings with him and President George Bush. The relationship that he established with him was absolutely outstanding. I notice that President Bush had a background himself, having been ambassador in China and then in the CIA, in the sense that you must have a President who has some understanding of this.

It is quite interesting that President Biden is, I suppose, the first new President coming in who has already had eight years' experience of the National Security Council. Jake Sullivan was also involved on that. What do you think about Brent as the role model for how to establish the role of national security adviser?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: I think it is exactly the right model. There is a great book by Peter Rodman called *Presidential Command*. It might be useful for the committee to take a look at the concluding chapter of that book, because it really holds up the Scowcroft model as the model. I had the opportunity to spend two hours with General Scowcroft after I took over the job. I spoke with every living national security adviser in the first few weeks. His insights were invaluable. I have, of course, been a student of National Security Council decision-making. I had the opportunity to read history and to write a thesis on why Vietnam became an American war, what some of the pitfalls were that led to an American war in Vietnam without a strategy, and the utterly ineffective and very costly approach to that war. I was determined at least not to make the same mistakes that I had written about in the book, *Dereliction of Duty*.

In writing that book, I looked at other models of national security decision-making, and General Scowcroft's is the best. The Scowcroft model is the model of co-ordinating and integrating across departments and agencies to provide best advice and multiple options, and to recognise that a national security adviser is the only person in the US national security establishment or foreign policy establishment who has the President as his or her only client and is therefore in a position of

trust and should endeavour, as you said, to have not only a good relationship with the President but, especially, a relationship of trust with the President.

This is why, for example, writing a memoir soon after departing the job as national security adviser during an ongoing term of the presidency could be damaging to future relationships, because future Presidents may say, "I don't know if I can trust this person". You want the best person in the job, not somebody who is going to be blindly loyal in the sense that the national security adviser thinks that it is his or her job to tell the President exactly what the President wants to hear.

That was the problem with McGeorge Bundy and the relationship with Lyndon Johnson during the period in which Vietnam became an American war. The President's closest advisers determined what the President wanted to hear and then set about telling him exactly that. Some of the President's advisers concluded that to maintain their good relationship with Lyndon Johnson they had to tell him exactly what he wanted to hear. Of course, that begs the question: what the heck good is your advice anyway if you are only telling the President what he or she wants to hear?

It is important for the national security adviser to have a sense of duty to the elected President and to be trusted by the President. It is no secret that I did not have a particularly amicable relationship with Donald Trump, but I was determined not to do him the disservice of telling him what he wanted to hear. As you may know, there can sometimes be an environment around a Prime Minister or a President that I would describe as competitive sycophancy. It is important for a national security adviser not to fall into that kind of an environment, and to do his or her best to give best advice.

Lord King of Bridgwater: There are not many members of this committee who would not think you had a pretty challenging President to deal with. We will let it pass at that.

The interesting thing is that with President Biden, having been Vice-President for so long and Jake Sullivan having come in, who was himself involved in the negotiations for JCPOA, which is possibly repeating itself a bit now, there is a measure of continuity. There is a very interesting issue as to whether you can get a measure of continuity when you get political change.

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Yes. It is important to have a sustained approach to foreign policy, but flexible in strategies because the environment changes and so forth. The National Security Council staff under the Obama Administration became very tactical. Also, they became a bit doctrinaire in that they made themselves susceptible to cognitive traps, especially mirror imaging, and, in the case of Iran, not considering the nature of the theocratic dictatorship and the four-decade-long proxy war Iran has waged against the great Satan, the little Satan—the UK—and its Arab neighbours.

They were prone to optimism bias and confirmation bias, and they did not frame the challenges to national and international security properly. They engaged in a fair bit of self-delusion on Iran and Iraq. You will recall that Vice-President Biden called President Obama from Baghdad in December 2011 and said, "Thank you for allowing me to end this goddamn war". Of course, wars do not end when one side disengages. We learned that the hard way as al-Qaeda 2.0 in Iraq took over territory the size of Britain. This is now, of course, ISIS, which became the most destructive terrorist organisation in history. Sadly, we are repeating an analogous mistake in Afghanistan.

Q102 **Tobias Elwood:** General, good to see you. We met a couple of times in Afghanistan through our mutual friend, Jim Mattis. One of my heroes is Field Marshal Sir John Dill, who was the founder of the special relationship and I think is the only Brit to be buried in Arlington Cemetery.

Some of the things we are discussing today are unilateral—for one country alone, and others—

Bob Stewart: Orde Wingate is there too.

Tobias Elwood: There are other relationships that are multilateral. The relationship that we have with you, the United States, our closest security ally, requires our National Security Councils to work together and those in the Oval Office and in No. 10 to work together. During your time, was there a connection, a back channel, between the top of the two trees? You mentioned Mark Sedwill. Was there an ability for you to get the view very quickly on an international situation, a dilemma, or a challenge, so that you could actually feed in what your closest friend would want to be doing at the same time?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Absolutely. I can think of one example of an event from the latest mass murder attack in Syria using chemical weapons. I have already mentioned the Skripal poisoning. There is also the Kurdish referendum in Iraq or the latest mass murder attack in Afghanistan, which you might recall in summer 2017. It was right across from the German embassy and really oriented on the US embassy. There were the subsequent attacks there. There was our effort to craft a new approach toward Pakistan. On every one of those issues, we worked very closely together. We consulted before major summits, whether it was with Xi Jinping or on Brexit, where the implications from a security perspective and an economic perspective figured prominently in our discussions over that year.

I cannot think of an opportunity that we missed to co-ordinate our efforts and always clarify an understanding of our Government's position. Oftentimes, of course, I did not know what decision President Trump was going to make. About every three months or so, we had a new round of debate, for example on the JCPOA and whether the United States was going to stay in it. That was a consistent topic of discussion. There was the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement.

They were all issues, of course, that were contentious, but they never went without multiple phone calls, co-ordination and a common understanding of how we and the President were thinking about them. It was also about creating opportunities for Prime Minister May and President Trump to have conversations about those topics, so that it was not just us co-ordinated at the national security adviser level or between the Foreign Minister and Secretary of State, but the President had the opportunity to hear Prime Minister May's perspective whenever it was appropriate for him to have a conversation on one of these topics.

Tobias Elwood: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr Stewart, I know you originally wanted to come in on this. Do you still?

Bob Stewart: I think the General has given a very solid answer, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Bob Stewart: I think that is it.

The Chair: We will move on, not least because you have a question later, I hope. Lady Healy, please.

Q103 **Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:** General McMaster, I would like to ask what you think would be the best advice. The UK Government have recently appointed a new national security adviser. You talked about the five priorities. You also said what not to do, as in, "Don't tell them what they want to hear". What could be the most effective way to balance both domestic and international issues, especially in today's security environment?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: It all comes down to the framing discussion. Put into place a process that allows that discussion to occur. That framing discussion should also allow key Ministers across the Government and the Prime Minister to integrate domestic and international efforts. I watched some of the earlier testimonies—they were excellent; these sessions have been great—on the issue of the integration of international foreign policy with domestic security efforts. I believe they have to be interconnected.

It was a mistake for the Trump Administration to break out a homeland security adviser and try to elevate that homeland security adviser to the same level as the national security adviser. We worked well together and co-ordinated efforts, but there were periods of tension, and, of course, we should have learned from 9/11 or from 7/7 that we cannot just focus on our homeland security efforts at the water's edge. We have to ensure that we are engaged with challenges and threats to national security abroad, because once those threats reach our shores they can only be dealt with at exorbitant cost and price. That is also the case for Covid-19.

