

International Relations and Defence Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: With the Secretary of State for Defence

Wednesday 27 October 2021

3 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Baroness Blackstone; Lord Boateng; Lord Campbell of Pittenweem; Baroness Fall; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Stirrup; Lord Teverson.

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 - 27

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence, Ministry of Defence.

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Examination of witness

Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP.

Q1 **The Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this meeting of the House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence. Today it is our pleasure to have with us for two hours the Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP. Thank you very much for being so generous with your time today.

Mr Ben Wallace: My pleasure.

The Chair: I hope that is the same by the end of the experience. Of course, our Members are extremely involved in all of the issues that are pertinent to the MoD, but until Defence came into our title officially last year it was more difficult for us to express that to the outside world. Your presence here today gives us that opportunity so to do.

As with all Select Committees the event itself is broadcast, transcribed and on the record. May I remind members of the committee that, as always, if we have a relevant interest we should declare that before asking our questions? We have 10 formal questions and my colleagues will ask supplementaries to those as we go through. At the end, Secretary of State, I propose to open the floor to my colleagues, who will ask questions that may well be fair more wide-ranging.

As ever on these occasions I will ask the first question before turning to Baroness Blackstone for the second question.

Secretary of State, earlier this year we published our report of the UK-Afghanistan relationship, which called for closer dialogue with the US over their plans to withdraw from Afghanistan. Given the very difficult experiences this summer, how much discussion did you have with your American counterpart before the US announcement was made on withdrawal from Afghanistan, and how do you assess that decision has affected broader UK-US defence relations?

Before I invite you to answer, I know I can speak on behalf of all my colleagues in paying tribute to the very brave people who acted in the forces on Operation Pitting. We are all immensely grateful to them.

Mr Ben Wallace: Thank you for inviting me. I am delighted that it is in the title, and my Ministers and I are happy to engage with noble Lords.

First, on your report, you were about the only people who scrutinised the Doha agreement and came to pretty much the conclusion that I did, which was that it pretty much removed impediments that the Taliban faced for military success. We, as the coalition forces, agreed to effectively lift off some of our capabilities that had held them back: the release of the 5,000 prisoners; the clear public signalling that the US negotiated with the Taliban but not in public—the Government of Afghanistan, I think, undermined the Afghan Government to the world; and, at the same time, within 135 days, an immediate troop dividend of

withdrawal. That was attached with some conditions. In the end, the conditions in the end were lifted and the rest is, sadly, history.

In the formation of that deal I was not consulted by the United States at all. That deal was announced in, I think, February or March 2020. We had a number of discussions on a number of occasions with our counterparts and others about the speed of the drawdown, but it was a politically driven timetable at the time in the United States and, we have to be really honest, we were not in control of that situation. We could make our representations, but the nature of the US framework status as the main contributor to NATO in Afghanistan meant that once it had made its decisions our space to manoeuvre was limited. I have spoken to my US counterpart on and off, often nearly every month; I have a list of the dates on which I have spoken to them, but it is quite regularly. They then had a change of Administration, and in those meetings—obviously they are confidential or secret—I certainly express my views freely, if I take a view. That is the nature of our relationship with our allies.

Q2 The Chair: How would you describe that relationship now, against the background of rising concerns about Russia and the non-state actors that seem to act on its behalf and the competition from China for a place on the world stage?

Mr Ben Wallace: The relations are very good. I am just one tiny part of the US strength and special relationship. There have been decades of corporate knowledge together, of experience. I have British officers as deputy commanders in US headquarters. We have a very long history underpinned by things like the Five Eyes; intelligence is a great convenor of people's relationships, and it is a trust.

Our relationship did not take a hiccup in any way at all—I think our relationship is still as strong, as it is—but the scale of China rising is such that the US knows that it needs international partners more than ever. We are not dealing in one sense with a Russia with an economy half the size of the United Kingdom's, with malign activity, which nevertheless is something we should worry about, and with potent force towards Britain and her allies should it wish to use it. Fundamentally, however, if the US wants to challenge China or encourage it to change its behaviour, it knows that it will have to do that in a coalition one way or another.

That increases the US's desire to work with us and allies—we saw the recent AUKUS announcement in Australia—and it is a very major problem set for America. China will have or has—I do not know where we are on the cusp of that yet—a bigger military force than the United States, and its economy has not yet topped that of the United States but the trajectories show that it will. The American psyche suddenly has on the world stage a bigger power, a bigger military power, which is understandably being reflected in their desire to be even more collaborative with many new partners, not just old partners like us.

