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Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Defending Global Britain in a Competitive Age, HC 166

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

Questions 212-252

Witness

I: Lieutenant General (Retired) Ben Hodges, Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies, Center for European Policy Analysis, and former Commanding General, United States Army Europe (from 2014 to 2017).



Examination of witness

Witness: Lieutenant General Hodges.

Q212 **Chair:** It is a pleasure to welcome to this Defence Committee hearing Lieutenant General (Retired) Ben Hodges, the current Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies at the Centre for European Policy Analysis and the former Commanding General, United States Army Europe. Thank you for joining us this afternoon.

We have a number of questions that we wish to explore with you following our Integrated Review about how global Britain will manage in this competitive age. You have just published an interesting book, "Future War and the Defence of Europe". Will you begin by explaining what drove you to write it and what we should be considering given our defence posture as we deal with ever-more complicated threats today and over the horizon.

Lieutenant General Hodges: Thank you very much. This is a real privilege and I do not want to waste your time or this opportunity.

I am speaking to you from Frankfurt, Germany. I am originally from Florida. I worked for CEPA, a thinktank based in Washington DC, but I live here in Frankfurt—only one time zone difference ahead of you.

To be candid, the book is aimed directly at all of you. The target audience is policy makers, legislators, senior members of Government and influencers, to shine the light on the very real threats that we face—a variety of threats—and to highlight how technology might be advancing faster than our policies can keep up.

There is recognition that the United States cannot do alone what we need and want to do. President Biden made that very clear from the day he gave his inaugural speech, and in his first few months in office he has emphasised the importance of allies, partners and working with other nations, because the United States, even with its massive defence budget, can nowhere come close to fulfilling or meeting all our security obligations. That is partly what the book is about.

I suspect that most of you are on this Committee because you recognise the world we live in, but that is not the norm, frankly, among many senior officials in most countries—certainly not here in Germany—because if you recognise and acknowledge threats you are obligated to do something about it, and every Government has lots of competing demands on budgets, as you know better than I do.

That was the purpose of the book. It is the first book I have been a part of, and working with John Allen and Professor Julian Lindley-French I learned an awful lot about not just writing a book but the material and the content. I would never have used the phrases, "machine learning" or



“quantum computing”—that’s not typical infantry lingo—and I learned a lot during the process.

Q213 **Chair:** Your book is entitled “Future War and the Defence of Europe”. The Committee has asked a number of witnesses whether, on the current trajectory, the world, and Europe specifically, will become safer or more dangerous and unstable over the next five to 10 years.

Lieutenant General Hodges: If nothing changes, it is absolutely going to get more dangerous. I believe we are on a trajectory to be in a kinetic conflict with the Chinese Communist party in about five years. From President Xi’s language about Taiwan, what has happened in Hong Kong and their activities in the South China sea and elsewhere, you do not get a sense that they are looking for a bridge to a normal relationship.

You will have seen what the Kremlin has done in the Black sea region in particular, although not just there. For them, the Black sea is the strategic cauldron of competition. You do not spend as much money as they did to put 100,000 troops in the field and at sea just for an exercise and leave them there. They see that we, the West, have not seriously reacted ever since Russia invaded Georgia in 2008—we didn’t do anything, not really.

The Assad regime, supported by the Kremlin, jumped over President Obama’s red lines in 2013 by using chemical weapons on its own people. It saw that we, the UK, France and Germany did nothing.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, other than EU sanctions that slowed Russia’s modernisation effort and the collective, important steps that NATO took to protect itself, we have done nothing to influence criminal behaviour for the better.

Unless we do all the things necessary for effective deterrence, including a strong, cohesive Alliance, then, yes, we are heading for a much more dangerous situation.

Chair: Thank you, General. That is very clearcut indeed. There is an understanding that that is where things are going. The big question is: what should we do about it? That is what we want to explore today.

Q214 **Derek Twigg:** The future battlefield will be one of artificial intelligence and autonomous machines or systems. We will have to rapidly understand the threats, make decisions and take action. One of the key messages that came out of the UK’s strategies was the need for technological integration and enabling seamless, real-time understanding of the battlefield. How important is that emerging technology, and why should we know more about it?

Lieutenant General Hodges: As we transition to preparing for high-end, large-scale conflict away from Afghanistan or Iraq-type operations, we are being reminded in exercises how fast our likely opponents can do things and make decisions. We are having to relearn the whole speed of warfare.



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A few months ago, 3rd (United Kingdom) Division was in Portland, Texas participating in an American core-level warfighting exercise. One of the big takeaways from that exercise was that, wow, things happen so fast. You have to have information systems that do not overload you but help to pick through what is happening so that you can make decisions.

The keys to effective deterrence are speed of recognition, speed of decision and speed of assembly—speed of recognition in an environment where it will not automatically be clear what is happening. There will not be an American or British satellite that is the first thing to recognise that something is going on: it will probably be an Estonian border guard or somebody from Georgia or Ukraine, not even inside Five Eyes.

The ability rapidly to share intelligence and information across all the usual boundaries, seams and levels of classification will be essential. If we are in a conflict, 3rd (UK) Division will not be able to have 100% attention from Great Britain's principal intelligence agencies. Everybody else will want that, as well.

We are going to be starting from a defensive posture, so our adversaries are going to have the likely initiative. There will be decisions to make very quickly about what to do. I think that, understandably and correctly, our civilian leadership will be tapping the brakes immediately so that something does not escalate too fast or get to a nuclear situation.

For the ability to understand what is happening in an environment where all our networks will be under a barrage of cyber-attacks—it will not necessarily be columns of tanks or big ships that are the first things that we see—information-led operations will be key to whether we even have a chance to be successful from the beginning.

Q215 Derek Twigg: Where do you think we are? Are we on a comparable platform to the Chinese or Russians, or are we lagging behind?

Lieutenant General Hodges: From a technical standpoint, we are at or better than they would be in information technologies and capabilities—for sure, we are in the lead when it comes to that.

Where do we have a challenge? The United States and, I suspect, a little bit, the UK are not very good at sharing intelligence. Five Eyes is somewhat comforting if you are one of the five, but most of our allies are not in Five Eyes. Many of our important partners such as Sweden and Finland are not in NATO.

How do you share intelligence? These are policy issues. I was in Kandahar in 2009 and 2010. General Nick Carter was my commander in Regional Command South. The United States decided to put 30,000 American troops under his command, but we had not made the policy decision to let him have SIPR, the secure network. He could not even have a secure VTC with his American subordinate commanders, or with General McChrystal above him. He would come to my office and use mine. It wasn't because there were evil people wanting us to fail; it was just the mindset and policy.



It is important that we examine this area and press because the natural default is to protect the network. What if all of us are in multinational formations at the tactical level? The American Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup in Poland has a British company, a Romanian air defence battery, a Croatian company and works for a Polish brigade. You can be sure that they do not have secure communications inside that formation, and they are in the range of every jamming and targeting device that the Russians have in Kaliningrad. This is a problem for us.

Q216 Mr Jones: You raise an issue of communications, but there is a broader issue of interoperability. It has been an issue within NATO going back many years. I chair the Science and Technology Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and I know that there are different abilities across NATO partners in scientific developments. How do we get them to co-operate more? What are the challenges in the new space in co-operation and interoperability between NATO nations?

