

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

Oral evidence: National security machinery

Monday 5 July 2021

4.45 pm

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Margaret Beckett (The Chair); Lord Brennan; Sarah Champion; Tobias Ellwood; Richard Graham; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Baroness Henig; Baroness Hodgson of Abinger; Lord King of Bridgwater; Lord Laming; Sir Edward Leigh; Baroness Neville-Jones; Lord Reid of Cardowan.

Evidence Session No. 6

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 120 - 139

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; Sir Stephen Lovegrove, National Security Adviser, Cabinet Office.

Examination of witnesses

Michael Gove MP and Sir Stephen Lovegrove.

Q120 The Chair: Mr Gove and Sir Stephen, thank you very much indeed for coming to give evidence to us today. We will do our best, and I am sure you will too, to be relatively succinct, because we have only an hour, which is about half the time we would normally hope for. If we have to follow up with some questions afterwards, I hope you will understand and accept that.

This is the final evidence session for the inquiry we have been running into the national security machinery, and it follows our looking at the Covid-19 pandemic as a test case for how the machinery works for tier 1 risk. I know you have been, and still are, undertaking a review of the systems and processes, and that it is still ongoing some four months after the integrated review was published. Why were the two not rolled together?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Thank you, Dame Margaret. The review that you are talking about is the review that was mentioned in the final chapter of the integrated review itself, with the PM asking the National Security Adviser—me; I was just about to take up the role—to do a review of national security apparatus. That was because the integrated review recognised it as an important area to improve, but the focus of the integrated review was more a strategic vision for the way in which the UK was going to conduct its foreign affairs and resilience planning for the future. That part of it was not done at the same time, but it was signalled that it would be done. We are just coming to the end of it at the moment, so I hope that we will be in a position to promulgate its conclusions fairly soon.

Q121 **The Chair:** Mr Gove, the integrated review as a whole is based on what somebody called a grand strategy approach to the whole issue of national security and international policy. What made you move away from the approach of previous SDSRs, which was risk based, and did you use risk-based assessment at all?

Michael Gove MP: Exactly as Stephen has pointed out, the purpose of the integrated review was an opportunity for the UK Government as a whole, particularly after Brexit and other political developments, to look not only at our place in the world and to develop a coherent strategy that looked at the risks that we faced overall, but at the opportunities that the UK's new position created.

We looked at our strengths, our weaknesses, and the opportunities, and the threats, that we faced, and laid out a doctrine and a set of principles behind it. Those principles emphasised the need for the UK, in domestic policy, to change its approach in particular areas, such as more investment in science and technology and greater awareness of some of the new risks that we faced, but to put that in the context of global trends that we were seeking to navigate.

It is certainly the case that a risk-based analysis was integrated in the IR, but it was also the case that, rather than simply looking at things that were potential threats to the national security of this country, we were thinking overall about how we could use our diplomatic, security, development and other assets to maximise not just the security but the prosperity of the British people and the opportunities available to Britain and its citizens.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is certainly a good characterisation of the integrated review. The SDSRs and SDRs of previous periods, because they were risk-based reviews and did not focus quite as much on opportunities and trends, tended to be a bit more reactive and a bit more static than we wanted this integrated review to be. I am hopeful that that has been achieved.

The Chair: You feel that it has wider scope. In your letter to us last week, Sir Stephen, you said that “enduring and robust machinery” would need to be in place for effective implementation of the integrated review.

When do you expect that to be in place and that process to begin?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think we have pretty robust machinery at the moment, to be honest. We have not pressed pause and done nothing since the integrated review was published. As you can imagine, we have had an intensely busy time with issues such as Afghanistan, Ukraine and so on. Existing machinery has continued to turn over. We are aware, however, that we could do better on implementation and strategic analysis, and it is in those kinds of areas, plus ministerial oversight, where the Prime Minister wanted me to see whether there could be improvements to the system, and we are in the process of finalising that at the moment.

The Chair: We will perhaps want to probe you a bit on that later.

Q122 **Baroness Hodgson of Abinger:** Good afternoon. The integrated review covers a range of policy areas that are within the remit of other Cabinet committees and ministerial committees, such as trade and economics, science and tech, cyber and so on. Who decides which committee should consider a particular policy question when there is an overlap, or do two committees sometimes consider them with a slightly different lens? If the latter is the case, how is that reconciled?

Michael Gove MP: Ultimately, the Cabinet Secretary is responsible for the allocation of advice to the Prime Minister on who should attend which committee and which committee should review which issues and in what way. Whether it is the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat in the Cabinet Office or the National Security Secretariat, they work to the Cabinet Secretary to ensure that there is timely consideration of important issues, and then, if necessary, at moments of particular pressure and challenge, new structures can be created to deal with new challenges.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Sir Stephen, do you have anything to add?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is an absolutely accurate description of the situation. There are obviously moments when there is a bit of overlap. Cyber is a classic example; and science and technology, cyber itself and hostile state actors. We are all aware of that. The point of the secretariat, from an official point of view, is partly to try to reconcile some of those moments—rubbing points, as it were—and to make sure that the right people at the right time are talking about the right things with the right material. Quite often, to be honest, as long as you have that, the name on the door of the committee is rather less important.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Thank you.

Q123 **Lord King of Bridgwater:** How do you actually choose the items for the NSC agenda?