The Chinese Communist Party foisted Covid-19 on the world by suppressing news of human-to-human transmission, shutting down domestic travel before international travel, and going after any of the

doctors or journalists who were trying to ring alarm bells about it. Of course, those actions prevented the world from containing what could have been a local epidemic, and it became a global catastrophe. It is very important to integrate those efforts. The framing sessions can do that.

There are organisational design and process implications that can help that happen as well. An example would be if we were dealing with the threat from North Korea and were endeavouring to develop a strategy such that North Korea no longer posed a dangerous threat to the world. That is a broad challenge. It involves its nuclear and missile programmes, but it also involves its cyber efforts, particularly the emphasis on cybercrime and ransomware similar to what we see with Russia. As you take on that element of the problem, there should be a representative from the Home Office and others who are working on cyber defences inside the UK, or inside the US, as well as those who are integrating intelligence efforts—for example, the efforts of our NSA, or any intelligence effort or cyber effort to counter it. Your question is great; it really gets to the issue of the integration of the domestic and the international, and how important it is to do that from a framing perspective as well as from a process and organisational perspective.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Thank you.

Q104 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** General, I want to ask you to expand a bit on what you have just been saying about the management of business in the National Security Council. I think it is a fairly common experience in government, and it has certainly been true in the UK, that very often the short term and the immediate tend to drive out discussion of the longer term. You have talked about framing the issues. Has that helped perhaps to focus attention on the longer term? How did you manage to keep people focused on the bigger but not necessarily so acute issues that all Governments face?

You have just been talking about the link between domestic and international security, which is a growing feature. Every year, the domestic consequences of international activity become more and more important, and are very important to manage and indeed to plan for. What was your experience of the domestic consequences of international activity? Did you feel that it was satisfactory, or do you feel that more needs to be done in that area? I certainly think that we need to in the UK. I would be interested to know what your reflections are.

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Thank you for those questions. Short versus long term is a huge issue. It is human nature to get dragged into the day to day.

When I got into the job as national security adviser, I inventoried every decision and authority that had been centralised away from departments and agencies into the White House. Where it no longer made sense to me for those responsibilities to remain centralised, or with the heads of the departments and agencies, we brought it to the President to have him devolve those responsibilities back down to the departments. A number

of reports were required from the departments and agencies that were not, from my perspective, connected to any form of decision-making, guidance or integration of policy, so we ended the requirements for those reports.

All those activities and that centralisation of authorities dragged us into the day to day within the White House rather than the much longer-term view that you need, with an emphasis not on doing the departments' and agencies' jobs for them but instead helping to integrate their efforts and to ensure, at the very minimum, that we were not working at cross-purposes and, ideally, were reinforcing each other's efforts and integrating the efforts of like-minded partners internationally and across the private sector for many of these challenges.

We then focused on the longer term by identifying 16—I think they grew to 19 over time—first-order challenges to national security: how to stabilise Iraq and ensure that Iraq is not aligned with Iran; how to move toward a resolution to the Syrian civil war in a way that mitigates the humanitarian crisis, ensures the enduring defeat of ISIS and limits Iranian and Russian influence in a post-civil war Syrian; and how to ensure that North Korea does not pose an unacceptable threat to the world. By phrasing those as questions, you begin to frame. I will not go through all of them. Those are just examples.

We scheduled framing sessions and then fostered collaborative work to develop framing papers. One of the ways we did that organisationally was that I wrote a new national security policy memorandum when I came in, which the President signed and is the authority under which I could operate to organise the National Security Council process. I know that you have had some discussions—I have seen some of the earlier testimony—on the degree to which your own process should be formalised. That is a good model, because it would allow each Prime Minister to put his or her imprint on the policy and the procedures and the organisation with which he or she is most comfortable.

What we did organisationally that was different was to establish a new deputy national security adviser for strategy. I think you can have too many deputy national security advisers, so we only had two. Jake Sullivan has maybe a few others. He also has a climate tsar to deal with and many others. I think two is manageable. The principal deputy runs the process that tees up issues, and develops multiple options for presentation to the principals committee or manages the day-to-day adjustments to policy. If you have an Iraq policy and now you have a Kurdish referendum, what do you do? Convene the deputies and come up with options. That is more the day to day.

The longer-term approach is that the deputy national security adviser for strategy works with the key far-looking elements of our other departments and agencies. For us, that is the office of policy planning in the State Department, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Defense Department, and their equivalents in the intelligence agencies and homeland security and so forth, in Commerce

and in the Treasury department. She—it was initially Dina Powell and later Nadia Schadlow—would work with their counterparts in those departments and agencies to establish the framing papers and to tee up the discussion, which would result in top-down guidance to the assistant secretary level on long-term strategic problems: how well did we do on especially implementing efforts that had to do with international challenges with domestic security implications?

I think the record was unsatisfactory and disappointing in some areas, although we made progress in cyber, for example. Establishing the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency was a positive step. We made tremendous progress in securing the 2020 election process relative to the 2016 election process. I had long departed. I left in March or April 2018, but those who carried on the work that we began in 2017 to 2018 did a good job. Of course, we see how much of our civilian infrastructure now is so susceptible to cyberattacks—the international implications of the SolarWinds attack and the attack on Colonial Pipeline, for example.

There is a heck of a lot more to do to address cyber threats abroad that affect infrastructure at home. We need, for example, as the next step, an NSA-type or GCHQ equivalent for the dot.com and dot.edu worlds such as we have for the dot.gov and dot.mil worlds. The way our financial sectors work together with Governments is an example. For cyber, I would give a “Less than satisfactory”.

We have a lot to do on biothreats. What can make you more effective? You have to emphasise implementation. You can develop the most beautiful policy paper and policy approach, but if you do not check your stockage levels of PPE, for example, or if you do not have a system in which authoritative, transferable data can help you track the waves of a biothreat and marshal the biomedical response to address that threat, your policy is no good, because it is not implementable. We have learned a lot of hard lessons from Covid-19. I hope we take those to heart.

I did not talk about the implementation process. As the President approved the integrated strategies, we developed implementation plans. Those were not detailed plans because they were at very high level. We identified the sequential and simultaneous actions of the departments and agencies and how they related to each other. Most importantly, we established measures of effectiveness, and assigned departments and agencies responsibility for tracking those measures of effectiveness, and, if we were not meeting them, to recommend adjustments.

Oftentimes, it was our intelligence agencies that tracked those measures of effectiveness, but oftentimes they were economic in nature in the Commerce Department or, if they had international economic dimensions, the Under Secretary for ECON at the State Department would track them. I think implementation is key, as well as tracking measures of effectiveness and making adjustments. None of these strategies should be immutable; they have to change, especially when you fall out of your assumptions or you achieve disappointing results in connection with your measures of effectiveness.

Baroness Neville-Jones: That was a very helpful answer. Thank you. I think it shows the immense scope these days of decisions that are taken at a high level, in the way they penetrate down through structures of government that have not normally been accustomed to dealing with national security issues.