Q3 The Chair: Those were the questions relating to our relationship with the US as a response to the events in Afghanistan. Staying with Afghanistan,

I have a question about our relations with Pakistan. I appreciate that you answered these questions in part when you appeared before the Defence Committee in the House of Commons. We of course had our own inquiry on Afghanistan, as we mentioned, and we concluded that Pakistan is the most important external actor in Afghanistan.

Considering that, what is your assessment of the strength of UK-Pakistan defence relationships post the Taliban storming in and taking over Kabul this summer? I appreciate that yesterday you said, "We engage strongly with Pakistan". I come down to earth: what does that actually mean?

Mr Ben Wallace: First, our relationship with Pakistan is not new. It is very deep and very long in the tooth, and that means that we have an enduring relationship at levels such as chief of the defence staff to chief of the defence staff. We have enduring political relationships with our counterparts. You can think of the cultural ties between Pakistan and parts of Lancashire and West Yorkshire, which are very strong. Our relationship is a pretty realistic relationship. The Prime Minister speaks to the Prime Minister of Pakistan. I cannot tell you exactly when the last Chief of the Defence Staff spoke to his counterpart, but he was regularly in discussions in the lead-up to the withdrawal from Afghanistan and, as you quoted from what I said yesterday, it is very clear that Pakistan is one of the major influences, if not the major relationship, in that region when it comes to relationships with the Taliban, the Haqqani network and, indeed, Afghanistan. The United Kingdom has to maintain that relationship as well as a very strong and historical relationship with India.

It has not changed, it has not deteriorated, it will still be very important. Some practical steps will no longer be there. We no longer run the logistics route through Pakistan to support our troops in Afghanistan because there are no troops, but Pakistan will be a key player, as will countries such as Qatar that are not neighbours but are nevertheless influential, in bringing the Taliban to book if they seek to go back to the old ways and allow al-Qaeda to settle. Pakistan will be very influential in trying to persuade the Taliban not to do that, and it will not be in the Taliban's interest either.

It is definitely in our interest to continue to be friends, both culturally and economically but also in a political dimension, with Pakistan. We do that every day through our military relationships in defence. We also do it in our political relationship. That has not changed. I do not think there is any significant shift.

The Chair: Thank you, Secretary of State. As you will appreciate, we always do a follow-up to our initial report and the concern we have had is about the Haqqani network, the Taliban's position with them—and al-Qaeda now part of the governance of Afghanistan—will continue. No doubt we will pick it up with your department again in the future. Thank you for those responses and I turn to Baroness Blackstone.

Q4 **Baroness Blackstone:** I should perhaps declare an interest as the former joint chair of the Franco-British Council. What do you think the

impact of the AUKUS announcement on the UK-French defence relationship has been? What was the rationale behind not including France in the agreement, especially considering its military potential and its interests in the Indo-Pacific, which are very closely aligned with our own?

Mr Ben Wallace: My relationship with my French counterpart is very good and very close. My German counterpart, my French counterpart and I have probably the closest relationship among my defence counterparts, complemented by the United States, which is also a close relationship.

The simple reality is that we need each other. Separate from the disappointment of France when it comes to the submarine deal, fundamentally we would both be shooting ourselves in the foot if we were to translate that row into solid actions, because we need each other in Africa, we need each other as a similar-sized force in Europe and NATO, we need each other because we share technology developments in things such as complex weapons. We simply need each other because of a range of threats. We share the same threat from Syria. ISIS targets us and mainland France, and it targets French and British individuals. We have a shared vulnerability when it comes to the likes of Russian cyber in our open society.

I spoke to Florence Parly last week at NATO and, yes, they are disappointed and there has been lots of language in the media. But fundamentally, if I refer to the professionals, the soldiery, on both sides, people have already moved on, effectively. I think we will get to a place where we are back to full firing on all cylinders. I do not think my relationship with Florence Parly is broken at all, and vice versa. It is in neither of our interests.

I have a squadron of Chinooks supporting the French effort in Mali as we speak. We are supporting Mali also through the UN deployment in MINUSMA. That part of west Africa is very French, it has a very French interest. But we are there to support them in solidarity. I do not think we should read too much beyond the sacré bleu, if I may say. I think we have heard some statements.