Lieutenant General Hodges: Mr Jones, the first step to truly address interoperability is to spell out the requirement in specific terms. I have been hearing about the importance of interoperability since I was a lieutenant in northern Germany about 100 years ago, and yet we are still in the situation in which an American battalion and a British regiment cannot speak to each other because we do not have compatible communications devices. Eventually soldiers will always figure out a way either by sharing equipment or by finding some sort of interim fix to allow them to get through the exercise. But in terms of everyone being able to speak securely when they show up on the battlefield, we are not there.

I talked to an American brigade commander a few weeks back and said, "Let's talk about interoperability." For him it was all about friendship, partnership and trusting each other, and I said, "No, that's not interoperability. Interoperability is whether you have secure, frequency-hopping, tactical FM communications. No matter what it says on the box—whether it is Bowman, Harris or Thales—you have to be able to talk secure."

Secondly, as you know when you walk into a command post, you typically see on the big screen a map and what is called the common operating picture—the COP. The requirement should be that the COP is truly COP. If an American battalion joins a British brigade, no matter what systems both are using, the icon of the subordinated unit should automatically populate the COP of the power unit. These are very specific requirements and they are all doable, but companies like Harris, L3Harris or Thales do not automatically build that in. That requirement is part one.

Q217 Mr Kevan Jones: Sorry to cut across you, but can I ask how that should be driven forward? Is it a matter for the political leadership in NATO or for the chief scientists within a NATO committee to say these are basic requirements for deployment?

Lieutenant General Hodges: That would be the ideal, if the military committee lays this out. These are the standards that we need everybody



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to use, because we are operating in multinational formations down at the tactical level and, in a crisis, we are going to be joining up on the battlefield. After twenty years in Afghanistan, you fell in on existing networks so that was not a problem.

In future wars, we are going to be meeting en route to wherever the crisis is about to happen so you do not have six months to get ready and figure it out. This should come from the military committee, but until the United States and the UK, in particular, make it a requirement and get some of the other larger nations, such as Germany and France, to advocate for it, it is never going to happen. Of course, the US will be reluctant to do it because it means a policy change to allow the exchange over networks of secure information. A handful of nations have got to lead on this.

When you get the opportunity, you might ask somebody from the ministry, "How does the British company or squadron that is under the American battalion in Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup Poland speak secure in a heavily contested electronic warfare environment?" In other words, everything that is not in a secure radio network can be intercepted, jammed or targeted. I would ask that question because the ability to speak secure should be a requirement.

Chair: That is the integrated operating concept that General Nick Carter is putting in but if we do it in a silo it is fantastic that our Army, Navy, Airforce and cyber-capabilities can talk together, but that does not necessarily spill over into our NATO allies, so there are some big questions there.

Q218 **Mr Francois:** General, I think you are on to something. We have what we might call national interoperability and then international interoperability. The Integrated Review—our recently published defence and foreign policy review—places a great deal of emphasis on fully networked integrated forces. We are not fully networked even nationally, and you make a really good point about the limitations on our network ability internationally. The Bowman replacement is a thing called Morpheus which is part of a wider programme called LE TacCIS and, hey ho, it is all running badly behind schedule. You make a pertinent point.

As you are a former commander of the United States Army in Europe, would you forgive me if we concentrated initially on some Army-related questions and draw on your specific expertise? In theory for the last decade or so, we have had a regular Army of 82,500. In effect, we have been struggling to maintain it at 75,000 to 76,000 trained soldiers, although there are always recruits in the pipeline. In our Integrated Review, we now reduced that to 72,000 so our Army is shrinking quite a bit. As a former commander of the American Army in Europe, are you comfortable with that? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but what is your view about the British Army, which is historically one of your strongest allies, reducing its regular Army by about 12% to 13%?

Lieutenant General Hodges: I am not going avoid the question at all, but I will put it in context. Every military, including the US, is constantly balancing force structure—how big—readiness, including capabilities,



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training, maintenance and so on, and modernisation. In a simplistic way, those are the three competing demands on budget. Of course, in the US Army personnel costs are always the highest. More than 50% of the budget goes on personnel costs, and they cover a wide range of things from recruitment to retirement and everything else in between. If you are ever looking to reduce the budget in the US, the first thing you do is slice the size of the US Army, which is the biggest personnel cost for the department.

Our history is that after every single war, from the first one to the last one, is to say a massive, "We're never going to do this again. Let's cut the army". Of course, what ends up happening is you find yourself in crisis and have to expand quickly, and many things are the unnecessary casualty of that as you have to grow back. That is the nature of it and that is why we depend so much on the national guard and the reserve. About 50% of the Army strength is in the reserve component, and that makes great sense for a variety of reasons.

From the British Army, I always counted on a well-trained, organised, fully manned, forward-leaning and innovative organisation called ARRC. The UK continuing to protect ARRC is very important from an American perspective.

Q219 Mr Francois: By that you mean the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps?

Lieutenant General Hodges: I am sorry; that is correct. The Allied Rapid Reaction Corps is one of the nine corps that make up NATO's force structure, but it can carry out missions for whatever the UK wants. The United States values that and we have about 35 American soldiers assigned to ARRC, including a brigadier general. Not everyone thinks adding a general is necessarily a good thing for any situation, but that is one way that the US demonstrates that ARRC is important to us.

The second thing that we always counted on from the British Army was a warfighting division headquarters with follow-up staff and real capability. Then of course the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup in Estonia plus the British contribution to the American Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup are other specific things that we count on. The UK is not doing that for us obviously, but that is in our calculus of what is there in Europe. When you asked the original question of whether I felt comfortable, the answer is of course not. I worry about whether the UK can continue to have this top-quality corps headquarters and a full-up warfighting division and the other things necessary to be an effective land force in all the things that land warfare requires. Air defence, logistics and engineering are all part of that. The UK has always been a provider, not a consumer.

Q220 Mr Francois: The Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, as you know well, is a corps headquarters, but you still have to populate it with the fighting units beneath the HQ. Of course, the brain of the organisation is perforce very important. The defence review says, "We will have a warfighting division in 2025". That is great, but we are bit concerned about what happens if the bad guys turned up in 2022 or 2023 and rather



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impertinently were to attack someone before our warfighting division were fully up and running to resist. We are going to upgrade 150 of our rather old, but none the less quite good, Challenger 2 tanks to Challenger 3 standard. We are going to spend £800 million doing that and, by my maths, that is slightly over £5 million a tank. That will give us two armoured regiments. In any kind of protracted conflict if they were chewed up within a week, what would you advise us to do then?

Lieutenant General Hodges: For sure, if it gets to a kinetic conflict on the land, there will be massive casualties. It will not be Iraq or Afghanistan; lots of armoured vehicles will be destroyed, and then there is the wear and the tear and the maintenance. You will not have 150 tanks out on the field all the time. The number will be significantly reduced because you will be carrying out 24/7 operations and the enemy will be very active. You have to factor that in, so now you are talking about not a lot of armoured capability. But you have to believe that you need that.

I am not an armour officer but an infantry officer, and I love having tanks. When you think about what we saw two months ago and what Russia put on display in and around Ukraine, what I watched was endless convoys and rail cars loaded with tanks, armoured artillery, and about 100,000 troops. That is very conventional capability that represents a threat and you have to be able to match that in order to deter it. I do not think you can have one or the other.

Q221 **Mr Francois:** It is worse actually. We have a new armoured infantry fighting vehicle programme called Warrior, which we have just cancelled. We have wasted half a billion pounds on that so we will not have an armoured infantry fighting vehicle in the future—not a tracked one to keep up with the tanks. We have a light tank programme called Ajax which we have spent £3 billion on and has delivered only 14 vehicles so far. It is meant to be stealthy; it is about as stealthy as a Ford Transit full of spanners and we may have to cancel that programme too. Overall, it could be argued that we are performing slightly sub-optimally.