You mentioned the private sector. What was your experience of working with the private sector? In what sort of issues did you find it a useful and important thing to be doing, and how effective was it?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: I think the big success story is in space, because space is now obviously a government, military and commercial domain. The reinvigoration of the National Space Council—in this case it was run by the Vice-President—was supported by National Security Council staff and the process we ran around the development of the public-facing space strategy, which I think was exceptionally well done, and the classified strategy that underpins it and goes beyond the public strategy. We reached an unprecedented degree of common understanding between the commercial, government and military dimensions of space and how we can work together to ensure unfettered, undisrupted access to critical space capabilities that are essential to our economy and essential to security. There is also a space exploration dimension and so forth. I think that was a very effective example.

An example with disappointing results would have to be with pandemic preparation, even though we identified the three critical tasks that we had to accomplish. The first was surveillance and containment abroad or locally before it becomes a pandemic. Thank you, Chinese Communist Party. That is why we were unable to do that.

The second key task was to mobilise a biomedical response. That is where we fell down on issues of supply chains that had become too biased in favour of efficiency rather than resilience, as well as not having the transferrable data that I mentioned.

Finally, it was biomedical innovation—the ability to rapidly develop therapies and the all-important vaccine. That is where we should probably give ourselves an A+. That went well. It was not just chance; it was investment in rapid vaccine prototyping, manufacturing at scale using innovative techniques that we had invested in over years and years, and the decision on the part of the Trump Administration to buy the vaccines in advance. A lot of decisions were made in the third area that did not necessarily compensate for the breakdowns in the first two, but I think it could have been a heck of a lot worse.

We have positive examples and negative examples on the integration of efforts across the private sector. The biomedical response is an example of good and bad. An example of bad in the biomedical response is that we do not have a single-payer system. As you know, we have a combination of public and private hospitals. We are very decentralised in where healthcare is managed at the state and local as well as the federal levels. It broke down in the biomedical response. Where it worked, and

where the public and private efforts came together, was in biomedical innovation and the development of therapies, especially vaccines.

Baroness Neville-Jones: There are lots of parallels in the UK, General, on that one.

What about cyber, where the private sector is both victim and solutions provider very often? It seems to me that that is an absolutely key partnership.

Lt Gen HR McMaster: It is, absolutely. I think the environment in connection with public and private sector co-operation is becoming much more positive. We now know that there is no bold line between the four types of cyber threats with which we ought to be concerned. The way to think about those threats is within categories but to recognise that the categories overlap with one another.

First are direct threats to infrastructure. We all have to be concerned about power infrastructure, energy infrastructure, healthcare infrastructure, transportation infrastructure, and space infrastructure.

The second area is cyber criminality. We see how cyber criminality, such as the ransomware attacks that North Korea and Russia are so good at, can place our infrastructure at risk. That is where they overlap.

The third is cyber espionage. This is where China has the lead, with advanced persistent threat 10 and other entities that are engaged in a sustained campaign of extracting our most sensitive intellectual property and technologies.

The fourth is the cyber-enabled information warfare that Russia is best at, but China is getting better at it and Iran and others are engaged in it.

Marshalling a public and private sector integrated approach to each of those problem sets is immensely important. The post-Snowden revelations and leaks of classified information created a bad environment in the US on working together, especially to secure communications infrastructure and companies associated with communications infrastructure and data. I think we are getting over that now. Companies now realise that they can no longer bias their research and development efforts in favour of customer experience and to the disadvantage of security, because customers have to trust. If we consider customers' data gold, our cyber companies have to consider themselves, to use an American metaphor, Fort Knox, and protect that gold.

I have seen more willingness to work very closely with government agencies now than I have in the past. It is extremely important to do so because the threats are increasing. Cyber actors in all four of those threat areas are getting better and better, and it is a skill set that is transferable ultimately to non-state actors that are much more difficult to deter. The surface area of those attacks is growing by orders of magnitude as our digital environment grows and we pursue the internet of things. This is quite rightly, I know, a focus for your committee and an

area where there is much room for improvement, but it is a positive environment for better co-operation.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Thank you very much indeed.

Q105 **Lord Laming:** Good afternoon, General. In answer to an earlier question from Baroness Hodgson, you gave a really positive report of successful international joint working on matters of security. We note that the US National Security Council is a statutory body. That is not the case in this country. It has been put to us that it should be and that we should follow the American example. Could you share with us whatever your thoughts are about the advantages or the disadvantages of making our council a statutory body, or would it not make any difference?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: I guess it depends. We have slightly different cultures of government. We have a written constitution, for example. It would depend on what works for you.

If there is a statutory remedy to what you see as a problem and a challenge associated with the integration of efforts across departments and ministries, as well as integration of elements of national power with the efforts of like-minded partners, a National Security Council staff is a key part of the solution. I would say that, whatever the statute is, it should give the Prime Minister a high degree of flexibility concerning how he or she regards the National Security Council staff, its role and how he or she interacts with it.

The history of the US National Security Council staff is instructive in this connection. It was forced on President Harry Truman in 1947, and he was very sceptical about it. He did not really want anything to do with it, and it was moribund until the Korean War. He saw the great value of integrating diplomatic efforts with what we were doing militarily in co-ordination with the industrial base for mobilisation and all sorts of other aspects of integrating the war effort that were vitally important. He held National Security Council meetings weekly after that and began to use it in a routine way, and it was valuable to him.

Dwight Eisenhower put a more formalised system into place. He had what he called an operational control board that monitored implementation, and he had a policy-planning, further-looking aspect of the National Security Council. Of course, he had been Supreme Allied Commander of Europe during World War II, so he was comfortable with a more formal set-up.

Kennedy, when he came in, got rid of a lot of that and wanted a less formal structure. One of the results of that, I would say, was the Bay of Pigs invasion and disaster, because the process was dismantled and he did not get effective advice before the Bay of Pigs. Lyndon Johnson had a process in place, but made decisions on Tuesdays over lunch with only his closest advisers because he was very distrustful of a larger decision-making body, and the National Security Council meetings were really theatre for gaining consensus for decisions that had been made already. I

do not think the National Security Council process and staff were useful to Lyndon Johnson. I will stop there. You have a historian talking about history, and that is always dangerous.

Flexibility would be the key. A President will use the staff as he or she sees fit and get advice the way he or she is comfortable with getting advice. Of course, there are pitfalls with all the different models and different ways of using it. When it works well, it can deliver options to the President. Just in the 13 months when I had the privilege of working at that level, we got a heck of a lot done, largely because we were able to divest ourselves of the near term, look longer term and make some long overdue changes to our policies, some of which, sadly, have been reversed in a negative direction in more recent years.

Lord Laming: That is most helpful. Thank you very much indeed.

Q106 **Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho:** Thank you, General. I think you have talked about some of these issues, but one of the things we have been trying to work out is whether it is possible to measure the effectiveness of the national security machinery and the associated things that we have been talking about.

You have talked about how you made the decisions and asked the questions of the decisions that you were about to make in setting up the frameworks. Do you think it is possible to measure success in national security, and, if you do, are there metrics that you think are universal, and how do you go about it beyond some of the things you have touched on already?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: One of the ways to measure success is the degree to which the Government are reacting to events, or have strategic frameworks in place that allow the Government to try to bend events toward well-defined goals and objectives. One metric is whether we have goals and objectives associated with our most significant challenges to national security and an effective foreign policy. Of course, you will have surprises, but that is one metric. Do you have goals and objectives established, and is there a concept of how we will work together?