On AUKUS, we have to recognise two things. First, the Australians took a decision; they wanted a strategic step change in their capability. They had been in a contract for a diesel/electric submarine, which can stay submerged if it stays very still for a few days or weeks, but it cannot do long-range patrols undetected under the water for months at a time. Therefore, it could not hold at distance any threat to Australia. Australia has clearly taken the view that if you want to disrupt your adversaries in the region, if that is where you see them, you need to be able to hold them at distance or at risk, so it wanted a submarine that was able to stay submerged for very considerable periods of time, which means a nuclear-propelled submarine.

The nature of the secrets involved in nuclear propulsion, especially if you are growing it from scratch, and the level of trust that is required mean

that it was inevitable that it would lead to the Five Eyes partners. Such is our relationship with the United States on our nuclear submarine propulsion that you do not get one without the other. We have been jointly at this the propulsion system since the late 1950s/early 1960s. The Australians could not pick up the phone and go to the Americans unilaterally, because effectively some of the intellectual property and the designs are shared and vice versa. We did not go behind the backs of the French to solicit this. The Australians made a strategic decision. They are perfectly free to do so if they wish to make a step change, so they did that.

Then you get into the fact that the Five Eyes, which goes back to the late 1940s when it started to develop, does not include France. The nature of blended intelligence means that everyone has a veto on who shares it. I cannot just give my Five Eyes intelligence to the French, or the Germans or anyone else, because the ownership of that may be one of the other partners. That is just where we were with it.

There is a cultural difference, which is that our industries are private. Most of our companies are private, but many of the French industries are state industries. Another European nation suggested something to me. When a British company does not win a contract in India, I do not think that the Indians have rejected Britain. When we did not win the Typhoon order in India, we did not think that India had rejected the nation because of Typhoon.

My observation, and it is a personal observation, is that when you reject a French product from a nationalised industry, the French feel that is rejecting France. They take it more personally than, in a sense, we do. That is a different view. You often hear them refer to us as Anglo-Saxons—as in, that is how we do business. That is my reflection of some the personal disappointment: “You aren’t just rejecting our submarine, you’re rejecting France”. I do not think that is the case. I think they just wanted a different capability. It was not a personal thing.

Q5 **Baroness Blackstone:** Thank you very much. I am sure you are right that the French saw it as a rejection of France. What are you doing over and above all the things that you have described, which I fully understand because this is what I have observed in my period of working for the Franco-British Council, to publicly restore face in the UK as far as the French are concerned? For example, are you or your department encouraging the rearrangement of the annual conference that takes place between France—

Mr Ben Wallace: The French cancelled my meeting.

Baroness Blackstone: I know they cancelled it.

Mr Ben Wallace: You will have to ask them. I had a meeting last week. It was perfectly good-natured. Again, I have had a relationship with Florence for two years. Our actions speak for themselves. Our actions right now are that we have our squadrons in Mali. It is a significant

commitment to put Chinook helicopters into Mali, which is not our normal operating base, to support the French. We are working together on an agreement on the next generation of complex weapons, and we hope to sign that soon. We are ready to sign and we are helping France with any queries that it has, so you will see further work on a joint industrial base. We worked together even on the EFP, the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup deployment in Estonia; you will see a French platoon alongside us. So our actions speak for themselves.

I have said publicly what I have just said to you: "Don't take this personally. We didn't solicit it, but it is a perfectly legitimate thing for Australia to change its mind on a strategic capability that it wants to do". I have talked people both publicly and privately about why it was inevitable that it would end up in a Five Eyes choice: because of the sensitivity of the nuclear technology that Australia wishes to have. But the schism is not as deep as the media would like to suggest. It is still professional. Ultimately we both have the same need, which is to defend our country and our citizens, and we both know that that is the real, grown-up game, and that is the game we are in.

Q6 Lord Boateng: Secretary of State, Britain has a shared interest with the French in west Africa. Our interest in Britain predates that of the French, of course. I would argue, would I not, that it is based on very strong ties of friendship and amity over very many years? When giving an update to the House of Commons on the work of the French and British forces in Mali on 20 September, you said that you are "concerned" about the Russian mercenary group Wagner, which is now appearing in many parts of west Africa. I would say that concern is well justified. What is your assessment of the situation now, a month later, and what are the Government's plans to contain or to respond to Russia's growing military presence in west Africa?