You can have all the integration you want and, as a former Army commander, you made a very good point about why you need it. I am not contending with you on that but, at the end of the day, you need some fighting units on the end of all this wonderfully configured IT. You can communicate perfectly but if you have got nothing to throw into the battle, you are going to lose. Given what I have told you, would you not be concerned that, as well as all this IT, you need at least some element of effective mass, particularly if you are going to fight the Russians?

Lieutenant General Hodges: I completely agree. When you talk about mass, it is not just mass effects but people. If you go into a built-up area, battalions of people get consumed in entering and clearing. There is a requirement for lots of people. Certainly human capabilities will be augmented and enabled by drones, robotics and other things in which I absolutely believe, but at the end of the day you need people. If you assume 24/7 operations, what you have meets only half the requirement. What I am saying is that you do not get the whole number the whole time.



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Mr Francois: At the moment, General, I think we would struggle to get to half. Thank you very much. Your point was clear.

Q222 **John Spellar:** There is this mythology that information warfare is going to displace kinetic warfare. You have clearly outlined that that is not going to be the case, although it is an integral part of it all. Do we then have enough mass that is in a position to become operational in a crisis? Do we have enough prepositioned equipment? Are our reinforcement pipelines sufficient? Do we have enough control of the north Atlantic, for example, to allow reinforcement and resupply from the continental United States? Have we exercised and planned enough for the flow of that equipment and personnel, presumably towards a front line in eastern Europe? In other words, have we over-focused – important though it is – on the IT side, the cutting-edge side, to the detriment of the kinetic side?

Lieutenant General Hodges: You mentioned a couple of things that I think are key, including exercise. Exercises have got to take organisations to the point of failure, or you can never really find out where the weaknesses and vulnerabilities are – for example, can you communicate with each other while under a massive cyber-attack and systems such as GPS are knocked out?

As we discovered in this latest Warfighter exercise, in which the 3rd (UK) Division participated, in about eight days of exercise every bit of important ammunition in the British Army's inventory was expended. This was a computerised simulation, but that has been my experience: ammunition expenditures go off the charts when you go into a serious, high-end, force-on-force conflict. We absolutely do not have enough of the critical munitions that we need, especially what is called the preferred munitions – the ones that are precise in targeting. In the US there is only one factory that makes them. The industrial side of this is obviously a vulnerability. There is not enough engineering equipment.

I am sure that you are familiar with the number of rivers and lakes across northern Europe. To get from, say, Germany up to Tallinn you would have to cross eight major rivers over 150 metres wide plus thousands of other bodies of water, particularly in Poland. You would have British soldiers on the other side of all that water from relief, to be blunt about it.

When I was a lieutenant, the United States had almost 300,000 soldiers here, mostly in Germany, and now we have about 30,000. Back in 2010, when we thought Russia was our friend and would be a partner, decisions were made to get rid of the two armoured brigades that were here, so that all we had left was the airborne brigade in Vicenza, Italy, and the Stryker brigade – which is a wheeled armoured vehicle regiment – in Bavaria. That is it.

After Russia invaded Ukraine, the Obama Administration made the decision to bring back rotational brigades, which of course is even more expensive than having them stationed here. But at least we now have an armoured brigade heel to toe – nine months, nine months, nine months – so that we have some tanks on the ground here. The Obama



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Administration also made the decision to preposition all the equipment necessary for an armoured division back in Europe. We had to reopen some of what we called POMCUS—prepositioned storage sites—in the Netherlands, Belgium, two in Germany and there is one being built in Poland. This was a recognition that we did not have enough, so paying the price to bring these things back is what is under way now. NATO's central European fuel pipeline system only goes as far as Berlin and does not continue further to the east, so we have some fuel vulnerabilities as well.

Q223 Sarah Atherton: Good afternoon, General. I want to pick up on something that Mark said and expand on it slightly. You mentioned at the top of this session the possibility of a kinetic conflict within five years. Do you think that the Defence Command Paper and the integrated operating concept better equip us for that possibility?

Lieutenant General Hodges: Yes, I do. I am saying this as an outsider, but with this Command Paper for the first time it feels that a review was done truly based on looking at threats and strategy as opposed to something that feels more like a budget drill. There are pieces of it that one could disagree with—and obviously people do—but the overall approach is a recognition of the changing character of war and not the changing nature of war. It sets out a good, strong approach. It is up to the Government to follow through and make good on the requirements. These things are always built on assumptions and, as you look into this, you need to challenge the assumptions. That is the foundation. What assumptions are you making about time, resources, the capabilities that will be available in five or ten years? And you have to continue to challenge those assumptions.

Q224 Sarah Atherton: Thank you. Can I look at the sub-threshold environments? We understand that there are blurred boundaries between open warfare versus the battle of the narratives and the use of non-lethal means to influence future operating environments. How do we ensure that this grey zone does not escalate into warfighting?

Lieutenant General Hodges: That is the challenge that we all face. I live in Germany—and I was in Paris last week—and there is a reluctance to acknowledge that there are threats out there. French and German businesses are very connected to Russian and Chinese businesses and they are not alone—the US is, too, in many cases. That reluctance to acknowledge that there is a threat makes us more vulnerable to the dangers of grey zone conflict, disinformation, undermining the trust that we have in our institutions and cyber-attacks on all facets of our communities and infrastructure.

The ones in the US are very well known, such as the Colonial pipeline. That was bad enough. If that had happened later this month, it would have been a real disaster because half of America is going on summer holiday and if you shut all the gas stations for a couple of weeks, that is bad news. We need to make it very clear to the Kremlin that if any cyber-attack—I do not care how small, or if it is just some knucklehead sitting in their mother's basement—is launched against the United States or our



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allies, the Kremlin will be held accountable for it and there will have to be some very painful retribution against them. That is easy for me to say, but there is no doubt in my mind that, pretty quickly, the NSA can figure out where it came from. The only way to prevent escalation is to deter in the grey zone, just as we did in the conventional arena in the cold war.

Q225 **Sarah Atherton:** Correct me if I am wrong, but I understand that you have identified a number of weaknesses in NATO's ability to reinforce its eastern flank. How confident are you that NATO's 2030 agenda will result in a credible conventional force?

Lieutenant General Hodges: I was impressed with the new strategic concept that was put in front of the Heads of State and Government at the recent summit. Of course, as often happens after a summit, a communiqué comes out to which everyone agreed. This communiqué had quite a list of significant points and commitments. It will be hard to meet all of them, but to get 30 nations to agree to them is an important step.

I am somewhat optimistic that we will continue have a credible deterrent and we will continue to move towards maintaining a deterrent that is fit for 2030. It addresses Russia and China specifically and it was quite a lift to get France and Germany on board. It addresses the need for cyber-protection and cyber-policy. It addresses the need to accelerate technological innovation and converge the efforts of different nations so that we do not have gigantic gaps between the technologies of nations. I think this was a positive step, but as always the Governments, including my own, need to follow through on what they agreed at the summit.

Q226 **Richard Drax:** Good afternoon, General. We all dread war, and even more we dread nuclear war. If the West continues to generally undermine our conventional strength, does that not mean that if, as you predict, something serious were to happen in the next five years, the West may have to resort to a nuclear deterrent because we do not have the conventional forces to put into the field?