The existence and the key components of a strategy would be the first thing. The second would be the degree to which the Government have been able to establish and identify the assumptions on which policy and strategies are based and continuously to test those assumptions. Where we get into trouble most often is that we have implicit and fundamentally flawed assumptions that underpin strategies that are based more on how we would like to see the world rather than the reality of the competitions that we are involved in internationally.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: Could you give us a specific example? Can you point to something where you said, "This was the metric that we were working to and this is what we managed"?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Sure. The Indo-Pacific strategy was recently declassified by the Trump Administration, I think in January this year. It

was a foundational document for much more detailed classified strategies, for example oriented to countering Chinese Communist Party economic aggression. The strategy listed the assumptions and then provided the framework. It is a good document. It is not perfect, but it is about being able to inventory and to see strategy documents of that level of generality—it is pretty high level—and then to judge whether the Government have thought through the nature of the challenges, as well as what the UK Government can do, along with like-minded partners, to advance interests. Just the existence of those strategies and their soundness is one metric. They would be partly objective but, I imagine, mainly subjective assessments.

Of course, over time, it would be measuring the degree to which you are able to make progress towards objectives and to satisfy the measures of effectiveness associated with discrete strategies. For example, let us take a really difficult situation such as the Syrian civil war. You would want to make progress toward a political process that would give all Syrians a say in how they are governed in a post-civil war Syria. This is the UN process. Where are we headed in that connection? Are we headed in a negative or positive direction? What leverage do we have? Are we gaining more leverage or losing more leverage? Do we have more or fewer options available to us?

If we want to block Iran's path to the most destructive weapons on earth, it is very important that we establish some metrics for that, because all of them are failing right now as we try to revive a nuclear deal that, I would say, is already dead. It is about more specific metrics, rather than operating at a superhigh level of generality. Are there strategies in place? Are we focused on the right challenges? You almost have to get into more of the detail of those strategies and policies.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: Thank you.

Q107 **Richard Graham:** General, can I push a little bit on that area? About 15 years ago, one of your predecessors, Stephen Hadley, defined the Scowcroft model of the role of the NSA in five bullet points, two of which were "Keep a low profile" and "Take responsibility for mistakes". In reality today, is it possible to keep a low profile? On taking responsibility for mistakes, you suggested earlier that the agencies were the ones that judged the outcomes of the work of the NSC. In reality, again, how easy is it to ascribe responsibility for the outcomes to the NSC or the NSA?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: The national security adviser should not be responsible for the outcomes. Ultimately, the President has to be. It is the President who was elected. It is the President who is accountable. I agree with Stephen Hadley on almost everything in connection with how to run the National Security Council process.

We ought to recognise that in any Administration, and this applies to the UK as well, there are three base motivations for people who serve in an Administration. The first is to serve the elected President or Prime Minister, and in doing so to present him or her with multiple options,

recognising that they are the person who was elected, they are the one who is accountable to the US or British people, and therefore they have to be the decision-maker.

The second group of people often come into government with their own agenda, and they endeavour instead to manipulate decisions consistent with their own agenda. They are not there to give multiple options, and they see a process that delivers those multiple options as a danger to their particularistic agenda. The third group of people are those who over time cast themselves in the role of saving the country, and maybe the world, from the President or the Prime Minister.

The National Security Council staff and national security adviser must fall into the first category, otherwise you are not only doing the President or Prime Minister a disservice, but undermining the sovereignty of the people, because nobody elected them to make policy decisions. That is the most important aspect of the role that a national security adviser has to understand.

Richard Graham: Service not subversion. Thank you, Sir.

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Absolutely.

Q108 **Bob Stewart:** I know we are up against the clock, so I am going to put the three legs of my question together. General, it is very nice to see you. Thank you for coming.

First, what were the most important sources or agencies that you wanted to see before making a recommendation to the President on national security matters? Secondly, how much did you rely on open-source information to help you with your decision-making? Thirdly, how much external participation did you seek before making decisions? Did you consult groups, for example academics outside the security organisation, or indeed seek inputs from allies like the Five Eyes? I am sorry there are three parts to that, but I am trying to be as quick as I can.

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Of course, I would say that our intelligence agency is right at the top of the list. I thought that our National Intelligence Council and all the agencies that informed the council's work, as well as the longer-term strategic far-looking organisations we have within various intelligence departments, did a very good job. I really felt that I was well served by our intelligence community. When I say our intelligence community, I would include all the Five Eyes; they work so collaboratively that it is impossible to distinguish our intelligence assessments from those of our allies. They are integrated at the working level every single day, and that is one of our greatest strengths. I would put it as the perspectives of outsiders, if I call outsiders our allies. They should not be outsiders.

It is not only the Five Eyes. Our French counterparts did a wonderful job confirming the use of nerve agent to commit mass murder in Syria, for example. Other intelligence agencies provide different unique perspectives on other events. I know you looked at the Skripal poisoning

as a case study. It was a great example of collaboration across all our intelligence departments and agencies. The Germans contributed significantly to a number of the problems and ambiguous, at least initially ambiguous, events that we faced.

In the private sector, and open source, the work that Bellingcat did on Skripal is another great example. I would go back to the Russian shoot-down of the airliner over Ukraine in—when was that: 2013, 2014 or 2015? I cannot remember exactly. Social media and photos of the missile launcher and the path that it took and so forth were largely definitive there. Open source is obviously the area that is growing in its ability to support decision-making from a foreign policy and national security perspective. You see this with groups like 38 North, for example, which looks at North Korea. We used all of that. I think we can do more.

If there is an area where the intelligence community should focus reform efforts, it is accessing more routinely unclassified sources of information. This is where AI-related technologies, such as big data analytics and geotagging, and connecting that to the various commercial surveillance capabilities that we have, is immensely important. It is also important for natural disasters, tracking everything from tsunamis to wildfires and so forth. We need more open-source intelligence—skimming of social media, for example. If you want to learn about the Syrian civil war and what is going on inside Syria, probably the best source is social media skimming these days.

We routinely accessed academia and experts. I failed to mention that having a framing session like the one we had allows you to bring in academia and others because you have not made a decision yet; you have not formed your policy yet, so you can have a wide-ranging discussion that can help you to clarify your understanding of the challenge, and help you to clarify the assumptions on which your policy should be based. Too often, we consult after the fact. We develop a strategy and we bring it around to people and try to sell them on it. A process that puts design thinking and framing up front allows for that collaboration.

The development of the December 2017 national security strategy is a tremendous example of that. Dr Schadlow, who ran that process brilliantly, brought in all sorts of academic experts. Of course, it had to be the President's strategy, but when the strategy was published, if you took out what some people thought were offensive terms such as "America First", I think that strategy would pass the test of time because of the rigour that was put into the process that developed the first national security strategy ever published, I think, in the first year of any presidency.

Bob Stewart: All the stovepipes and the information or intelligence comes in, and you and your staff collate it to try to make one policy or one statement that goes to the President. Is that the way you tried to do it, Sir?

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Absolutely. I cannot think of one problem or one challenge that we face internationally that requires only one element of national power to solve. Take the problem of Pakistan, and Pakistan's continued support for jihadist terrorists. I do not know if you saw the recent Axios interview with Imran Khan in which he said, "Of course, we are not going to support US counterterrorism operations". He did not go as far as saying that he is part of the problem, or at least that the Pakistani army and ISI are part of the problem.

An integrated approach to Pakistan involved a multinational effort. We want to try to convince the Pakistanis that they are on the path to becoming a pariah state with a single-state sponsor. That is not a good future for Pakistan. Who has sway with Pakistan? Of course, the UK, with its long history with the Pakistanis, but also the Emiratis and the Saudis can deliver a pretty strong message.