Mr Ben Wallace: The challenge for all of us is that when we go to help or support countries, we have, quite rightly, a standard of values. In a sense, the social contract that we have with them is, "You can't engage in torture and corruption and everything else". As you know, we quite rightly come with those expectations. Unfortunately, you see countries that are less fussy. The Wagner group, allegedly nothing to do with the Russian Government, is remarkably well equipped for a mercenary group. Certainly in Libya it had anti-aircraft missiles. I do not know any other mercenary groups that can rustle up Russian-made kit like that. They seem to appear without any strings attached and make an offer that you cannot refuse. They also have a political wing that helps to advise people on how to win elections, which I suspect also does not conform to European standards of political consultancy.

That is a temptation for some countries and it is deeply worrying. It is now quite prominent in central Africa. We see it in the Central African Republic, coming out of Libya, and we should all be concerned because it is also a direction of travel: our adversaries use proxies. You can call them mercenaries. You could say that Iran's relationship with the Houthi is a proxy relationship. Wagner is a mercenary group that has a strong

relationship with the Kremlin—I think we can pretty much say that—and we should be very worried. The French have warned the Malian Government that their contribution in Mali is not without condition. The French are collecting, effectively, European signatures to make it very clear to the Malian Government.

This is the quandary that we all have: do we exit the field, and therefore let Wagner go from one country to another to another because we are not even in the game, or do we stay and at least try to build resilience against the terrorist threat? It is not an easy question, because if we all pulled out of Mali tomorrow, I can guess very quickly who would replace us. Therefore, Russia and other countries that use proxies would know that all they need to do is turn up with a proxy and we would exit the field, and very quickly they would grow their influence. That is a worry.

We are examining measures to look at tackling these mercenary groups. They are mercenary groups, so they do not have the same protection of the Geneva conventions or respect for foreign forces. It makes them more vulnerable. They are dependent on money. Most of them are paid mercenaries and there are definitely methods that we should look at. It is a concern. My European allies also agree that it is a concern, and we will be taking steps to see what we can do to limit the use of mercenaries. It is not just Wagner; there are something like 200 named Russian so-called mercenary groups. It might be Wagner today, it might be called something else tomorrow. We should worry. They have cropped up all over Africa. The difficulty goes right to the heart of corruption and my frustration in Mali.

There was the Algeria agreement, which was about nation building. It was not just about a military solution to terrorism but about dealing with poverty, counter-radicalisation and anti-corruption, and I have felt that the UN has not stepped up to that part of the bargain, which is why we see the terrorist and security threat continue to decline or move around the country. It is not decreasing.

Then you have corrupt Governments whose populations either say, "This terrorist organisation might not be very nice, but, you know what, it's not corrupt", or the leaders say, "We'll just go with the biggest proxy going that is as corrupt as I am". That is the challenge that we have.

Africa is really important. The United States published an interim national security strategy. It was about 60-odd pages long and Africa appeared on only one page. When we get into competition with state powers and terrorism, you do not have to go to the Pacific to compete with China, you only have to go to Africa. You do not have to go to Russia to compete with Russia, you only have to go to Africa. A lot of these global challenges are being played out in Africa.

The spread of radicalisation is very quick at the moment. Mozambique, just boom, ISIS in Mozambique. Al-Shabaab is probably the most active al-Qaeda affiliate. It is strong, it is well funded, it is active. It is probably a bit inspired now after what it has seen in Afghanistan. The spread of

radicalisation, because of dysfunctional Governments not being able to stand in the way of it, or large spaces that are ungoverned, should really worry us.

Q7 Lord Boateng: Thank you, Secretary of State. Your engagement with Africa is most reassuring. There is of course, and you have touched on it, another potential adversary and certain competitor at work in Africa, and that is China. China now has a naval base in Djibouti. The People's Liberation Army is the fastest growing non-African material presence in Africa. One has concern, based on past experience, frankly, Secretary of State. When I was High Commissioner in South Africa, I recall that there was no support from DfID as was, working with the MoD to ensure that the MoD was enabled to be present diplomatically and in peacekeeping as it might have been. Indeed, in many posts in Africa the military attaché was downgraded, essentially in order to save a few tens of thousands of pounds. That had a hugely damaging effect on the relationship between the British military and security forces and those on the ground in Africa, because, as you know very well, status matters.

What assurance can you give us that the new FCDO is working in a more collaborative way with the MoD and that we are seeing in this current spending round the MoD resourced in order to counter Chinese competition and engagement with Africa?