Lieutenant General Hodges: You are exactly right, Mr Drax. That is the only option—to threaten nuclear. Most of our potential adversaries do not believe for a second that we would actually use it, which means that we have pretty much lost our deterrent capability. I do not want this to sound like a bumper sticker, but we need a combination of nuclear capability, real conventional capability—steel at sea, in the air and on land—and strong cohesion inside the Alliance. Strong cohesion does not mean that everyone has to love each other, or that there is never a problem, but there has to be no doubt that we are committed. We also need a resilient society. By that, I mean knowing whether your infrastructure can withstand attacks—the banking system, the power grid, transportation networks and food supply. I do not see how you can deter effectively if you do not have all four of those. If one of them is not present, we are in big trouble with either the Kremlin or the Chinese Communist party.

Q227 **Richard Drax:** It is my view that the Russians and Chinese would not like to see our ships on the sea, or our planes in the air and substantial forces



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on the ground. How do we persuade western Governments, not least ours, to increase expenditure to provide this deterrent?

Lieutenant General Hodges: The challenge is explaining the theory of deterrence to Government officials and our civilian leaders—why you need to spend a lot of money on something you hope you will never use. It is just like trying to get teenagers or young married couples to invest in health insurance and they say, “For what? I don’t need health insurance; I am completely healthy”. Germany is surrounded by nothing but friends for the first time in its history, so it is hard to find too many Germans here in Frankfurt who would acknowledge that there is a huge threat. There is no pressure in the German Government to invest not just in getting to 2%, but in maintaining a level of readiness that is necessary.

You need to be able to articulate, in a way that makes sense to the average voter, that with deterrents, in the long run—and why we know from history that if you are prepared and demonstrate that you are prepared—the chance of ever going into conflict is significantly reduced. American history is full of examples. Every time we were the least prepared, we had the most disaster, and we always paid the price.

Q228 **Chair:** Just before we turn to the bigger threat picture, let us stay on our own alliances for a second. You spent a bit of time in Brussels, and there are two big international headquarters there—namely, NATO and the EU. In your book, you speak about a number of lessons that we need to learn to prepare ourselves or to deter a future war. Your third lesson is that Europeans must learn to trust each other. Even today, as we have seen with covid and other things, there is still an awful lot of political rivalry taking place, which perhaps prevents us from moving forward and working as an alliance, as NATO would like, because of political competition. Can you reflect on your experience of working in Brussels? Did you see that and were you affected by it? Was it frustrating to witness?

Lieutenant General Hodges: Let me say it like this: first of all, the United States has a responsibility to remove all doubt about our commitment to security and stability in the Europe. The last Administration was not terribly helpful in that, but even the Obama Administration, despite his enormous personal popularity in many places in Europe, was where “Pivot to the Pacific” was first mentioned in a broad policy sort of way. I remember allied officers looking at me and saying, “Are you guys leaving? What’s going on?” I think the United States has a role to play.

It is easy for me to say that everybody should trust each other. You can look at our own domestic situation in the United States, and I am sure that you must be concerned sometimes and think, “What is going on over there?” Having said that, my view is that among the military professionals—I am saying this straight out—because of the last 20 years, as we have all been together in Iraq and Afghanistan, doing those kinds of things, there is nothing but trust between the British Army, the German Army, the Italian Army, the French Army. Because of the shared



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experiences, the preparations for deployments and so on, there is a trust that comes from that. I do not want to overstate that, but I guess what I am saying is that I feel confident in the trust that we have inside the Alliance.

At the ambassador level, or the Secretary or Minister of Defence level, there is a recognition and a trust that exists and recognises that each person represents their own nation and has to deal with that environment. I remember when I was an aide-de-camp for SACEUR General George Joulwan from '95 to '97. This was before IFOR went into Bosnia. I remember him talking to a group of allied officers. He said, "Look, I know that everything I say in here, as soon as I say it, is going back to London, Paris, Berlin. That's okay, I understand that is the nature of the alliance." But at the end of the day, the renewed commitment that goes on and on helps to keep that strong. Where I think we have challenges is when you talk about the EU and NATO. Even though those are almost all the same countries, the reasons for those institutions are so different, and their interests, in many ways, are so different. That is why I think there is a lot of scepticism, frankly.

Q229 Chair: You could say that our competitors—Russia, in particular, and indeed China—are very clever at finding the seams of division between the various clusters or groupings in and around Europe that prevent us from standing as one.

Lieutenant General Hodges: Absolutely. Target No. 1 is undermining the cohesion inside the Alliance, undermining the EU and anything that they can do to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe, and I think, frankly, between the UK and the rest of Europe.

Q230 Chair: My follow-up question is on the information age that we are moving towards, and technology. How close do you think we are to the first hyperwar—this ability for war to take place without humans participating, with AI reacting with swarm drones and so forth by automated feature?

Lieutenant General Hodges: I am sure you have seen the reports that came out very recently about Turkish drones that were operating apparently independently—they were capable of retargeting and reorienting themselves based on programming—so I think we are there, to an extent. Every day, you see video or reports about advances in robotics. Of course, that is different from an autonomous vehicle that can do things and make decisions on its own.

I think that this will be commonplace within the next five years. When I was a brigade commander in 2003 when we invaded Iraq, I did not even have a drone of my own for the entire brigade. Now every battalion in every army in the world has their own drone. It is so common. I cannot even believe that, in 2003, the 101st Airborne Division did not have one. If industry sees the value of those kind of things, and if the Department of Defense sees its value and utility, it takes off.

Q231 Mr Francois: How recent was that exercise you mentioned when 3rd (UK)



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Division was exercising with the American Army, I think in the States, and we had ammunition supply problems? Can you remember when it took place?

Lieutenant General Hodges: It was within the last four months.

Q232 **Mr Francois:** And whereabouts in the States?

Lieutenant General Hodges: Fort Hood, Texas. You had the American III Corps, which is based there, and an American division, 3 (UK) Div and a French division. Those were the three subordinate divisions under the corps headquarters. Of course, the corps commander gave—this is what corps do. Corps have independent assets that they can use to reinforce the subordinate organisations, so the corps cavalry regiment, which is a brigade-sized formation, was attached to 3 (UK) Div, and I think there was also another brigade attached to them as well, so you had a really robust British Army division.

Q233 **Mr Francois:** And that was four months ago?

Lieutenant General Hodges: It was within the last three or four months.

Chair: Let us now turn our attention to the big chunky threats with which we are having to deal. Kevan, would you like to take us forward on that?

Q234 **Mr Jones:** The integrated review identified China and Russia as two major threats. What is your assessment in terms of perception by other partners? From talking to colleagues there, I believe that the United States agrees with that. You have already mentioned Europe and it would be interesting to hear what you think their perception is of those two countries. You also talked about public perception in the UK and across Europe and asked whether they understand what the threat is. Is there a disconnect between policy makers in terms of articulating that threat and the public believing that the threat exists? If you look back at the cold war, in the UK it was easy for people to realise what the threat was. It is rather diffuse now and if I spoke to the average person in my district they may have read something about Russia and China, but they do not see the same threat or context as they did during the cold war when the Soviet Union and eastern bloc existed.

Lieutenant General Hodges: I may have missed the first part of your question. Are you asking how other nations perceive the threat?

Mr Jones: Yes.