There is a huge diplomatic effort. From a military support effort, how about just stop giving the Pakistanis stuff? Stop giving them weapons and aid when they are supporting jihadist terrorists who are killing our soldiers and committing mass murder against Afghans. There is a very strong military dimension to the strategy. There was an economic dimension associated with it. Unless you are going to put everything on the China-Pakistan economic corridor, which is failing, economic incentives play a role, especially with the severe debt problems that Pakistan has, and the leverage associated with that through the IMF. I could go on. There is no one instrument to get Pakistan to change its approach and its behaviour, and it could not be a US-only effort.

Bob Stewart: Thank you, Sir.

The Chair: Thank you very much, General. This is a good point at which to finish, not least because you say that in the United States you think you should take the widest possible field of information and advice, and that is something which this committee has urged on our Government on more than one occasion. Sometimes, it has fallen on slightly stony ground, but we shall, I suspect, continue.

Thank you very much indeed for your evidence. It has been very helpful and illuminating, and we appreciate it.

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Thank you for the privilege of being with all of you. Thank you.

The Chair: It has been a pleasure.

Lt Gen HR McMaster: Cheers.

Examination of witnesses

Joe Griffin and Reg Kilpatrick.

Q109 **The Chair:** Apologies, Mr Kilpatrick and Mr Griffin, for keeping you waiting. We are grateful to you for coming. This is a different approach. Having listened to General McMaster about what we can learn from the American system, we are looking at how our system works, in practice as opposed to the theory, because we are quite familiar with the theory. We are particularly keen to learn how you feel it works from the point of view of the devolved Governments, and about your interaction with the United Kingdom Government, especially with regard to national security.

It is suggested that I should give you the reassurance at this point that any conclusions from our inquiry will be directed only at the United Kingdom Government. It will be couched in terms of how well the UK Government manage these things. We are not attempting to pass judgment in any way on how you handle things, but we are very interested to hear your point of view. Could I begin with Mr Griffin?

Joe Griffin: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you very much for the invitation today. I suppose a general comment at the outset would be to look at three baskets of activity relating to national security, which is reserved. The first, and probably the area where co-operation is strongest—it is excellent, in fact—is in crisis response. The relationships between the key response agencies, particularly on policing, for example, are very good. The next level up is the implementation of strategy. Once strategy has been determined, we are typically then takers of strategy. I think that is more variable. It is good in some aspects, but in others it is inconsistent.

The top level, the development of strategy, is the area where I think particularly our Ministers' experience would be that there is the least engagement. The National Security Council itself, for example, has no representation from the devolved Administrations, and on matters like the integrated review or the national security risk assessment, our input is really pretty limited. I think that our Ministers would find that top tier, the development of strategy, the most unsatisfactory of the three levels.

I am sure that you will want to ask about specific aspects, so I will pause there and you can turn to Reg, or whatever you want to do, obviously.

The Chair: It is very helpful to know how you feel about your input to risk assessment. Mr Kilpatrick, is that your experience as well?

Reg Kilpatrick: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today.

I think Joe has summed up very well how it feels to be a devolved Administration in the national security space. My observation about national security is that it should be national, and that means that the devolved Governments, all of whom are independent democratically elected Governments, need to play a full role in national security. We really need to be able to play a full part, and to do that we have to understand what is happening in each of the other countries to deliver the sort of emergency response that Joe was talking about as being so effective. As we develop more complex strategies in particular areas,

understanding the information, and understanding the basis on which policies are made and evidenced, becomes even more important.

Q110 The Chair: Can I explore one more aspect with you both? I will begin with you, Mr Kilpatrick, as you were speaking. One of the things that has come up, and that we have discussed somewhat, is the issue of whether you focus on threats and hazards equally, or whether one tends to take precedence over the other. From your point of view, does the distinction between something that arises from a threat rather than a hazard make any difference to the way in which you plan to meet whatever the problem is?

Reg Kilpatrick: I think our Ministers would say that their first priority is maintaining the safety of the people of Wales. Whether it is a threat or a hazard, as a Government we need to be in a position to respond as well as we possibly can. In the way that the devolution settlement works, we are much more able to respond and to control mitigations to do with hazards, particularly national hazards—flooding or potential issues with the transport system—because we have the levers to do that. We control the public services, the land and the national environment agencies, and so forth.

With threats it is more difficult. We rely on the UK Government to share information with us. We have very close links with the police, so that gives us a view into some of the more confidential issues, but nowhere near enough for us to play a full role in the response to some of the threats. The ambulance service, the fire service, our NHS and local authorities, for example, will have a role in dealing with counterterrorism. It may be a smaller role than some services in England, but they none the less need to be trained and prepared. To do that properly, we need to understand the scale, the detail and the level of those risks.

The Chair: Thank you. Mr Griffin, the same question.

Joe Griffin: We would take an all-risks approach to planning, a risk-agnostic approach. That means again, as Reg said, preparing to manage the consequences of an event rather than dividing events into their respective definition or their cause. The advantage of that is to allow us to engage in generic planning, which we can then adapt readily to fit a wide range of issues, particularly new or novel issues, around response or recovery.

The NSRA process, the product, that we have sight of is very helpful to us, as Reg said particularly in respect of threats that are best analysed at the UK level. Our aspiration would be that there is again an opportunity to feed into the development of the NSRA. That existed through a couple of sub-committees of the NSC prior to the general election, but neither has yet been reformed and as a consequence we have lost our opportunity proactively to feed into that process.

The Chair: Thank you, that is helpful to know.

Q111 Lord Laming: Can I follow on from the questions from the Chair and

bring them down to recent experiences in dealing with the pandemic? How well has the split of reserved and devolved responsibilities helped or hindered the way in which you have been able to prepare and respond to emergencies in recent months?

Joe Griffin: With the pandemic we have seen an evolution of the relationships over the year and a quarter or year and a half. Like many aspects of the pandemic, in the early days there was a very ad hoc and improvised series of responses where necessarily there needed to be emergency-level meetings, particularly at COBRA level, and then the development of the immediate health response in each of the four nations, with a degree of co-ordination. It evolved as the crisis developed and there were aspects that grew out of that.

One aspect that I would note in particular was the development of shared datasets, which proved to be very useful. The Cabinet Office did a very good job in drawing together data from each of the four nations and producing a really good analytical product that was then available to all Administrations. Ministerial implementation groups then developed, which came out of the Whitehall system, but implementations were extended to devolved Ministers. Again, that was quite often on a short-term basis, I would say, but nevertheless was a useful forum for devolved Ministers to be able to engage.

As the pandemic developed, latterly there have been more settled arrangements. All this is in relation to ministerial engagement. At official level there have been myriad different engagements, as you might imagine, and probably quite a complex dynamic that I would struggle to summarise effectively. I know, certainly from my health colleagues, that there has been a lot of work done around and across the Administrations.

Lord Laming: Thank you.

Reg Kilpatrick: I would like to go back a couple of years because, from the emergency preparedness perspective in Wales, Brexit was actually quite a good exercise to prepare our local resilience structures and our national leadership structures through the Wales resilience forum, through the LRFs, which I am sure the committee will be familiar with, and through our strategy groups. So we had a very well-practised and well-prepared set of structures and relationships that proved extremely powerful for Wales as we went into the pandemic.