Michael Gove MP: That is ultimately a question for the National Security Adviser in consultation with his colleagues, so I will hand over to Sir Stephen.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The Prime Minister ultimately decides what he would like to discuss and in what format. He does that on the advice of the National Security Adviser and a fairly detailed forward look at potential subjects that we think are worthy of discussion—and he obviously has his own views. We go through a fairly wide process of consultation, and, indeed, we are going through it for the next 12 months right now.

Lord King of Bridgwater: What interests me about exactly the point about the next 12 months is how flexible that agenda is. I mention it, because a few weeks ago we had the Queen's Speech. I spoke entirely in the foreign affairs and defence debate about cybersecurity and the risks of ransomware. I have been very struck since to see the amount of interest in it, and that President Biden made it the first item on his agenda and apparently itemised 16 items of US infrastructure that he told President Putin were off limits for any possibly Russian-devised cyber warfare. Did you have an opportunity in Moscow, Sir Stephen, to get a similar message across? You do not have to answer that question, but I hope you recognise it.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I had a very wide-ranging, frank and straightforward conversation with my Russian opposite number. If you had been there, Lord King, you would have been comfortable that I got across the subjects of national importance that we all share appreciation of.

Your first question was whether the agenda is sufficiently flexible to accommodate subjects that are coming up as items in a way that was not quite anticipated. Yes, it definitely is. It is not set in stone, but we want to make sure that the Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues have sufficiently well worked up advice with the right type of preparatory work to facilitate a really good conversation. It is important that the forward look is there, recognising that it will in practice ultimately be flexible.

Lord King of Bridgwater: The speed with which something comes as a problem—I am thinking of our nuclear deterrent and the sort of risks that people now perceive could exist from cyber insecurity in this field—is an absolutely critical area of importance globally.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I simply could not agree more.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Thank you very much.

Q124 **Tobias Ellwood:** Thank you, Chair. It is good to see you, Sir Stephen and Michael. Thank you for your time this afternoon. Mr Gove, I want to talk about the differences between long-term strategy and operational day-to-day incidents. Have you actually discussed the current situation in Afghanistan at the National Security Council?

Michael Gove MP: It is not appropriate for me to discuss what the specific agenda items are on a day-to-day or week-to-week basis, but it would be fair to assume, given that this is a significant diplomatic and security question, that it has been addressed by the Government.

Tobias Ellwood: Given the fact that we are departing from Afghanistan, one would assume that you had discussed this at the National Security Council, but the media have been saying that it is to be discussed this week. That does not seem as though we have it the right way round.

Michael Gove MP: There will be lots of reports and speculation in the media about what is on the Cabinet agenda and what is on the agenda of Cabinet committees. I will not say what is on the agenda of any National Security Council meeting or when it meets, but, again, you can be reassured that the situation in Afghanistan is of profound concern to the Prime Minister and to others, and there are appropriate moments at which we can review exactly what our posture should be.

Tobias Ellwood: I hope it is a profound concern, because I think we all agree that that country is probably heading towards civil war now that we are departing. It must have been discussed in the past. I am not asking you to say what will be discussed, but have you discussed Afghanistan in the last three months?

Michael Gove MP: Yes, there have been many discussions about Afghanistan and at various levels, for the reasons that you outlined. The CGS and others have spoken publicly about some of the challenges that we face as a result of the situation in Afghanistan. What I would say is that, while it is of unique importance, there are questions, not least about the conversations that we have with our allies in the US Administration and elsewhere, such that, if I were to stick my oar in, I do not think I would necessarily add much to public understanding or to effective delivery of the correct policy.

Q125 **Tobias Ellwood:** Thank you, Michael. Sir Stephen, in general, do you think the world will get more dangerous or become safer over the next five years?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: As National Security Adviser, I suspect that I end up seeing some of the less savoury and encouraging developments in global security. Aiming off from that, I would on the whole see many of the developments that we are seeing at the moment turning on the downside, so it is likely to be more dangerous.

Tobias Ellwood: I was expecting that answer. It begs the question about our national security budget, but that is for a different place. The question then is: are we horizon planning? Are we using the National Security Council to look at long-term strategy? Are you able to say how much of any agenda is devoted to the here and now, as opposed to what might be coming over the horizon—the threats and challenges, and the opportunities?

Michael Gove MP: There is a balance between the two. The first thing is that the integrated review was designed to achieve precisely that. On everything from the future of our independent nuclear deterrent to the Indo-Pacific tilt, it outlined a strategy for the UK that can be debated, discussed, challenged or approved as appropriate.

Within that overall context and framework, precisely as you say, there are specific events, and they can be everything from the increased risk of conflict in Afghanistan through to developments elsewhere in the world, through to, for the sake of argument, deeper understanding of some of the effects of the pandemic in different parts of world on the stability of institutions in less developed nations.

There is an opportunity for the NSC and sometimes for the Cabinet to take that strategic view, and for the NSC and Cabinet committees to look at specific challenges along the way. I was there when the integrated review was signed off, but I was not one of its principal authors. It does a fantastic job in setting the strategic context against which our friends and allies can judge our commitment to all the responsibilities that as a burden-sharing nation we need to shoulder.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Perhaps I may add a comment. You will not expect me, Mr Ellwood, to comment on specific NSC meetings or specific agenda items, but the balance that you point at is very definitely in the Prime Minister's mind when he thinks about the apparatus of national security. He is keen that the NSCs take subjects that are not only of immediate import and where there are important decisions to take, but where they are capable, when appropriate, of taking a longer rein. Getting that mix is part of the review that we have been undertaking in the last couple of months.