Lieutenant General Hodges: I will start with Germany. Over the last two or three years there has been an increased willingness to acknowledge that the Kremlin is not a reliable partner. It is important for German industry. There are more than 5,000 German businesses connected into Russia. Obviously, that is not illegal, but it is extensive. Germany's largest embassy in the world is in Moscow. Despite that, and the very frustrating Nord Stream 2 project—we got serious about it too late to stop it—I am encountering more and more Germans who acknowledge that China and the Kremlin cannot be trusted and that the threat exists. However, I live



across the street from the Goethe University here in Frankfurt and a few months ago I had the chance to give a presentation to some international relations students—people who are paying attention to what is going on in the world. Two thirds of them had no idea that Germany had deployed soldiers as part of the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence battle group in Lithuania. They did not even know about it. That is not terribly uncommon as the average German does not pay attention to it. Last night I asked two German friends, “What do you think about the German troops coming out of Afghanistan?” The last Bundeswehr soldier finally got home about five or six days ago. They looked at me and did not really know about it. They just do not pay attention. So my sense is that there is not much pressure on the Government to do something about the threat.

France is completely oriented to the south. They do their part in NATO, whether it is air policing missions or Enhanced Forward Presence, but their principal focus is on the Sahel and North Africa. We are getting some help from the French Navy in the Pacific, so there is a recognition there. When I say that I think there could be a kinetic conflict within five years, the usual reaction is, “What? What do you base that on?” It is hard for them to get their heads around the idea of a kinetic conflict.

Italy is also focused to the south because of the constant flood of refugees coming across the Mediterranean. India clearly recognises the threat from the Chinese Communist party, as does Australia. In effect, the conflict is already under way, it is just not kinetic yet. For example, the Chinese fishing fleet is in effect an arm of the PLA navy. They use it to occupy whole regions of islands and it smashes up fishing vessels from Vietnam or the Philippines. This is not bad seamanship; it is part of the design.

That is a long, incoherent answer to an important question. There is a growing recognition of the threats, but they are not sure what to do about it yet. There is not yet much pressure from the populations on their Governments.

Q235 Chair: May I explore that a bit further? China seems to have a strategy and a clear direction of travel of where it wants to go over the next 10 to 20 years. You are the first person to say that there is going to be something kinetic in the next five years. Do you think that the West needs a Sputnik moment to wake up to the geopolitical and geostrategic threats that China presents?

Lieutenant General Hodges: I am on thin ice here, looking at who I am speaking with, but I would have thought that the reaction to Hong Kong being shut down would have been more severe. I am sure that inside the UK and London a lot was being said and done, but even from here in Germany I saw very little significant, meaningful reaction. China seemed undeterred, based on the 100th anniversary of communism that they just celebrated and the language coming out of Beijing. It will probably take something around Taiwan. Yesterday, even Japan said that an attack on Taiwan would represent a threat to them. It seems as though that has become the threshold for people to wake up and say, “They are not going to stop”.



Q236 **Chair:** Can you elaborate on how you see a kinetic engagement or conflict playing out?

Lieutenant General Hodges: At some level, a commander is going to ram a US Navy or Royal Navy vessel at sea. We have had a couple of close calls, as you know. Ships shadowing each other and aeroplanes buzzing ships is not uncommon. What is different now, with the Russians as well, is that it is much more dangerous and more unprofessional. We had a Chinese ship come within about 50 m of an American ship at sea. That was deliberate, but there was no way that the commander of the Chinese vessel would have done it if he had not been given instructions or latitude to do something like that. What HMS Defender did was one of the best things I have seen in a long time. To me, it was an example of what enforcing international law looks like. It was what professional sailors, properly trained and equipped, do. I can only imagine the level of work that went into that at the Ministry, to think of all the contingencies. To end up with a massive Russian overreaction was quite amusing, because it reminded the whole world that Russia knows that they are illegally in the Crimea. We will have to keep doing those sorts of things in the Pacific. The US Navy frequently, although not routinely, sails through the strait of Taiwan and the South China sea doing these freedom of navigation things. At some point the Chinese will feel compelled to shoot at people. I do not know what that looks like.

Q237 **Chair:** Are you speaking about an individual incident that could potentially ratchet up, or do you think it would be an isolated incident as a kinetic event rather than a large-scale conflict?

Lieutenant General Hodges: If the Chinese leadership has authorised a commander to engage a United States naval vessel, in the current environment that could ratchet up very quickly. About 18 or 19 years ago, the Chinese forced down a US spy plane—reconnaissance aircraft—which was flying in international airspace, but the Chinese came up and forced it to land.

That did not turn into kinetic conflict, obviously, because the context in which it happened was completely different. It was unacceptable, but it was a different context. I think that the context now, the language coming out of Beijing, is so worrisome. I think that they watched and they see that we have not done anything against the Russians to seriously influence their behaviour, and I think that will inform their thinking. I should say, Mr Chairman, that I hope I am completely wrong on all of this.

Chair: So do we.

Lieutenant General Hodges: The admiral who just gave up command of Indo-Pacific Command said six years, and then the admiral who relieved him said six years also. They have access to more information than me.

Q238 **Chair:** It will be interesting to see what occurs from what happened in the Black sea. We are proud of what HMS Defender and the Royal Navy did, not least because, while we speak about the erosion of the rules-based order, what are we doing to enforce it? Freedom of the seas and freedom



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of navigation is important, but is this all just a warm-up for what is going to happen in the South China sea?

On China's leverage of soft power, there is an argument that we are already in a cold war and that China is utilising and yielding its soft power—its debt, its one belt, one road programmes, its technological gifting and so forth—to lure evermore countries into its way of thinking, ensnaring more countries to lean to the east rather than to the west. That way, the West itself is shrinking, and authoritarianism and China's footprint and geopolitical influence is increasing. Is that the state of affairs you see and our current trajectory?

Lieutenant General Hodges: On the term "cold war", most of us listening in right now lived through that and it has a certain connotation, so I don't know if saying that we are back into a cold war or that this is a new cold war helps understanding or not. We are all searching to categorise this thing so we can understand what we are in, because it has so many similarities to cold war, but so many things are different. I don't have a better way to describe it, but I don't know if "cold war" is the most helpful.

Absolutely, I do believe in the construct of great power competition. There is no doubt that that is under way. The competition is not just military but even more so—and this goes to your question—in the economic domain, the information domain and diplomatic domain. I also believe that great power competition can prevent great power conflict. If the United States, the UK and our other allies and partners, both in Europe and in the Pacific, work together, we have economic leverage that far surpasses what China can have, for example. We have diplomatic leverage if we work together—easier said than done. For sure, the combined militaries would dwarf whatever Russia, and even China, could put in the field or at sea.

The willingness to compete and demonstrate that this matters to us helps reduce the chance of misunderstanding. For China, the use of soft power, specifically the belt and road initiative and their other types of investments, is because they have stepped into empty space. There is no US, British, German or Dutch investment—not in a serious, deliberate, strategic way—that provides infrastructure such as seaports. So the Chinese can walk in and, to be honest, I can't blame smaller countries for saying, "Yes, we need a seaport or a railroad." People are becoming increasingly aware of the downside—the Chinese bring in their own labour and massive debt traps—but you can see how they are vulnerable to this.

It is the same with Huawei and 5G. I can't believe that the United States, the UK, Sweden and Finland together cannot come up with a better, affordable 5G network. I would rather us compete than, frankly, clubbing our allies over the head and threatening them if they use Huawei.

Chair: It is interesting that people compare it with the Apollo programme, a combined commercial/state operation designed deliberately to catch and overtake the Soviet Union. Perhaps that thinking is required to get us back to a position where we can protect our critical



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national infrastructure and not lean on the Chinese.