As regards whether devolution helped or not, a large part of our response was health based, and health, as you know, is fully devolved to Wales, so we were in quite a strong position and have remained in quite a strong position as we have gone through the pandemic. There were of course other issues at ministerial level, which Joe referred to, and certainly some disagreements and some differences of opinion about how we went through the original PPE crisis and maybe later on about vaccination, but those were much more strategic political issues than the operational issues that I was dealing with. I think that as a country we were well prepared.

Devolution, if anything, helped us, I am sure in the same way as it helped Joe, because it gave us coherence, and an ability to focus our response and our resources at a very local level. We were much less encumbered by a sort of universal national approach. We could, and we did, talk to our preparedness structures pretty much on a daily basis. That meant that we could move much more quickly, and I think much more robustly, than had we been working in a non-devolved situation. That freedom was very powerful for us.

Q112 Lord Laming: Finally, for the sake of time, could I ask each of you if there are any lessons you would like to give the committee on dealing with emergencies under the pandemic?

Reg Kilpatrick: As I have the floor—sorry, Joe—I will just say that for us there are two lessons. One is very clear leadership from the top, not just from politicians but from officials like me; and, secondly, a very well-practised system and the ability to be able to rely on strong and resilient local structures to deliver the front-line response.

Lord Laming: Thank you. Mr Griffin.

Joe Griffin: It is a very big question. I will do my best to give a relatively short answer. As Reg Kilpatrick said, the position of the devolved Administrations at the apex of a set of local structures, whereby responders across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland themselves need their own partnerships and their own ability to respond, and to be able to do that in a way that is informed by the characteristics of place, which certainly in Scotland is a big issue, is crucial.

That relationship with the reserved authorities, the clarity of direction, the clarity of communication, and as much interaction as possible in the planning and the development of the strategy, in turn can allow the response, in our case the Scottish response, to be informed by people on the ground and in communities, the diversity of which I referenced earlier. It is getting the best out of what devolution offers you by an engagement that is realistic and genuinely allows you into the development of strategy, with timeous and well-prepared meetings.

Lord Laming: Thank you.

Q113 Baroness Neville-Jones: My question follows on very neatly from what has just been said. It sounds from what you have both said that in the area of operational contingencies there is a system that is quite well formulated, and quite well trodden and understood. I get the sense from what you are saying that, when it comes to national security priorities that might have an impact on the devolved Administrations, where there is a potential operational task that needs to be performed right across the country in a new area, perhaps the machine is not working quite so well.

Have you found the prime ministerial committee, which as I understand it is meant to have a role in top-level discussion of big issues, a useful mechanism for discussion of priorities at national level? If it is not adequate from your point of view, it would be interesting to know why.

What would you like to see in its place, bearing in mind that national security, at the end of the day, is a reserved matter but clearly has implications for the consequences of events that might occur? I would be interested to know how you would like to see the system develop if you think that at the moment it is not functioning as well as it might.

Joe Griffin: The intergovernmental relations system, which includes the Joint Ministerial Committee, is currently under review. I think that reflects the challenge that we have had collectively in finding something that really works. For example, the JMC (P), the highest level of the JMC, has not met since December 2018, so there is quite a long period when we have not had the ability to have those meetings at the highest level.

Whether the JMC lends itself to the discussion of national security issues, I do not know. I imagine that it is being considered as part of the review. Typically, it has been used to work our way through issues that needed some form of resolution, where there were disagreements between the Administrations. It has more of a resolution function than detailed examination of a strategic issue. I agree with you that some vehicle that allows those sorts of discussions to take place probably makes sense. I am not close to the detail of the review, but it may be something that the review will have a look at.

Reg Kilpatrick: I agree with Joe. I do not think that the JMC has met, and I cannot recall it discussing any matters of national security in quite a number of years. I would think that these are quite sensitive matters, as we know from what can be discussed in public or not. I think there would need to be a within-government solution to the particular problem of designing what should come next.

In my view, we have benefited on occasion in the past, but probably not enough at the moment, from a very clear understanding of the structures between the devolved Governments and the UK Government, and how we broker national security issues through those structures in a way that is predictable in terms of meetings and subject matter, with a set of structures and processes that are actually agreed by Ministers and which all Ministers can have confidence in. That is not just devolved Ministers but clearly UK Ministers, because they will need confidence in us as Administrations.

We also need to understand the information that flows through those structures, what is appropriate and what is not, because at least then we can begin to make decisions about whether we know enough about the right things or not. I fear that at the moment, as Joe mentioned at the beginning with the decommissioning of the National Security Committee substructures, that we are now largely in a position where we do not have full sight, or even significant sight, of a lot of the national security matters that are being discussed within Whitehall, which we really need if we want the devolved Administrations to maintain the security of their populations.

Baroness Neville-Jones: That is a very clear answer. Thank you very

much.

Q114 Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: Good afternoon. The Civil Contingencies Act sets out the requirements for local preparedness, including those of devolved Administrations. Would you say that these legislative responsibilities have been defined in a way to allow you to undertake your tasks more effectively? Have there been any areas where they have not helped, particularly in light of what we have lived through in the last year?

Joe Griffin: The Civil Contingencies Act works pretty well for us. We have a system with Scotland's resilience partnership at the apex. That is a coming together of the Scottish Government with local government, Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, health and so on, to set a strategic direction for the resilience community. There is both an operational level underneath that, in the event of a crisis, and regional resilience partnerships—our local resilience partnerships. Generally speaking, we found that that has worked well over the years, and that because of our relatively compact administrative cadre, if that is the right way of putting it, we are able to reflect quite a lot of the local and regional diversity that we have in Scotland.

I do not really think at this point that there is anything that is particularly getting in the way. Covid will need a huge amount of reflection and lessons to be learned in respect of that, because clearly the scale and the novelty of Covid asked a lot of questions about our resilience machinery. In some ways, because it was such a health-led response, some of the partners—for example, blue light responders—found that they did not have a classic resilience role to play in a number of respects. I do not think that is particularly to do with the Act. It was encouraging that it was said that the review of resilience in the integrated review would be done on a partnership basis with the devolved Administrations, but our hope is to preserve the particularities of our system, not least because they afford us the bottom-up approach that reflects the geographical particularities of Scotland. I think that would be the position from our point of view.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: Thank you.

Reg Kilpatrick: From Wales, I would have to echo that. I think I made clear in a previous answer that I think the strength of our ability to respond is the fact that we have a system based on subsidiarity, where the right decisions can be made at the right level. The challenge, as always, is to make sure that organisations can be resourced and continually trained and developed so that we are always in a position where we can respond quite quickly to whatever threat or hazard emerges.

I look forward to the outcome of the review of the CCA, but, like Joe, I think it serves its purpose fairly well for us in Wales. The one issue that I would like to feed into the review is the ability of the UK Government to declare a state of emergency and potentially to do that over and above

the will of a devolved Administration, or the Welsh Government in my case. I would encourage Ministers to put that forward as a matter for consideration.

Q115 **Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho:** That is very helpful. I have one more question and I will wrap two bits together into it. The first, and perhaps you can be candid in this response, is: do you find that political differences stress the administrative demarcations at all in preparedness planning?

I have a slightly different question on local resilience forums, but I will ask it now in the interests of time. Last year, in our biosecurity review we found out quite a lot about their importance, and about how staff had suffered through the last year from burn-out and feeling that they were not able to cope with the pandemic particularly well. I am particularly interested in your reflections on that from your Administration's point of view.