Within the National Security Secretariat itself, we are deeply conscious of the need to have a strong strategy muscle, building, as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster says, on the work in the integrated review. We are building up a strategic cell in the centre that will, I suspect, have different types of relationships with the academic community, think tanks and parliamentarians, because we are aware that that is an area where we could improve.

The Chair: Can I bring in Lord Brennan, please, on the balance between operations and strategy?

Q126 **Lord Brennan:** Thank you, Chair. Mr Gove and Sir Stephen, I would like to give you a practical opportunity to distinguish between strategic and operational or, if needs be, to combine them, in relation to cybersecurity. This morning's *Financial Times* and *Times* both describe attacks in America last week, and in Sweden over the weekend when the Coop shopping system had to close down 795 of its shops last Saturday. The ramifications of these attacks are obvious. President Biden spoke about them on Saturday, as Lord King mentioned.

What is the plan to deal with cybersecurity to give the public confidence

that a security risk is being dealt with? The national cybersecurity strategy is due for a new edition this summer or autumn. What is the programme for that?

Secondly, Mr Gove, as a Minister in the Commons, what would you say to the question, "Describe how our system works to protect us? What do we do for protection? What are we ready to do with attack response if it becomes necessary?" Thank you.

Michael Gove MP: Thank you. At the risk of giving the committee what it already knows, the UK and all developed democracies are vulnerable to cyberattacks. Those attacks can come from hostile states or other bad actors, whether they are terrorist organisations or anarchist or other activist groups; indeed, sometimes the overlap between those individuals is hazy.

To make sure that we can maintain the integrity and security of critical national infrastructure and other defence assets, we need first to utilise not just our own assets at GCHQ and elsewhere, but the support of our allies who have particular expertise in dealing with such threats. In the short to medium term, both the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary are taking steps to augment both offensive and defensive cyber capability.

More broadly, we need to ensure that we have a cadre of skilled individuals with the ability necessary to navigate these difficult areas, and that means a range of technical expertise as well as savviness in recognising where the threats might come from. This is a world where necessarily technical expertise, intelligence expertise and defence expertise coincide. We are fortunate in that, over the years, through GCHQ and allied agencies, we have built up formidable capacity in this area. As you quite rightly say, press reporting at the weekend, and the evidence of the SolarWinds affair and other ransomware attacks, remind us all of the importance of this.

Q127 **The Chair:** Could I ask you, Mr Gove, to make a briefish observation about the issue of operations and strategy? You have experience of the EU exit operations committee and now of the Covid operations committee. Would there be any merit in having such a separation and such an operations committee for the NSC itself?

Michael Gove MP: No, not intrinsically, but the opportunity might be required at certain points. It is important to recognise that, from time to time, Cabinet sub-committees, inter-ministerial groups or task forces are set up in order to deliver operationally some of the issues where the NSC believes that the Government should proceed. For the sake of argument—I think I can say this—there is a small group, chaired by the Foreign Secretary, that deals with China, on everything from how we welcome BNOs who are coming to the UK to other aspects of our relationship with China. It will deal with some of the specific operational questions, but when it comes to the broader decision about our approach towards China, that will be an NSC discussion or, if necessary, a Cabinet discussion.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Dame Margaret, that was one of the models that we have actually been thinking about. Obviously, it worked pretty well with Brexit and it has worked pretty well with Covid.

Without wanting to prejudge the Prime Minister's final decisions, but with the NSC remit as broad as it is—the whole waterfront of national security, which seems to be getting wider, as people rightly understand the importance of economic security, and the increasing scope of the definition of critical national infrastructure—having one committee seeking to implement across the whole of that waterfront would be a deeply formidable task. There are some practical issues about using that kind of model on the NSC, although it is one that we are keen to get the goodness from.

The Chair: Both of those, I would say, come into the category of domestic issues. Is that to do partly with the balance of domestic and international that the NSC discusses?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is a fair point. It is inherently more difficult, I would say, to create implementation programmes for issues to do with foreign affairs. Other countries have a vote. It is difficult to know exactly how quickly you will be able to get things done. You do not have all the levers of state power in your hands because there are other states involved. It would be fair to say that the XO or XS types of model are probably better fitted to domestic subjects, but I am not an expert on that. Mr Gove will have a different view, possibly.

Michael Gove MP: I think that is right. In fact, I know it is right. It is a cliché that the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign have been increasingly eroded over time. To take two issues with which you will be familiar, Chair, when it comes to dealing with climate change or international terrorism, by definition the boundaries between what is domestic policy and what is foreign policy are very porous.

Stephen is absolutely right. If we are dealing, for example, with the important need to marshal all the state's resources to support those who have to shield as a result of Covid, you can get all the devolved Administrations, the DWP and others in the room and crunch through that. If you are dealing with a situation, say, in the Sahel where we are working with our French allies, necessarily a different structure will prevail.

The Chair: Thank you. Sorry, I did not mean to hog that. Lord Laming, please.

Q128 **Lord Laming:** Thank you very much indeed, Chair. Good afternoon, Mr Gove. Some witnesses have put it to us that it would be advantageous if the NSC was put on to a statutory footing, which would help to cement and clarify its function. We would be very grateful if you could say what you think are the advantages or disadvantages of putting the NSC on to a statutory footing.

Michael Gove MP: My own instinct is that it would be a mistake to put anything on to a statutory footing when it comes to the organisation of Cabinet committees, task forces and all the rest of it. Everything from the prospect of judicial review of those arrangements to the amount of time that it would take to dismantle one particular structure and replace it with another inclines me against it. That is just my instinct. I am a hoary old Tory. My view is to give the Executive the power they need in areas of national security to act as they should, and to keep the judges at arm's length.