Q239 Richard Drax: General, if you were sitting beside a British Prime Minister or the American President and learned that a British destroyer or American frigate had been sunk in the South China sea by a Chinese missile, what would you advise them to do in retaliation or on how to react?

Lieutenant General Hodges: Naturally, I would want to confirm with the Chinese Government whether it was a rogue commander or deliberate. If there was any hesitation, there would be retaliation of some sort. I imagine that the National Security Council and the British equivalent have a list of potential options for retaliatory strike, whether it was a strike in kind or a cyber-attack that crippled a significant part of the Chinese Government or economy, or economic sanctions that would have instant, debilitating effect.

For my first step I would want to be sure it was not just one ship's captain who did something without guidance.

Q240 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank you, general, for joining us. May we turn our gaze back to the Indo-Pacific region and the UK carrier strike group? What are your thoughts on the UK's decision? Do you welcome it, or do you think we should be concentrating on the Euro-Atlantic area?

Lieutenant General Hodges: I absolutely welcome it. What a terrific maiden or first operational deployment it is for the strike group to have a global mission and to practise. I am sure that you know that when strike groups or vessels are on their way they are constantly practising and training and doing things. They will learn and grow so much in capability, far exceeding the technical specifications of the ship, aircraft and weapon systems. They will learn a lot and things will get fixed and improved.

If for no other reason, that is extremely valuable. The fact that it is a multinational strike group demonstrates to the Chinese and Russians that, yes, although we are all dealing with covid and its economic effects we are still willing to expend the money necessary to do something like that—a significant message to our adversaries. That is worthwhile.

I have thought about what the US needs, but the British military—the Royal Navy—does not exist to do what the US needs. I completely respect the decision of the British Government to send the carrier strike group wherever you think it should go or is needed.

For sure, if we get into a kinetic conflict in the Indo-Pacific the United States will have precious little left for Europe and the north Atlantic. I believe that the United States will look to its European allies to continue to deter the Kremlin and to continue to protect the north Atlantic-Arctic access into the Mediterranean, even though most of the United States' air, naval and intelligence capabilities will be focused on the Indo-Pacific.

Q241 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Let me connect that, then, to the north Atlantic and Mediterranean. If the carrier group is in the Indo-Pacific for a short time but is to have a long-term position in the Atlantic it could play



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a critical role in, for example, a kinetic conflict in continental Europe, bringing divisions over from the United States and Canada.

It also links to asserting freedom of navigation in, for example, the Black sea. If the carrier group is in the Atlantic and others are navigating through the Mediterranean from the Black sea, having that link through the carrier group asserting those rights to navigate in the Black sea, specifically into occupied Crimean territorial waters, might be a more long-term benefit.

Lieutenant General Hodges: You've hit on the risk. If the Royal Navy's principal warfighting capability is in the Indo-Pacific region, that is going to leave a hole. The US Navy has only four frigates in the US Navy Europe—that's it. They are based in Rota. The same four ships are doing missile defence in the eastern Med. They go up into the Black sea for three weeks. They go up into the Arctic. It is the same handful of vessels: that is all there is. I believe that the US Navy will deploy an additional two frigates to the European theatre in the next two years, but it'll still be six ships for the whole area. That is not a lot of capability.

The navies are working together in the Black sea on the Sea Breeze exercise. That is the only way we can have enough capacity to meet all the requirements for protecting sea lanes and preventing interdiction.

We have to be clear-eyed about the likelihood. In the old days a Russian submarine would sink a ship with an American brigade's worth of equipment on it. That is the competition we are talking about—the threat that is out there. That is why the Alliance recreated a headquarters responsible for the Atlantic, but that is a headquarters: there are no ships there.

Q242 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Let me connect again with the Indo-Pacific. If there is a lack of American capability in the north Atlantic and the Mediterranean and the expectation is that others in Europe will pick up that capability, what is the benefit of the frigate part of the UK carrier group or a destroyer going through the straits at Taiwan? Is that a good use of our capabilities or should we leave that to the Australians or even the United States and refocus on the north Atlantic, Mediterranean and Black sea?

Lieutenant General Hodges: The benefit is the UK asserting and enforcing freedom of navigation wherever it is required. From a practical standpoint you can say, "Australia, you guys get that one. We will take care of this one."

The whole world saw HMS Defender demonstrate how you enforce international law. If just the US is doing this with China, the Chinese will believe, "Okay, we don't have to worry about everybody else." There is a seam between the United States and Europe when it comes to China. That creates a vulnerability for all of us.

Q243 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** You said that you were originally sceptical about NATO classifying climate change as a security threat but are now



supportive. Will you expand on why you changed your mind and whether other non-state issues such as non-state actors might be defence and security priorities for the UK in the years ahead?

Lieutenant General Hodges: At first, I was thick-headed—narrow-minded is a better way of saying it—and wondered what NATO's responsibility was for dealing with climate change. But as I began to reflect on what the Alliance was saying and about its role, I saw that it wasn't so much about doing our share in preventing or slowing down climate change, but more about the implications for our security.

In the United States, plenty of people argue about what is causing the shrinking of the polar ice cap but, for me, what matters is the fact that, whatever the reason why you think that is happening, it is not debateable that it is shrinking. That has significant strategic implications for all of us. Therefore, we have to address that. That is an example of why I changed my thinking. We have to acknowledge the fact that the ice cap is shrinking, and the previous Administration were reluctant to even talk about the polar ice cap shrinking because they would then get into an argument that they did not want to have to defend about what's causing it to shrink. For me, it is shrinking, and the Russians are way ahead of us, as are the Chinese.

The biggest embassy in Iceland is the Chinese embassy because they are carrying out meteorological and all other kinds of studies because they anticipate in the next 10 to 15 years more ships coming through the polar ice cap. Back in February, for the first time in history, a vessel sailed across the top of the world. It had to follow a Russian ice breaker, but for the first time in history a ship was able to sail from the Pacific to the Atlantic in February. That will only increase and that has real security implications for us. That is why the Danes have reopened their radar station on the Faroe Islands and have long-range drones in Greenland.

I imagine this will be true in Portsmouth, because it is certainly true in Norfolk, Virginia. The prospect is that the ocean will rise by five or six inches. Huge installations will go under water and their operations will be affected, so huge amounts of money will be required to mitigate those problems.

Finally, in a tactical and practical sense, when we were in Afghanistan almost all our fuel came in large 5,000-gallon trucks from Karachi in Pakistan. It was driven by commercial vendors who were super vulnerable. They were seldom attacked because people were paid off not to attack them, but they were hugely vulnerable. We therefore started to find ways of generating electricity other than through gas or diesel-powered generators. A practical consideration to get fuel trucks off the road drove us towards using solar power. Those are some examples of why I think it appropriate for the Alliance to address the issue of climate change.

Q244 **Mr Jones:** I am interested in your observations. Traditionally we talk about non-state actors such as terrorist groups and other organisations but now the Russians use private-sectors bodies like the Wagner Group



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to project their power, and it is now moving into the Sahel and areas like that. How do we counter that? Clearly there is public deniability but, in practice, we all know what is going on. How does the nation state deal with that new type of privatised warfare, if we can call it that?

Lieutenant General Hodges: At the end of the day, by holding the sponsor seriously responsible with crippling economic action. For some reason, we have been reluctant to do that over the past few years, and I can never understand why. Why didn't we shut down the money flow that keeps ISIS or al-Qaeda going? I think it was because we were going to find out that a lot of that money was moving through American and British banks, and our friends in Saudi Arabia and other places. That would have been very uncomfortable and would have caused problems for us, so there is a reluctance to put the financial heat on people because of the collateral damage to friends or creating embarrassing situations for ourselves with the Kremlin.