Mr Ben Wallace: My colleagues have been going through the desperate negotiations with the Treasury. You will know from the Treasury yourself what it is like. I had my settlement last year, which has been very good for us to get on and deliver. In that is a spending line that we are already delivering, which is a growth in our defence attaché network. Defence diplomacy matters in sub-threshold work, in holding up and building the resilience of allies, so we are increasing the number of our defence attachés. We are changing the curriculum to make them better trained. I have instructed that we have a proper career structure for them so that people become experts and are not just filling in jobs towards the end of their careers.

I think that we should embrace defence diplomacy properly and give it a proper career path, so that if someone chooses to become an expert in the Middle East they start as maybe a major, they do a post, it comes with an attachment to the FCDO, they learn Arabic. By the time they get into a senior or big embassy or post, they are knowledgeable, they are deep experts in the region, and we should recognise the value that can bring to preventing conflicts and to helping commercially, because they also have a function in aerospace, in equipment, and in exports. They also have a space in intelligence sharing with those host nations. In the defence Command Paper 2021, I made it very clear that alongside defence engagement comes intelligence sharing. That matters. That helps. We have capabilities that some of those countries do not have, but just a bit of intelligence could help them to protect themselves.

A large part of my defence Command Paper is about improving that. Plus, we are going to make sure that we improve the network of secure

communications. We have too many, as you say, not invested in. I have been very explicit that we are going to put more into Kenya. We have just signed the new defence agreement with the Kenyan Government and we are waiting for it to be ratified. I see Monica Juma, my defence counterpart—she has just changed jobs—three or four times a year. I visited Kenya I think twice as Defence Secretary, or maybe once and once as Security Minister. They are very important partners, so we are leaning into that—better defence network, better-trained defence attachés, better resourced. That was part of the settlement.

On the FCDO, I take the lesson from the Security Minister's job that CSSF was brilliant funding; it worked. I remember going down to Mombasa to see counter-radicalisation Prevent training to the Muslim community in Mombasa. It was brilliantly administered. I was very impressed by a Muslim woman inspector in the Kenyan police. It was just after two Kenyan girls had got themselves killed attacking a police station. It made a difference. That was a type of good security, good work.

The good news is that I get on incredibly well with Liz Truss. We work very well collaboratively. I saw her yesterday for a formal bilateral and we work truly collaboratively in that space. She understands the importance of defence diplomacy. Sometimes in some countries it is the best vector of entry into a country. They are more interested in that than they are in some of the other stuff. I would say that I am optimistic. We are putting the money in the right place.

Finally, in the military capability space, we are establishing four ranger battalions. They are pretty much modelled on the US Green Beret battalions. Do not ask me why we want to confuse ourselves, but that is what we are going to call them. At the moment, we have training teams. In Somalia, for example, we will train the army, but we do not go out of the gate with them. We train them in the barracks and then they are on their own. Often that does not have great consequences.

Part of my job as Defence Minister is to provide the options. If, politically, we want not just to train them but to accompany them or enable them—that is still not necessarily fighting with them but taking them to the door, or lifting them in a helicopter to the border, or giving them overhead ISR so that they can take on al-Shabaab, for example from Kenya—we should be prepared to do that. That, in my view, is proper partnering. That is force-multiplying the effect.

Those ranger battalions are specifically designed to do that. They will have skills in languages, they will have not quite Special Forces skills but special operations skills, and they will take it to the next step. That will give us good influence, but it will also really help people and countries not to slide into conflict, because the best way to avoid Afghanistans is to prevent conflict happening, and actually it is the best value for money.

So, all round, my defence Command Paper delivers, I think, good things for Africa. We cannot be everywhere—that is one of the challenges, as

you know—but if we target it in the right place, I think we can make a difference.

Q8 Lord Teverson: Secretary of State, first, could I say that from a personal point of view that I thought you showed a great deal of integrity during the time of the Afghanistan withdrawal, perhaps rather more than some of your government colleagues?

We come back to Russia. Next week, Russia's mission to NATO comes to an end. Given the recent relationship, where does that go now, and will something be lost, or had that relationship already soured so much that it will not make a great deal of difference? More generally, how do you see the UK-Russian Federation relationship into the future?