Q129 **Lord Laming:** Could I follow up on the earlier questions? Who took the decision to establish ministerial implementation groups instead of using COBRA for the Covid-19 response last summer, and why was that decision made?

Michael Gove MP: It was made by the Prime Minister and No. 10, and the reason was simply in order to ensure that we had agile and flexible structures. The ministerial implementation groups—I chaired one of them to do with public service resilience—met sometimes daily, and it would sometimes be the case that, as we were meeting to discuss, for example, the provision of supplies to those who had to shield, the economic and business ministerial implementation group would be meeting at the same time to discuss how we could support businesses to make their venues Covid-friendly, and a similar ministerial implementation group would be meeting to discuss how we could ensure that ventilators got to the front line.

Because of the nature of those structures, the traditional COBRA structure, which is intended to deal, ideally, with one specific challenge, sometimes with concurrent challenges, would not have been entirely appropriate. Of course, when the opportunity comes for the full public inquiry into Covid, an assessment can be made of whether or not that was the most effective and most agile approach.

One thing about the ministerial implementation groups is that they included around the table devolved Administration Ministers, officials and experts on terms of absolute parity, and I think that was a good thing. Of course, that can happen in other meetings and other fora, but for that moment of high intensity during the Covid crisis those groups worked.

Lord Laming: Thank you very much. Why in those circumstances was the NSC not used to lead the response to all those discussions?

Michael Gove MP: Again, it goes back to the question of strategy and operations. Overall, it is the NSC's responsibility to look at the NSRA and the documents that horizon scan and help us to deal with potential challenges and crises.

In the Covid pandemic, we had to adapt operationally as time went on in order to deal with the range of challenges that we faced. Just in domestic policy and reaction, it was one of the biggest challenges that all countries have faced since the Second World War, and that required a sense of

agility and improvisation. Of course, the National Security Council and the National Security Adviser and his team have been reviewing, as we look at future national risk assessments, how we can learn from that experience in order to be ready. It was a challenge of an unprecedented scale.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I was not privy to those conversations, but on your last point, of course, the National Security Council does not have all the relevant departments represented on it. For something like Covid, the department of health is not on it and the environmental department is not on it. There are plenty of voices that you would want to have in the room that would not necessarily be represented on the NSC.

Lord Laming: Is there a formula for which issue goes to which group—the NSC, COBRA or a ministerial implementation group?

Michael Gove MP: There is a broad rule of thumb. The NSC will deal, obviously, with some of the big, strategic, horizon-scanning issues, and it will be the appropriate forum for discussing policy when dealing with a specific crisis. To take the example of the Sahel again, the NSC would meet to discuss, on the one hand, the risks from terrorism on the ground and other factors there, and it would probably also give a broad steer on what we should do to support our allies there. That would be a typical NSC discussion.

A typical COBRA discussion would be a specific event of the kind that the national risk register identifies, where there are relatively familiar and well-rehearsed processes for dealing with it; it could be anything from flooding through to perhaps an outbreak of animal disease, which might have an impact on food farming and public safety. That would be a typical COBRA.

When you require effective co-ordination across lots of departments, where quite a lot of the decision-making requires to be made rapidly and where you need to build strong relationships over a period of weeks in order to make sure that delivery is effective, inter-ministerial groups would be the right forum. In deciding which forum to remit a particular set of discussions or set of decisions to, the Cabinet Secretary would advise the Prime Minister on what was appropriate, and then the PM and his team would decide.

Lord Laming: Allow me one point of clarification, if I may. That answer, in general terms, was very helpful, if I may say so, but you were not ruling the NSC out of handling domestic matters.

Michael Gove MP: No, it goes back to the very good point that the Chair made, which is that sometimes domestic matters and international matters come together. If we were thinking overall about the strategic approach that we might take to Islamist terror, that would be an NSC discussion. If there were, God forbid, any sort of incident on our streets, COBRA would be convened to deal with it.

Lord Laming: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr Graham wants to come in on exactly that kind of point.

Q130 **Richard Graham:** Thank you very much, Chair. Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Sir Stephen, thank you. My question, in a way, draws on that. If we take a specific incident, let us say a Royal Navy vessel navigating disputed waters, are you saying in effect that the risk assessment of such a journey would be made by the NSC, but that, if a specific incident developed from that, it would turn into a COBRA?

Michael Gove MP: This is so far above my pay grade that anything I say is only indicative. The overall strategic decisions about how big the Navy should be, where it should go and what it should do are NSC decisions, and very often they are decisions that will be made by the Prime Minister with the Defence and Foreign Secretaries, with the advice of the NSC. Operationally, the deployment of our assets is a matter for the service chiefs. In a crisis of any particular kind, there are circumstances, I am sure, in which the Prime Minister would convene COBRA, with the relevant officials and ministerial colleagues, to discuss it.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I do not have much to add. The example that you cite is obviously recent. We would not have had an NSC, I think, on the subject of specific routing issues. It would certainly be the case that senior Cabinet Ministers who had knowledge of it, interest and expertise in it, and authority over it, would provide their views to the Prime Minister for final decision. In a sense, it would probably feel a bit like an NSC by correspondence.

The CDL is absolutely right: the moment at which COBRA in such a situation might get convened is if a proper crisis arose from that kind of situation. It certainly would not be convened for the purposes of taking a policy decision.

Richard Graham: Indeed.

The Chair: It was the issue of which committee it is that this committee is interested in. Mr Graham, can we leave it there?