I was surprised for how long many senior people were willing to say, "We're not sure these are actually Russians in Crimea"—the so-called little green men—because they didn't have a cap badge or shoulder patch to say that they were in the Russian Army. That gave people who did not want to face up to it cover for a period of time to say that they weren't sure there really were Russians in Crimea. That was pathetic and we have to be more clear-eyed about who we are dealing with and be willing to call them out and inflict serious pain, which really means money and economic sanctions that go after the inner circle, whether that is in the Kremlin, the Chinese Community party or somewhere in the middle east. That means we have to get our own act together, and although that is easy to say, that is how we do it.

It is no mystery that the Wagner Group was in Belarus a few months ago. It has been in Syria and Africa, and an information operation needs to be organised at the highest level that shines the light on that. We can then turn to our allies who are propping up or supporting the Kremlin in economic and other ways and hold them to account publicly. That is easier to say and harder to do but, in my view, that is how you deal with the Wagner Group, Boko Haram, ISIS and similar organisations. You dry up the money and call out the people who are formally or informally endorsing, supporting or enabling them. The problem is that we are going to be really embarrassed when we find out who that is.

Q245 **Chair:** I just have a few questions to bring some of these thoughts together. You mentioned USS Arleigh Burke and the four ships based in the European theatre of operations. We have HMS Defender but only six Type 45s, which are the equivalent. Would you say that we require greater force presence and greater surface fleet reach, given that the ice caps are melting and there is more determination to enforce international freedoms of the sea? We simply can't do that with the very high-spec Navy that we have at the moment. On a chessboard, we essentially need more pawns as well as the bigger pieces. Do you concur with that?



Lieutenant General Hodges: Absolutely. Part of this is about getting more out of our allies. The German Navy has seven or eight submarines and I think one of them is operational right now. The Germans obviously did not forget how to operate submarines, but instead of clubbing them over the head about the figure of 2%, we should say to them that as a strict requirement, "Germany, we need you to accept responsibility for command and control of everything in the Baltic, to ensure that we have freedom of navigation, that the hundreds of thousands of underwater mines that are still there from world war one and world war two are cleared, and that you perform all the maritime duties, because there will not be a Royal Navy or US Navy ship going up into the Baltic, except for a flag day or port visits." In operations, I don't think too many commanders will want to sail a grey hull into an enclosed space like the Baltic, so get the allies to do that.

It is the same thing in the Black sea, working with the Ukrainian Navy—our partner, the Ukrainians—as well as Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria. Turkey has a significant navy. By the way, in the US we have got to fix our relationship with Turkey. They are a very frustrating ally, but a second lieutenant can look at the map and realise how important they are not just for the Black sea but to help contain Iran. Turkey has almost nothing on the Black sea, but they have resisted NATO growing its capability in the Black sea, so we have to address that.

Maritime unmanned systems are a significant development that really expand anti-submarine capabilities, mine and counter-mine capabilities. If you take a Defender—I know I sound like an infantry soldier right now describing this—with a suite of four or five unmanned systems around it, you have significantly increased its capacity for anti-submarine warfare, mine and counter-mine, and even strike and reconnaissance, at a fraction of the cost.

Q246 **Chair:** Fascinating. Thank you for that. On HMS Defender, which we have mentioned a couple of times, we had a couple of British journalists on that vessel, which helped perhaps clarify exactly what was going on: Mark Nicol from the *Daily Mail* and Jonathan Beale from the BBC. Do you believe it is important to have journalists on board? The disinformation campaign was used by the Russians. Putin himself was using this as an illustration to hold up against western aggression.

Lieutenant General Hodges: I thought it was brilliant that Jonathan was on board Defender. I have known and admired him for a long time. I was jealous that he was there, because I wish that I could have been on board to see that. But at the time I was thinking, "Why is this not the norm?" I hope that every ship participating in Sea Breeze has a journalist on board from the nation that sent a ship. It has to be somebody like Jonathan Beale—I don't know the other gentleman—who would never be accused of being a shill for the Ministry. It has to be a respected, independent journalist who can report, so that it is not US Navy or Royal Navy video pointing to what is happening, but instead it has BBC on there or CNN or whatever.



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I think that was a great idea. My only critical thought about what happened there is that the messaging part was not put in place. They had to know the Russians were going to react, so they need to be prepared with the messaging instead of having what looked like conflicting reports from Jonathan, the Russians and the Ministry.

Q247 **Derek Twigg:** General, you were in Afghanistan and you have extensive service. I know we are talking about global Britain here, but a number of us feel very strongly about Afghanistan and the potential for future conflicts and problems arising from our withdrawal from that country. Can you tell us briefly what your view is about that and the potential dangers for the future?

Lieutenant General Hodges: Of course it is embarrassing to look at the news reports of the last two days, with Bagram looking like it was abandoned. It won't be long before you have the Taliban conducting victory parades up and down the runway there and those kinds of things. And it is frustrating when former President Karzai is so critical of what the United States did in Afghanistan, how poorly we fought—saying things like that. But at the end of the day, those will pass.

I think the US President was right to say that it is time to go, and I say that for three or four reasons. The first reason is that we—the collective we—were never willing to do what was necessary in Pakistan to prevent safe haven for al-Qaeda or the Taliban. I don't think there are too many examples in history of where an insurgency was defeated when it had a safe haven like they did—they do—in Pakistan. Pakistan has no interest in an Afghanistan that is stable, secure, prosperous and linked to India. And of course ISI cannot be trusted. I think we were always worried that some of these nuclear weapons would end up in the hands of the wrong kind of people. For those reasons, we failed to do what needed to be done in Pakistan. If that is the case, I don't know how you continue to justify sending young women and men, and all the money, into Afghanistan. That is point 1.

Point 2 is that obviously—this all comes with the benefit of hindsight, my hindsight—we should have gone after one year. We took our eye off the ball. Basically, we—again, the collective we—had accomplished what we had set out to do, inside the first year, not perfectly, not elegantly, but quite well. We should have left. Of course it would have been a mess when we left. People would have complained about that and pointed to it. But that was the original purpose for going. We changed the purpose and then we compounded it by going to Iraq. I think we will all be studying and arguing about that decision for decades to come. At the time, I thought it was right, but only because I was brigade commander and we were going. Having some years now to look back on it—well, why did we go there? What was the connection? And I own part of that mistake, because I completely supported the idea. But thinking back on it, that was a mistake.

The third thing we did that was a mistake was that in the United States we never raised taxes to pay for it—either Iraq or Afghanistan. I am not a



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big tax person, but because there were no taxes raised to pay specifically for this, no American family felt any piece of it. There was no question: unless they had a family member that was deployed, or maybe there was a reserve or a national guard unit from their community that was deployed, it didn't affect their daily life and so there was no pressure on the Government and on the Congress to address the challenges and problems. I think that was a mistake—a political mistake.

Finally, when we left Kandahar in November of 2010, I was extremely proud of what we had accomplished in Kandahar and in Helmand, when Helmand was part of RC South at that time. It was incredible—I mean the elections and what women were able to do even in this part of Afghanistan, which was far removed from Kabul. Still I am very proud of what we accomplished—the tens of thousands of police and army and all of this stuff. I thought, “We’ve done it.” I felt like I could see it, as people had been doing for seven years before me and as they have done for 10 years since: “We’re almost there—we’re almost there.” And here we are, 11 years later, and we’re not. And then you see how the Afghan Army has evaporated in so many places.