Joe Griffin: On political differences, I do not know because I am not inside the minds of the people making the judgments. I suppose there has not really been an alignment of political Administrations since the onset of devolution, strictly speaking, although there were Labour-led Administrations in Holyrood and a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition. To some extent, we have never had an alignment, so we have not been able to make the comparison.

On the LRFs, I know from colleagues working in local government and in health boards that there is a degree of fatigue in the system. Clearly, it has been an extraordinary year and a half, with many people going above and beyond the call of duty, and with the redefinition of many roles—in local government there was, for example, the repurposing of libraries to become testing centres, the development of the shielding response that we put in place, and moving people from services that were in effect being suspended. I am not sure I would use the word exhaustion, but there is certainly a great deal of tiredness that I think all decision-makers need to take into account.

Reg Kilpatrick: From Wales, I would respond to your question, Lady Lane-Fox, by saying that as officials we are here to make the system work. Our job, and I think we do it pretty effectively, certainly in Wales, is to make the services come together in a collective, regardless of whether they are devolved and regardless of the political overlay.

One thing that binds all our local resilience fora, and indeed our other strategic groups, is that common purpose. For the last 15 months, obviously it has been the common purpose of tackling Covid. Before that, it was preparing ourselves for the implications of a no-deal Brexit. That was probably not as candid as you may have liked, but our job is actually to make the services work as best as we possibly can.

You are absolutely right about fatigue among the local resilience fora. The local resilience fora are made up of representatives from a whole range of

public sector organisations, and I think that, as Joe says, that fatigue runs pretty widely through our services. In Wales, we are beginning to see the beginnings of a third wave of Covid, and that is quite difficult for many colleagues. None the less, I think that our ability to recognise local fatigue, and to use services within Wales to relieve the pressure, particularly on our local authorities, by using other civil servants or colleagues from other organisations, has not completely solved the problem, obviously, but it has helped manage the problem over a prolonged period.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: Thank you.

Q116 **Lord Brennan:** I have two interrelated questions please, gentlemen. Although defence and national security are reserved matters under devolved legislation, considerations about them and decisions as a result could well affect your devolved jurisdictions. Could you tell us what interaction there has been between your Governments historically with the central United Kingdom machinery: first, the National Security Council contact; secondly, the Westminster emphasis on lead government departments having specific responsibility to deal with the risks particular to them; and, thirdly, COBRA, which was created for discrete emergencies? Did you interact with it at any stage historically, or would you wish to?

A second and different question arises from Covid. I was on the Constitution Committee a few years ago. Meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee with the devolved jurisdictions were not common, and when they did happen the minutes were economic. I think, Mr Griffin, that you said that 2018 was the last meeting. What is the position with the Prime Minister's creation of new ministerial implementation groups—the acronym MIGs—to deal with Covid, with the devolved jurisdictions? Secondly, having replaced them with Cabinet committees a few months after that move to MIGs, what has happened since vis-à-vis government creations, with the devolved jurisdictions, about Covid?

Joe Griffin: You are absolutely right, Lord Brennan. Clearly, reserved matters have an impact on the geographies and the public services of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and devolved Ministers are accountable to their Parliaments for the delivery of those services. I do not have encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of the interaction, but I would say, certainly latterly and in my recent experience, that the formal interaction between devolved Ministers and the National Security Council apparatus is very limited, probably bordering on zero in that formal sense. We will talk about ministerial implementation groups and so on in a moment, but that has felt very much like a reserved space.

The point about lead government departments is very interesting. The integrated review talked about the extension of the fusion doctrine, a more integrated approach that would involve more effective policy-making and more coherent implementation. That seems right to us, but we were not involved in the elaboration of the integrated review, and we are not involved in any of the overarching implementation of it, so it is

not clear to us how exactly implementation, which depends on a policy that is taken by a department in Whitehall but has a devolved equivalent, is meant to operate. We do not have assurance, if you like, that the policy is being consistently implemented across the United Kingdom, because we have no means of understanding what the lead government department in Whitehall is doing. That is not to say that there are not contacts in different areas—of course there are—and relationships, but there is not an overarching approach that would give us assurance that those things were happening.

You asked, Lord Brennan, about COBRA. When COBRA is convened in response to a very short incident, for example in conjunction to the tragic Manchester Arena bombings, when devolved Ministers, and the First Minister in Scotland, were involved, it is very effective. There were operational consequences and implications for Scotland, and I think the view is that it operated entirely as it should have.

In Covid, COBRA was convened a handful of times in the quite early days. Reg used the word “unpredictability” earlier. Our experience of it was unpredictability of rhythm, so we did not know when meetings were likely to be scheduled, coming up to hours in advance actually, and on a couple of occasions there was also a very late submission of paperwork, which made it very difficult for our First Minister to prepare effectively for them. Then, gradually, as Covid developed, COBRA was used less and less. As you rightly say, and as I referred to earlier, there was then the development of ministerial implementation groups. I think our Ministers’ reflection would be that they felt quite Whitehall-centric. They would be invited to attend, which was a good thing. They would be invited to intervene, but often for a very limited period. I think the involvement, in principle at least, was positive.

What we have seen latterly, since Cabinet sub-committees have taken over, is a group chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for the devolved Administrations, which the First Ministers have often been at. That has been, as I understand it, quite an effective forum for airing different perspectives and being able to air potential differences that can be followed up, in the interests of trying to find a more consensual approach. That is the current state of co-operation around the Covid machinery. If you do not mind, Chair, I will hand to Reg for Wales’s response.

Reg Kilpatrick: I agree absolutely with your analysis of the last 15 months through Covid. I would just add that the unpredictability of COBRA in the early stages was challenging for our Ministers. It made taking decisions and gathering evidence for those decisions very difficult, with such short notice.

There is something that I would hold up as good practice. We were invited consistently to the daily CDL-chaired meetings during the summer. They considered particular issues and briefed not just our First Minister but portfolio Ministers as we went through Covid. That was quite useful. I think that, as with all meetings, they became of limited use after

a while, but they provided a degree of predictability and an agreed rhythm, which we could all begin to plan to.

To respond to your point, Lord Brennan, about decision-making and the involvement of Ministers, making decisions at national level is really important. Certainly, as General McMaster said, having elected politicians properly briefed, and able to make the right decisions, is absolutely essential. That is one of the things that Welsh Government Ministers are always absolutely committed to, and really keen to be able to do through part of the national security machinery. For me, it comes back to the points I made earlier about having clarity of purpose, openness of exchange of information, and a predictable and stable set of engagements around which we can all coalesce.

Lord Brennan: Thank you both very much.

Q117 **Richard Graham:** There is an interesting question potentially for both Mr Griffin and Mr Kilpatrick. I think what we are hearing is that you are both, as you put it, basically pretty positive about the Civil Contingency Act and the way in which officials have worked together and some of the briefings you have had and so on.

I was just looking at some of the statements, for example, on the Scottish Government's Resilience Division website. It says that the Resilience Division leads on emergency planning and so on for the Scottish Government: "We manage the Scottish Government Resilience Room ... which is activated to co-ordinate the work of the Scottish Government and its agencies, and brief Ministers during emergencies and significant events". That is fine as far as it goes. It sounds a bit like the description of Gold Command, for example, at county level, but it does not say much there—maybe it does elsewhere—about partnership with the UK, if you like, on issues that are not necessarily devolved.