Q131 **Richard Graham:** I want to ask a very brief follow-up, if I may, Chair. Sir Stephen, in a situation where a specific operational issue arose, let us say from vessels travelling through disputed waters, and should there be third parties and other countries involved, would that determine whether a COBRA or an NSC were called?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It would be a factor, but the real test is whether or not some form of crisis emerged. That is the moment at which COBRA is triggered into action.

Richard Graham: Thank you so much.

Q132 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** It is good to see you, Sir Stephen and Michael. I have a brief question, but before I put it to you I want to comment on some of the discussion earlier about the agenda and what is

discussed at the NSC. When the NSC was set up by the Government of which you were a member, Michael, the decision was taken to be fairly open about the agenda, and indeed to give, as were given, briefings about what had been discussed at the meetings. I very much hope that there is not a move backwards towards greater secrecy about what goes on at the NSC. My view is that in an increasingly dangerous world it inspires confidence rather than the reverse for the public to know that the issues of the day are being discussed by government.

The question I want to ask you is quite straightforward. When it comes to the spending review later in the year, will the NSC meet beforehand to agree what the national security priorities are? Will it also meet after the CSR to agree the provisional funding allocations by the Treasury?

Michael Gove MP: There will almost certainly in the run-up to the spending review be a discussion at the NSC that will be intended to inform the spending review. It will also be the case that the Chancellor, who of course sits on the National Security Council, will want briefings from those in charge of each of the arms of our defence, and from the intelligence and security agencies and others, so that he and others in the Treasury can satisfy themselves about the particular challenges that are faced.

Certainly, in my experience, every Chancellor whom I have worked alongside is very careful to ensure that, as well as a forum such as the NSC to develop their understanding, they have proper in-depth conversations with the service chiefs and the heads of the agencies to make sure that they have a proper understanding of the pressures that are applied.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have nothing very much to add. I am the accounting officer for the agencies, and I would expect that we would have the kinds of conversations that the CDL has just talked about.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Thank you. I have a question to ask you later about how priorities are set.

The Chair: Thank you. Mr Ellwood, please.

Q133 **Tobias Ellwood:** Thank you, Chair. Before we go there, you mentioned the spending review, Sir Stephen, and you and I agreed that the threat picture is indeed concerning, given the trajectory of where we are going, and that the world is getting more unstable. Would it be your recommendation that in the next spending review, given where things are going, we need to spend more on our hard and soft power?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The settlement that defence achieved last year is a very good indication of the assessment that the Prime Minister and his Government have made concerning the threat picture and the development of various aspects of national and international security. I imagine that that assessment would carry over into considerations on spending this year. Ultimately, obviously it is a question for debate and broader national prioritisation, and the Prime Minister will no doubt have

his views on that. I do not think that the picture that informed the kinds of decisions that we got to last year for defence is likely to be particularly more favourable now than it was then.

Tobias Ellwood: I am trying to read between the lines there. I think you would certainly like more money, given the threats that we are facing.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That may be true, but it would be fair to say that every department in the whole of government would like more money. Ultimately, the national priority is one for the Prime Minister and the Government to set.

Michael Gove MP: This is something on which you have written eloquently, Tobias. The only thing I would add is that, while it is important in security terms to make sure that the MoD budget is appropriately fixed and secured for the long term, it is also the case that there are aspects of our national security that do not fall within the MoD budget. If we are thinking about cyber threats, for example, as we have discussed, there are things that we should be doing, in everything from our universities to the way in which we tailor apprenticeships, that are designed to ensure that we have a pipeline of talent in a critical area as well. That is not to disagree; it is simply to stress that it is not just the MoD budget that is critical to national security. As I say, you have written more eloquently on this than anyone else.

Tobias Ellwood: Thank you, Michael. I stress that that is why I said hard and soft power rather than the MoD budget, because you are absolutely right to say that the character of conflict has changed immensely from a build-up of military might either side of an Iron Curtain.

I want to focus on who is around the table at any National Security Council. Are there main players? Are there usual suspects, if you like? We would love to see a wiring diagram, please, of who is there on a regular basis. We have requested that and we would be very grateful for it. Who might be called up as specialists, or indeed from other departments, who is not there on a regular basis? Are you able to give an indication as to who is there? I presume the Prime Minister is at every one of them. Would that be right to assume?

Michael Gove MP: Yes. I hope there is a publicly available list of who sits on every Cabinet committee. If there is not, I will immediately ensure that it is updated. From memory, meetings are chaired by the Prime Minister. As you would expect, the Chancellor, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary are there. There is also almost always a law officer there—almost always the Attorney-General. I sit on the NSC as well. Depending on the issues, sometimes the Secretary of State for International Trade or the Business Secretary, for example, will be represented as well.

We almost always have a defence expert, whether that is the CDS or someone else; an intelligence expert, whether that is the Chair of the JIC

or representatives of the agencies; and, depending on the item, other people from the policing, security, diplomatic and defence worlds, so that there is a combination of politicians, those charged with operational defence decisions and diplomatic expertise, and, of course, the secretariat, which supports the NSC.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Absolutely right. There is a list, in fact. It may need to be updated; I do not think it has been updated since 2010, as a matter of fact. We will certainly send that over to you. The only name I would add to those the CDL listed is obviously the Home Secretary—

Michael Gove MP: Yes, of course.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: —who is in charge of many aspects of domestic security and is obviously an indispensable part of the conversation.

Q134 **Tobias Ellwood:** It would be really helpful if you could provide that information.