Mr Ben Wallace: We are at the place where Russia has asked the NATO office in Moscow to close. Some Russians were expelled but not all of them, and I think they took that opportunity to leave NATO. It is no secret that the Russian relationship with large parts of Europe is not in a good place. We in the United Kingdom have been clear to call on them to stop their malign activity. We do not see much stopping of that. Most recently, you could look at the Belarus issues—the support for the hijacking of a European passenger aeroplane, the Ryanair plane that was going from Greece to Estonia, which they diverted to Belarus to arrest the journalist. There was no condemnation by Russia of that behaviour. We still see that, and what is going on is deeply worrying.

NATO is obviously preparing reforms to its defence structures under the DDA. This defence, deterrent and assurance piece of work is an excellent piece of work that gives birth to two major plans, one for war and conflict and one for peacetime resilience, and it is the first real modernisation of NATO planning for decades.

Russia is not in an easy place. However, I wish it would reverse that and allow a NATO office in Russia, because we need to talk. What we do not want is miscalculation. We need people to talk with the Russians and vice-versa. We need to at least engage with each other to understand. We should engage within each other in a co-ordinated manner; I do not think unilaterally going off one way or the other works. Fundamentally, we and our European allies and the United States need to engage with Russia in a way that indicates that there is a better relationship to play for but at the same time that malign activity needs to stop.

Q9 Lord Teverson: One of the things that greatly saddens me is that the Russian Federation should be a great European and central Asian power, but effectively in international relationships it has become a rogue state. We see that, as you say, in Moldova, in Ukraine and internally here with the Salisbury situation. Trying to be slightly optimistic, is there any way back at all while Crimea is still occupied—that is probably quite popular with the Russian population, unfortunately—while we see the cyber tactics and everything else, and indeed while Putin is still there?

Mr Ben Wallace: There should always be a way back for people. We should constantly signal that there should be a way back. It is hard at the

moment, as you say, with Russian forces in Crimea and what goes on in the Donbass with the grey zone and the hybrid. They could hand over the GIU officers, and we named a third. I remember on a number of occasions as Security Minister going down to the house to see the investigation and seeing the bottle with the Novichok in it, which had just been discarded. The Novichok was so pure and of such a scale that, if it had been administered differently, it could have killed thousands of people. It was an extraordinary thing to do on our streets. I was quite close to it in a sense, but I find it unbelievable. They did not choose another method; they chose something like that.

There always has to be an indication that you can have better relations, because it is in both our interests, but at the moment I do not see any signs of them necessarily shifting. Therefore, we have to know what they respect, which is resolve, a strong response and a united front.

Lord Teverson: Absolutely, thank you.

Q10 **Baroness Rawlings:** Continuing with NATO, it has been very active in recognising the disproportionate impact of the conflict on women and girls, the vital roles that women play in peace and security and their importance in incorporating gender perspectives in all that the alliance does. What actions do you plan to take to make sure that these issues remain a priority for the alliance, particularly after the selection of the new Secretary-General next year?

Mr Ben Wallace: It is a challenge for some countries more than others within our own forces. NATO is the sum of what we all are. If we are producing Armed Forces with too few women and a poor record on issues such as bullying and sexual offences, NATO cannot be as strong as it could be. In one sense, in the way that charity begins at home, fixing it begins at home. That is the first thing. If NATO's second biggest member starts to improve and uphold that within its own military, it can uphold that in its political alliances.

My colleague Sarah Atherton, MP for Wrexham, has just finished a report on women in defence. I authorised serving women to give evidence, which had not been done before, but I would much rather have everything out in the open and get to the bottom of what is going on. I have delayed my response, because I want to make sure that it is a response that helps and improves the situation.

We had the Wigston report into unacceptable behaviours in defence. Even with that we have to change the culture. That is easier said than done, but it has to happen, whether we get more drastic to do that, which may be a way, or whether we learn from others. What struck me from meeting intelligence services lots of times was how many women there were in MI5 compared to how many women there were in defence. I thought, "If MI5 can get it right, I'm sure we can get it right". We have to work out how to do it.

Within NATO itself, you are right. I do not know how many women there are at SACEUR military command headquarters at NATO. We should do as much as we can to be more balanced and representative. You will be glad to know that there is a significant number of women Defence Ministers around my table. In fact, my new Canadian colleague, who was appointed yesterday, is a woman, and there is Florence Parly. Apart from the United States, my closest allies are all women Ministers. The power of some of the states in Scandinavia that are in NATO, such as Denmark and Norway, where there are very strong Governments led predominantly by women in many places, sows the seeds for NATO to take a proper lead in it. We will see, but I will do my best to produce Armed Forces that reflects society.