I was interested that the *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015* says: "In the most challenging emergencies, especially where there are consequences for the whole of the UK, there are established arrangements for linking the UK Government's emergency coordination structures with those of the devolved administrations".

Mr Kilpatrick is nodding. Is there a sort of slight "mind the gap" issue, or is it in my imagination and actually there is a well joined-up effort if need be in these crises?

Reg Kilpatrick: I think it is "If need be". Brexit was a good example where certainly Wales was able to join the UK Government's response arrangements, Operation Yellow Hammer, as we know it now. It took a lot of work, a lot of engagement and a lot of preparation to do that successfully, and we had the time to do it.

In the shorter term, with a rapidly emerging incident of the sort that Joe was talking about, I think those engagements are much more ad hoc. I think that is part of where our issue is: sometimes a COBRA may be

called, at other times it may not be. Clearly, there will be examples when we would not expect Welsh Government Ministers to be in the room, if it was a very localised issue in England, but where there are matters of national importance we would expect to be called. At the moment, it is fair to say that there is not a protocol that would enable our Ministers to make a judgment or to expect to be part of those discussions. With time and planning, it can be done, but in a real crisis I think there is a great deal more uncertainty about the arrangements.

Richard Graham: That is very helpful. Mr Griffin, what is your reaction to that idea of a more detailed protocol? One instance that seems relevant is that, if there is severe flooding, as there has been in all parts of the United Kingdom, at what stage do things like COBRA kick in, or is it all too fast for that? At what stage do you find that your Ministers need to be involved, and is there a protocol needed for that?

Joe Griffin: Reg talked earlier on about subsidiarity. We would use the term “integrated emergency management”. That is the principle that events should be dealt with at the lowest level. In the past, our Ministers have chaired SGoRR meetings—Scottish Government Resilience Room meetings—where there have been colleagues from reserved agencies, whether the military or the British Transport Police, but agencies necessary to help us in crisis response.

I do not think, and I said in my introductory remarks, that in crisis response there are big issues about which we have grave concerns. I think the position that our Ministers feel is the difficulty of really engaging in the development of strategy, the integrated review being a good example, where we end up being takers of the strategy but Ministers have had no opportunity to feed into it. As I said to Baroness Lane-Fox in respect of the Act, I think things work pretty well as they are, so I am not sure that a protocol on a crisis response is something we are advocating at this point.

Richard Graham: Thank you.

Q118 **Baroness Hodgson of Abinger:** Good afternoon. I think, Mr Griffin, you have actually answered the first part of the question I was going to ask you, which was about the input you had into the integrated review. Were there specific things that you wanted to see in it that did not make it into the document?

The second part of my question is that the integrated review promises a national resilience strategy by the end of the year that will be prepared “in partnership with the devolved Administrations”. Has there been no feed into that either? What would you like to see it addressing? Perhaps, Mr Griffin, I can start with you, as you have already started down the path of the integrated review, and then come to Mr Kilpatrick.

Joe Griffin: We had some meetings on the integrated review. It would not be accurate to say that there were none, but they were very high-level briefings on the development of the process and, in very broad terms, the UK Government’s approach. There was never any attempt to

share draft language with us or to get Scottish Government input. I will give as an example that as officials we were keen to organise a meeting of the Scottish Cabinet to take a position on the integrated review as it emerged. We had so little substance to be able to marshal and prepare a discussion in that way that it proved not to be possible.

It all gets a bit counterfactual as to what is not in there. The Scottish Government ended up publishing their own position called *Scotland: A Good Global Citizen*. That is a pretty comprehensive statement of our Ministers' view of Scotland in the world, so I suppose that would be a sort of compare and contrast. The integrated review is pretty broad in what it covers, but clearly there are significant policy differences in respect of, for example, the independent nuclear deterrent, on which independent Scottish Government Ministers would take a very different view compared to the UK Government.

It was very good to see the commitment to the resilience review being done in partnership with the devolved Administrations. It is the only reference in the integrated review to that methodology. We are now involved in some discussions around that, I am pleased to say, but there is some lack of clarity at the moment on some of the key issues—for example, the development of a national resilience forum. For the reasons I gave earlier, not least our shared stewardship of the Scottish system, we would very much hope to have a seat on that forum, but that is not clear to us at this point. I think we would hope to try to largely maintain the civil contingency system for Scotland because it works reasonably well, for the reasons that I gave earlier.

Reg Kilpatrick: I agree absolutely with Joe's points on this. Certainly our experience of being engaged in the integrated review was no different. I think we were engaged very late. Certainly it was quite disappointing that our Ministers were not engaged in an earlier and deeper way, considering the subject matter that we are trying to deal with.

As regards what else we would like in it, as Joe said, that is a difficult question to answer. My real concern is how we are part of the implementation of the national resilience review, and our ability to shape it. I think we would like some consideration of more ministerial engagement in this area going forward. We do not have a ministerial presence on the National Security Council, so that would be a good start, and then if we are moving towards a national resilience forum, again there could be some ministerial engagement in that. As I said at the beginning, we are democratic Governments in our own right, and I think that a recognition of that in this space would be very welcome indeed.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Last, but by no means least, Baroness Healy.

Q119 **Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:** I shall be very brief. Mr Kilpatrick, one of the UK Government's initiatives is to establish a new situation centre. Do you think it will be of assistance to the devolved nations? Is

getting the information part of the issue for you to plan properly?

Reg Kilpatrick: I have seen quite a lot of information about the situation centre and it looks to be a very impressive arrangement. I suppose my observations are probably, first, that it can work only if it has information, and it can get information for the UK for the national picture only if it works closely with the devolved Administrations. We have a number of devolved services, and the information we collect for example from our health service belongs to Wales belongs to the NHS, so I would expect and hope for really early engagement between the situation centre and me and other colleagues to build up a national picture. There is no point, if there is an emergency, having to scrabble around to find information to build a picture. That all needs to be in place, and it will take quite a lot of work, quite a lot of planning and quite a lot of engagement between the four nations.

A really good example of that is the Joint Biosecurity Centre. I do not think we have spoken about it this afternoon. We have been working really closely with it and, in my view, it is a very, very good example of how a Whitehall organisation can draw the devolved Administrations into its operations and do some really good national work as a consequence. The advantage to us, of course, is that we can then use that information; we can use the products that are developed once for the UK, to help inform our own decision-making and our own evidence. I think it could be a really good and powerful new tool, but it will require a lot of partnership working with the devolved Administrations. It goes back to what I was saying earlier about having clear and agreed ways of working, and systems and processes that enable us to feed it, and to benefit from it.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Mr Griffin, would you like to add to that?

Joe Griffin: Like Reg, I think it is an interesting development. I was very impressed with how data collection and analysis developed during the Covid crisis. It is crucial that the data is both clear and accurate. There is a brilliant term in resilience circles about establishing a commonly recognised information picture. That is invaluable when you are in the middle of a crisis. We need to make sure that that CRIP—commonly recognised information picture—accurately reflects the situation on the ground.

The second point is that the information flows at pace need to work effectively. At times during Covid, there were multiple overlapping commissions, and it could get quite confusing. Finally, as Reg says, the best way of ensuring that is to design the systems in advance so that you have buy-in; you have collective design of something that you know will work when it is put under test in a crisis situation. It looks interesting, and we are involved in discussions, but there are some key principles that we hope to see reflected there.

The Chair: Thank you both very much for coming to give evidence. It is nice to finish on a slightly more positive note. We very much appreciate

your coming to give evidence to the committee.