Turning to fusion doctrine, which touches on what we were talking about or touched on before—the blurring of the lines between hard and soft power—who is responsible for administering and advancing the fusion doctrine?

Michael Gove MP: The fusion doctrine was developed under the previous NSC and under Theresa as Prime Minister. It reflects, precisely as you underlined, the vital importance of recognising that the traditional borders between defence, diplomacy, development and security more broadly have become more porous. Notwithstanding the criticisms levied by some, the amalgamation of DfID and the Foreign Office into the FCDO is an example of the fusion doctrine. More broadly, the integrated review is the fruit of an approach that seeks to ensure that all our assets and interests are viewed in the round.

Tobias Ellwood: If we take a real-life example, such as Mali, to understand our strategy, I am very clear operationally about what our soldiers are trying to achieve out there in providing support, but how does that dovetail with other government departments? How does Whitehall sit together with an overall strategy of what we are trying to achieve in Mali?

Michael Gove MP: Again, it is probably fair to say that this issue has been discussed at the NSC, and we have looked, as you might expect, at a number of its different aspects. To what extent is the UK's national security affected by the potential growth of terrorism in that area? To what extent do we feel that we have an obligation to our French allies in the broader context of Anglo-French military co-operation? To what extent do we as a burden-sharing country, given that we have had assets on the ground there for some time, feel that it is our responsibility, because we are there in the heat and dust, to continue support? To what extent, if we were to take a different approach, would there be a risk to any of those relationships?

All those questions are borne in mind, and, of course, as you would expect, there is always an opportunity cost. If we have brave men and women and assets on the ground in west Africa, by definition they cannot be deployed elsewhere, so is that the right deployment to make? You can judge from the decision that was made that we concluded that it was.

Q135 **Tobias Ellwood:** A last question, if I may, Chair, on another example of where the National Security Council is, I hope, debating things in a wider context. We had the announcement over the weekend that we are going to arrest migrants who make it across the English Channel. The wider picture is that these people are coming from places such as Afghanistan and Mali. Where is the wider strategic thinking? Does it take place at the National Security Council, to recognise that that is not necessarily the best solution in dealing with the source of the problem?

Michael Gove MP: That is absolutely a live discussion. Again, the point has been made by every Prime Minister from Tony Blair onwards, if not before, that the security and integrity of the UK's own borders and the impact on our borders of migration and asylum seeking is a consequence of security elsewhere. We know from the number of desperate people on our shores and elsewhere that conflict, whether in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan, is one of the principal drivers of the migration that is such a cause of public concern overall.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: If I may, Chair, I will add a subsidiary answer to Mr Ellwood's penultimate question. The Cabinet Office is quintessentially the official organ for making sure that co-ordination of differing policy perspectives is accommodated and integrated sensibly. The National Security Secretariat certainly aims to bring together different perspectives on, for instance, the deployment to Mali to be able to make sure that Ministers have fully reflected for them the various perspectives that are held around Whitehall when it comes to taking such decisions.

The fusion doctrine, in my mind, to a certain extent was recognition of the points that were made earlier by members of the committee, and indeed by CDL, which is that everything is so incredibly interlinked in the 21st century that it is very difficult to untangle, and we will be successful as a nation if we can use all our assets and levers more in concert than in disharmony. That is really a job for the centre to achieve. It brings its own tensions, because, if you have absolutely everybody in the room who has any kind of interest in a particular subject, sometimes it is rather difficult to get clarity in the discussion and clarity of decision.

That is one of the tensions that we are seeking to address in the review we are doing at the moment. Looking through some of the transcripts of your previous witnesses, I know it has been a subject that has come up a couple of times. It is a Cabinet Office problem, but we are seeking to solve it.

The Chair: Could you say briefly but practically, Sir Stephen, what will make the difference in getting that kind of integration between the

integrated review and the fusion doctrine, because they both seem to say basically the same thing? What practical difference do you expect?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I think they say practically the same thing in many respects. We have a conceptual understanding that everybody now agrees with, which is that Covid is an economic problem, a health problem and a security problem. There are many other examples of where the boundaries have been blurred to the extent that we have to have conversations with many other partners around government to be able to get the right answer.

To my mind, there are two things that need to happen to make sure that it is manageable. One is that we need a sufficiently strong, robust and well-managed centre to be able to hold the strings in its hands, not to step on departmental toes, because that is quite wrong, but to be able to make sure that the right conversations are happening at the right time with the right people with the right materials. That is not to prejudge the conclusions, but we need a centre that is capable of making sure that the orchestration of that exercise is properly done.

As importantly, we need to foster a culture where officials, and sometimes Ministers, are happy to engage in that kind of conversation, recognising that often the answer no longer lives entirely in one department. There is a cultural aspect as well.

Michael Gove MP: I think that is right. The fusion doctrine was a set of principles about how we should organise ourselves in order to reflect the changing security landscape, and the integrated review is the fruit of that, as it were. The fusion doctrine is the belief that you should have every part of the orchestra playing together, and the integrated review is the symphony that we have come up with.

The Chair: Thank you for that extremely helpful description.

Q136 **Lord King of Bridgwater:** Mr Gove, you talked about the NSC being overwhelmingly foreign affairs and defence, but neither of you suggested that the Health Secretary could be a member. Considering the crisis that we have over Covid, did I misunderstand that?

Michael Gove MP: The Health Secretary is not a permanent member of the NSC, but Ministers are often invited to attend the NSC because of the additional expertise that they bring.