Q11 **Baroness Rawlings:** Thank you very much. I look forward to reading the reports. Could you tell the committee what the latest NATO developments are, although in a slightly different way, with regard to Georgia's and Ukraine's position with NATO, and perhaps Russia's attitude towards them?

Mr Ben Wallace: The way we approach NATO—I cannot remember the exact name and I would have to be refreshed—Ukraine came under a new status last year, the sort of midway point towards full membership.

Baroness Rawlings: And Georgia too.

Mr Ben Wallace: And Georgia too. Interestingly, it goes back to the point about NATO as a resolved single force as opposed to individual bilateral relationships. The help that has been given to Ukraine has been quite bilateral and a bit diverse but not in a good way. We orbit with a few other partner nations. The United States publicly announced more money to lethal aid last week. It has not been particularly a single approach. NATO has helped with standards and capabilities, but overall you have not seen the whole of NATO or every nation in the European Union lean in either to help build Ukraine's resilience, which is regrettable because that is the sort of thing that Russia notices.

Baroness Rawlings: What about Georgia?

Mr Ben Wallace: Britain and Georgia have a very good, strong relationship that is growing. We have done some exercises and a port visit. HMS "Dragon", the defender, visited Georgia. She was on her way from Ukraine to Georgia when the Russians took exception to her transit. We have a strong defence relationship there and so does NATO. However, like Ukraine, Georgia comes under considerable pressure and interference from Russia through cyber and espionage and other likes.

Q12 **Lord Stirrup:** NATO is developing its new strategic concept, and at the same time the EU has work in hand to develop what it calls Strategic Compass, which early next year is supposed to indicate what capabilities the EU will need to develop to give it strategic military autonomy. I suspect that if EU nations were to develop more military capability, a lot of us would shout hooray.

Do you think that this particular approach, politically driven as it is, is likely to complement NATO and NATO's strategic concept, or do you see a danger of competing centres of power and decision-making, duplication, overlap and increased friction with NATO? Also, and perhaps more fundamentally, is it your view that the EU nations as a whole are likely to make the substantially increased investment in defence capability that will be necessary if they are truly to develop strategic capabilities that so far have been produced and run by the United States on behalf of NATO?

Mr Ben Wallace: On Strategic Compass, we will slightly have to wait and see. I hope it produces something that complements NATO and does not seek to virtue signal an alternative without doing the groundwork that would be needed. The old chestnut of a European army comes out every few years. Anybody can produce an army with blue berets and call it the EU army. The question is whether you can underpin it with foreign and political agreements that make it worth while. I would say that we have that; it is called NATO. We got over the politics and came up with mutual defence, which was a big step in 1948. It is a big thing, so you do not need to reinvent that horse. If you want to virtue signal by creating a European army, it will do nothing because you have not done the politics first.

I think the EU can play a strong role in the following way with Strategic Compass if it takes time to study the DDA and the SACEUR's AOR-wide strategic plan—SASP—which breaks down crisis and warfighting into areas of responsibility and everything else in a time of conflict. The SACEUR has his strategic direction for peacetime and divides it into certain zones. By improving its co-ordination in the face of vulnerabilities such as cyber threats, organised crime, human trafficking—all the things that the likes of Russia often do to weaken a nation or state—the EU could build the resilience of Europe. By building that resilience, it is less vulnerable to being tricked into or allowing Russia to feel tempted to move into a military space.

My advice to the European Commission, if it would listen to me, would be to work on improving areas where Russia seeks to antagonise—for example Belarus, where we see migrants literally being used to try to destabilise some of these states—and on co-ordinating that better. You will achieve better European security by doing that.

We will see what Strategic Compass brings. From talking to lots of my European allies—lots of people with different views, as we know—with NATO you have to be unanimous, and EU foreign policy predominantly has to be unanimous, so we will see where it goes. I would not speculate whether it is going to compete or cause a problem. If it is to be useful, I would follow the direction of improving resilience, not trying to take some view for the sake of it. There were lots of voices from European states in NATO last week against strategic autonomy.

Q13 **Lord Stirrup:** The issue, I suppose, is that one of the key drivers or accelerators, at least in recent months, was the US decision over Afghanistan and the way it seemed to leave everybody else out in the

cold. My sense, certainly from those who are proposing more strategic autonomy, is that it is not about complementary capabilities; it is about the EU having its own capabilities because it may not be able to rely on the United States.