I am sorry for the long answer. I am emotionally sad and melancholy about it. I worry about what is going to happen to women. However, I do not think that this is the same Taliban that was there 20 years ago. I am not entirely convinced, or maybe I am just hoping, that there will be a bloodbath. I think that the Taliban today know that they need a degree of political legitimacy. That is my view, Sir.

Q248 Chair: Let us just explore that a little more, because it has been a major engagement for 20 years for western nations and NATO to be on a mission there. But having gone in to take on an insurgency that is harbouring terrorism, for us now to depart—to retreat—is gifting or ceding territory back to the very same insurgency that could once again harbour terrorism. There must be lessons for the West to learn, because we will intervene, perhaps on a smaller scale or perhaps on a larger scale, and if we don't learn those lessons, we're going to repeat them again, are we not?

Lieutenant General Hodges: For sure. I agreed with General McChrystal's change of strategy when it became “protect the population”, around 2009. That was a significant change from “destroy Taliban”. But that required not just change of mission but also a whole cultural or mindset change: “What assets do you bring if it is about protecting the population, so that the Afghan Government can deliver governance out in the districts?”

I would be a prime example of somebody who was not culturally prepared, and it was nobody's fault but my own. I mean, I'm embarrassed to tell you this, but in 2003 I knew there were Shia and Sunni, but I didn't really know the difference in Iraq; I didn't really know. And in Afghanistan, yes, it was Islam, but they're not Arabs; there are different ethnicities and the tribes. And I showed up in Afghanistan as a brigadier—a director of operations—in 2009 and I still did not fully grasp all that.



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So, my first six months was spent on operation but trying to learn and catch up to Nick Carter, who had already figured all of this out. Then, of course, we had American units that were showing up ready to go kill the Taliban and we had to say, "No, the mission is now this".

The one lesson is making sure you understand the nature of the conflict before you enter it. That's not new—but that's one that we failed to do.

Q249 **Chair:** You sort of make my point for me. And you're very honest about the level of understanding—the detail—both in Iraq and indeed in Afghanistan. But as a military warrior, you're not necessarily expected to know those details. It should be the political masters who understand what is happening on the ground and what is required.

The West built that umbrella of security for which activity—governance, stability, peacekeeping and nation-building—needs to take place. And when I came out to see you—it was with General Jim Mattis—when Nick Carter was in charge of Kandahar, I saw a lot of military activity and I saw very little grasp of what we then needed to do to win over the locals—the indigenous capability—and build an indigenous force itself.

These are lessons that I think we have failed to grasp, particularly in the first five years, from 2001 to 2005. Would you agree with that?

Lieutenant General Hodges: Yes, Sir—of course. And your criticism of what you saw when you visited us is a fair criticism. But in the first five years, of course, it was all about destroying the enemy, and it was only after General McChrystal came in and changed the strategy that things changed.

So there is shared responsibility. At the end of the day, our civilian leadership has got to say, "This is the strategic objective", and then they have to own it and they have to explain it to the population. Take the advice of uniforms about what the cost is, what the risk is and what the time is—what do you think? And keeping in mind that all of us in the armed services are committed to success and we're going to accomplish the mission, no matter what. So, take that into account when one of us says, "Yes, we can get it done. We're making progress." And we really believe it, but—

Q250 **Chair:** In the last couple of minutes, can I just turn back to the threat of China? Richard Drax posed a very dramatic question about what would happen if China attacked one of our vessels, and there is much talk of the DF-41—this intercontinental ballistic missile that could take out a carrier. Do you believe that these weapon systems will ever see the light of day, or do you think that the threats that we face are going to be sub-threshold and deniable? For example, rather than hitting a carrier with one of these missiles, you are more likely to see a low-yield tactical nuclear weapon being set off not far from one of our aircraft carriers, sending a tsunami to roll the carrier itself, which would be deniable by your adversary. Is that not more likely than these unimaginable things to affect our economies? Our Queen Elizabeth carrier is going through the Suez canal at the moment. The blockade of that by a ship was done



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accidentally, but it shows you how vulnerable our world is to events that are beneath the threshold of war.

Lieutenant General Hodges: When I was a student at the war college 20 years ago, we did an exercise like that and somebody decided to sink a vessel in the Suez canal for that very reason. Twenty years ago, people were already thinking about that.

Chair: To block this arterial route.

Lieutenant General Hodges: That's correct. The students playing the opposing role knew how much the United States depended on the ability to shift back and forth using Suez, so they decided to block that. Of course, the whole world was reminded again this year of the impact. Whether that was deliberate or not, the fact is that it blocked the canal. We have done exercises for years whereby some type of a pandemic strikes the east coast of the United States during deployment, making it difficult for us to load ships with cargo and send people over to Europe for an emergency. We should have been prepared for covid, because we had exercised these possibilities.

I guess what I would recommend—maybe you are already doing it—is getting very senior civilian officials, in Parliament as well as in Government, to participate in crisis exercises that examine exactly the type of scenarios that you are discussing, because ultimately the CDS is going to turn to the Minister and say, "Okay, here is what we think has happened. What do you want us to do? Here are three options." That should not be the first time that senior civilian officials are having to think through all the implications and to appreciate the time. How long it takes to do certain things is always the biggest surprise.

Q251 **Chair:** That is really interesting. Looking at these incidents that are perhaps very high risk but very low probability, you speak in your book about biosecurity and the prospect of further pandemics. Could you envisage a situation in which an adversary would be so ruthless as to develop a vaccine to protect themselves and then deliberately release a pandemic that would cause economic and human harm in a wider region?

Lieutenant General Hodges: I can easily envision that type of scenario. I am not sure it is the Chinese who would do it, if only because their own prosperity is tied to markets, consumers and so on around the world. But I could see others who do not have the same risk exposure doing that, and they will have seen how vulnerable we are to just that.

Q252 **Chair:** That is very interesting. Thank you for that. Finally, on something that is very topical at the moment, news has come out of a British company, Newport Wafer Fab, which is one of our very large microchip companies. It has a plant here in the UK. The Chinese have acquired that company, and there is a lot of concern expressed by our sister Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee, that it is not the right decision and we should be protecting such capabilities, given our reliance on the movement of data and the importance of microchips. Where do you sit on that? Do you believe that we should have an indigenous capability, or is it



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okay to be selling such capabilities to China?

Lieutenant General Hodges: I think it is a very unfortunate transaction. Certainly in the United States, people were shocked to find out how much of our medicine comes from China, and how not just iPhones but so much of what we use day to day comes from China. We got that way because it was so much cheaper. That is where I think political leaders have to talk to the population and say, "Look, we've got to reduce our vulnerability. In some cases, that means we are not going to allow, encourage or incentivise certain investments or transactions that create a vulnerability for us."

That will be hard to square with all the other things, but there is no doubt the UK has tools just like the United States has tools, which can help. They monitor those kinds of things and limit vulnerability. NATO has started to track what transportation infrastructure in Europe is controlled by Chinese business. I think that is an important step. People are a little surprised to realise how much is controlled by China—it is not just the port of Piraeus.

Chair: General, it has been a real pleasure and an education to speak to you and engage with you this afternoon. Unless there are any further questions from my colleagues, on behalf of the Committee let me thank you very much indeed for joining us this afternoon. Clearly, the next few years will be quite critical; the decisions we make will probably determine how the next few decades play out. You certainly provided food for thought as we discuss that. Most important is our relationship with the United States, which you underlined. I am very grateful for your time this afternoon.