I should have mentioned earlier that the full membership of the NSC is published on GOV.UK and is currently up to date. It includes the Ministers we mentioned earlier. Of course, sometimes the Health Secretary and others will be invited, as appropriate.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Looking at the situation at the moment, I think he is likely to be there for a while.

Sir Stephen, your letter last week said that there would be stronger ministerial oversight of implementation when decisions are taken. Which

Minister will that be?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It will be a range of Ministers, depending on the subject and implementation plan in mind. Clearly, the Chancellor will be particularly engaged in economic security. The Foreign Secretary will clearly be very heavily engaged in international affairs, the Defence Secretary likewise. Some of the more obvious taxonomies you can imagine will be followed fairly straightforwardly.

Michael Gove MP: I can say from my own limited experience that the current Defence Secretary pays incredibly close attention—he does not seek to second-guess the CDS and the Chiefs of Staff—to the deployment of our forces and to the procurement decisions that are being made. Similarly, the current Foreign Secretary pays incredibly close attention to the nature of diplomatic engagement and the interaction between that and development spend.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Is there not another point that some of the decisions you take will mean the cross-departmental interaction of a number of different departments? What worries me is whether you have somebody who has built up expertise and experience in dealing with these sorts of problems so that there is a measure of continuity.

I have tried to get the message through to Sir Stephen. Are we drawing enough on past experience? David Cameron came and gave evidence. A number of people, different Prime Ministers, have had to be involved in the National Security Council. Are we drawing on their past experience and on the work of National Security Advisers? Sir Stephen, I imagine you have had a chance to talk to a number of your predecessors, to draw on their experience of the challenges they faced.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I absolutely have. I have been in regular contact with my predecessors and a range of other individuals—deputy National Security Advisers and so on. This is an exceptionally complex landscape. I am far from complacent that I have all the answers either on my desk or in my team. There is a very great range of people who can add very significant value.

Lord King of Bridgwater: David Cameron said at our previous meeting, when we asked him, that he would be more than happy to make any contribution he could, because some of these problems are the same problems coming round again.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes.

Lord King of Bridgwater: Thank you very much.

Q137 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** This question relates to some of the changes that were made to the way the integrated review was put forward. In a previous answer, when you were asked about having removed the tiering and the risk-based approach you said that it perhaps rendered things more static and reactive than is desirable. That is certainly an arguable point, but it provided a very clear guide as to where the priorities lay,

where the urgent issues lay and where the money ought, without doubt, to be going.

In the absence of any stated prioritisation, how will you establish the priorities and therefore the money allocation, other than, I hope, ministerial combat between departments? Where is the assessing of one set of issues against another for the question of where the money goes? Michael, this is not an unfamiliar issue, but the committee would be grateful for a really well thought out answer, because it is crucial.

Michael Gove MP: You are absolutely right. In the process of concluding the integrated review, some significant decisions, for example on the future of the independent nuclear deterrent, were taken in that context. Some work, as the committee pointed out earlier, has been remitted to Sir Stephen as part of the work of making sure that the National Security Council serves the overall aims of the integrated review as effectively as possible.

Within that, we are considering, for example—how best to put this?—the right way of making sure that, in advance of the Covid inquiry, we learn lessons from those events so that the overall set of risks in the NSRA is appropriately judged and appropriately reviewed. I know that Sir Stephen and others are talking to outsiders, so that we have a robust document, a public version of which can be shared, that we can use in order to allocate resource, ministerial time and official attention to risks.

One of the key things, as this committee has pointed out, is that cyber risk has grown significantly in the last 10 years. Without prejudging Sir Stephen's conclusions, our own internal NSRA will reinforce what we are already doing in investing more time, care and thought in cybersecurity.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes, I would like to reassure the committee that we have not jettisoned the risk assessment, and a sense of which risks are more critical, more catastrophic and more likely, that you would expect us to do.

When it comes to resource allocation, however, coming out of the integrated review not only do we have greater appreciation, which is reflected in the integrated review, of opportunity, or areas where we wish to be more active for a reason that is not immediately associated with risk, but we have a better sense of the longer-term trends.

Obviously, there is a great deal of balancing and complicated assessment and discussion to be able to get the right balance between those aspects, but it is a proper, methodologically robust process. In fact, we are looking at the methodology of the NSRA at the moment. I assure you that we are seeking to make the right prioritisation resource decisions against that full set of criteria.

Baroness Neville-Jones: I have a couple of quick supplementaries. I have no doubt, Sir Stephen, that you will be putting a paper to Ministers on this very subject, with recommendations. Michael, will you and your colleagues look at that and discuss it together so that you take ministerial

responsibility for the way in which you spend the money and, indeed, devote ministerial time to where the focus of attention is?

Given the way in which the integrated review brings international policy but also builds what are seen as national opportunities for the UK—many of which will be domestically based, such as our work on technology—will you integrate some of that so that, where national security issues are concerned, you get a picture of integrated funding across what is an international aspect and what is a domestic aspect, which are enablers of each other? It seems to me a rather different situation from the kind of budgeting that there has been previously, because this is a much broader strategy that goes much more deeply into the national destiny than previous reviews.

Michael Gove MP: I absolutely agree. I will try briefly to refer to two areas. The first is space. The Government have set up the National Space Council. The membership overlaps the National Security Council. The purpose of that is to recognise that there are both economic opportunities and security challenges in space, and to make sure that the decisions that we take are properly integrated into our desire to become, if you will forgive the phrase, a science and technology superpower, with an awareness of our particular areas of existing expertise.

Questions such as what impact low earth-orbiting satellites will have on our security, and what impact they will have on future scientific investment, are one set of discussions where Ministers are involved precisely in assessing risks and opportunities. Another is in the area of cyber, because, again, as the example of Israel shows, countries that take and have to take cybersecurity incredibly seriously are also responsible for creating a talent pipeline that creates other economic opportunities. It is precisely that interplay between security and prosperity that needs to be resolved and where priorities need to be agreed between Ministers. That is exactly what the NSC and other Cabinet committees exist to do.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: To build on the cyber example, you could actually adduce the National Cyber Force in this regard as well. Clearly, if you was thinking purely about risk, you would probably end up stopping at the National Cyber Security Centre. Of course, the building up of the National Cyber Force tells you that we are not thinking purely about risk; we are also thinking about deterrents and other factors. Again, the decision to make a very substantial investment in that national capability is one that Ministers were very clearly sighted on and took in full knowledge of where it fitted into that particular ecosystem.

Baroness Neville-Jones: I see. It sounds very much like a building-block approach.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It is not dissimilar. Sometimes, that incremental building-block approach is right, inevitable and unavoidable. Sometimes, we can look more broadly across the piece, and take the up

arrows with the down arrows. It is a complicated process. I am not pretending that it is not.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Thank you. I have a slightly clearer picture. I hope there will be serious attention at ministerial level to make sure that when you have the overall allocation it really reflects the priorities of the nation.

The Chair: It has been a preoccupation of this committee from the very beginning that discussions about policy and security requirements should precede discussions about allocation, rather than taking place after the allocation has already been made.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Yes.

The Chair: I realise that we are trespassing on your generosity, Mr Gove. Could you take a question about devolution from Lady Henig?

Michael Gove MP: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Q138 **Baroness Henig:** Thank you. Good afternoon. I want to raise the issue of the current machinery in relation to devolved government and regional structures. Michael Gove, the pandemic required a complex response, which cut across devolved policy areas such as health, transport and policing. Do any of the current dividing lines between devolved and reserved matters need to be reviewed in order to deliver better resilience in the future? Resilience is obviously one of the main issues the Government are looking at.

Michael Gove MP: It is a really good question. Overall, notwithstanding the fact that at different times different parts of the UK have had different policies on social distancing and other non-pharmaceutical interventions, on the whole things have worked well. Across the UK, we co-ordinated the rollout of the vaccination programme. Across the UK, we took a view on how we could use our assets abroad to get the PPE we needed from the countries that were producing it. Even though, of course, some mistakes were made, for the most part the day-to-day workings of the UK Government and the devolved Administrations were very pragmatic. I thank all the devolved Administration Ministers for approaching things in a very realistic way.

To take a case in point, and this is a genuinely open question, if we think about public health overall, you can divide public health into prevention and protection. When it comes to public health prevention—how many fruit and vegetables you should eat a day, whether or not you ban tobacco smoking in certain areas, and so on—that is quintessentially the responsibility of devolved Administrations, absolutely. The Chief Medical Officer and the Health Minister in Northern Ireland might take a different view from Wales and so on. That is devolution.

On one aspect of health protection, which is how, when you are dealing with a pandemic, you ensure that your borders are secure, at a UK-wide or at a federal level you need to make sure that you have the machinery necessary for people to act quickly and together. I make no criticism of the devolved Administrations, because we were able to act quickly and together. Wiser heads than mine can look properly at that division of responsibilities and assess whether or not the current machinery means that, when it comes to protection, we have exactly what we require.

Q139 Baroness Henig: Could I ask the National Security Adviser what options the NSC review has considered for bringing the devolved Governments more formally into the UK national security machinery?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It has been really about more consultation than occasionally we do. The question you pose is a really good one. There are some fault lines. Getting the right voices in the right order in the right room is not straightforward. We have a mix in this area, as the CDL says, of devolved responsibilities and instruments and, rightly, national ones. Getting that right is not straightforward. It is about conversations as much as anything else.

Michael Gove MP: In the run-up to the preparation of the integrated review, I chaired a couple of meetings with devolved Administration Ministers so that we could make sure that we had a proper understanding of their concerns. Subsequently, we had a brief conversation and we are scheduling more in more detail, particularly about resilience, where the devolved competences are real and significant, and their expertise can help and inform us overall.

Without being too boring, the review of intergovernmental relations will, I hope, conclude soon, and that will ensure that there is a regular forum where, even though defence, diplomacy and development are reserved competences, there will be an opportunity for devolved Administration Ministers and officials to discuss those with UK Government Ministers so that we are fully aware of their views on those questions.

I hope you will forgive me one final thing. It would be very damaging to resilience and security overall if, by some mischance in the future, there were to be a majority for secession in any part of the United Kingdom. The impact on our security would be devastating. I am sure this committee is all too well aware of those arguments.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr Gove. This committee hearing has been notable for various people taking advantage of the opportunity to raise issues that do not ordinarily seem to be wholly on our agenda.

Thank you very much indeed for your generosity and your time. I am not asking you to commit to a date, but can you give me a broad expectation as to when you think the first annual report on the integrated review may come before Parliament? You probably have something in mind—this half of the year or that half of the year, or whatever.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: We would try to do that before recess next year, to be honest. I think that would be the right kind of timing.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is helpful to know. Again, thank you both very much for coming. Thank you in particular for your extra time. We will, I am afraid, still have to write to you with various bits and pieces that we wanted to raise. On behalf of the whole committee, it is very much appreciated.