Having said that, you mentioned earlier the importance of the strategic bilateral military relationship between the UK and France. France politically has always been keen to involve the EU as much as possible in whatever it is doing. We see this work on Strategic Compass. We seem to be seeing three foci emerging—NATO, the EU and our bilateral relationships. We will have to manage those on a sort of trilateral basis in the future.

In terms of the EU portion of this, how much visibility do we have of the EU's thinking and planning now that we no longer have people in the engine rooms, as it were, and how important is that for our defence policy going forward?

Mr Ben Wallace: I have not seen the draft Strategic Compass at all. It has not been a document that has necessarily been shared widely, other than within the EU member states.

Many people in the Commission are perfectly reasonable about it. Just like when I did my defence Command Paper, we wrote to the French, the Germans and the Americans and asked them their views about what they thought we should do. I contributed to the French reviews. We do that, because that is what adult allies do with each other.

You mentioned the funding earlier. You can have all these things, but if you do not fund the capabilities it is pie in the sky. It is the same question for us within NATO. To be fair, President Trump was on to this by trying to talk about 2%. You can indulge yourself in wanting to be less dependent on America, but if you have not invested in transport fleets, ISR and things, you are just talking to yourself and it is not going to make a difference.

It would be perfectly possible for NATO deployments to happen with less US contribution if we had more capabilities of our own. America does not always have to be the overall framework as it was in Afghanistan and which gave us very few choices. The US could have drawn down and we could have gone up collectively if NATO had had those capabilities, but we just do not because we do not spend 2% across the board.

There would be a long way to go before strategic autonomy had any effect. You could declare it tomorrow if you were the European Union, but you would end up being able to deploy precisely nowhere, I suspect, or not at scale, because you have not invested. I do not think it is necessary, and the only benefit would be to China and Russia.

Q14 **Lord Campbell of Pittenweem:** I cannot resist an observation on what you have just said. It is difficult enough to get all the countries that are members of NATO and the European Union to spend 2%. The prospect of an alternative structure could well be regarded by them as a fulfilment of

2%, so, if I may say so, I think you are being polite about the consequences of this.

Can I take you back to the integrated review? Among other things, it said, "The first goal is to grow the UK's science and technology power in pursuit of strategic advantage". The Government, it says, will: "Prioritise higher-risk research to support the modernisation of our Armed Forces". Since this is Budget Day, have you had any prior notice that there is anything in the Budget that might go to fulfil these ambitions?

Mr Ben Wallace: Yes, I have to tell you that we had a meeting of the Science and Technology Council chaired by the Prime Minister yesterday. It was expected that we would have a significant increase in R&D and science and research funding. I think that has happened. I cannot tell you the actual figure, because it happened a few hours ago. In my budget I got £6.6 billion of R&D, so there is definitely a determination to follow the integrated review not only with more funding for R&D but with an intelligent application of it.

What we have not done enough in the past is strategically align our R&D to capture certain technologies, to play to our strengths or to use it to bring collaboration together. When people talk about the Pacific tilt, I say that it is not just about an aircraft carrier. In some parts of the Pacific it is nothing to do with the military. British influence can be done with science, it can be done with culture, it can be done with language, it can be done with military. Science is really part of that, and we need to intelligently apply how we are going to do that.

There is more funding for it. It is more co-ordinated than it has been before. There is a determination to recognise that this is a campaigning thing. If you want to lead the world in quantum computing, for example, you have to stick at it for 10 or 20 years. It is not a single announcement in a single statement by a Secretary of State and suddenly it is all perfect. We are 10 or 12 years away from quantum computing, so you had better lean into it properly.

I think we are in the right place to do that. We have some world-beating capabilities. The one thing that we have always been weak on, not so much in defences but elsewhere, is in using our public pound to pull through and be early adopters. We do not do that enough. We do it in defence because we are buying the aeroplane or the radar, but other countries, especially the United States, use the public pound to become the first adopter of the new technology, and that is how we capitalise.

There is a determination to do it. We will see if we do it. Some of the changes in the Green Book will help with the recognition of social value and so on, otherwise you just spend on research and it trickles out somewhere else. So I think we are in a better place.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Are we talking about hypersonic areas of that kind, which seems to be the frontier of other people's knowledge at the moment?

Mr Ben Wallace: The main buckets are in AI, quantum, biotech—medicines—and sciences. That is where we seem to be in the lead in picking some of the buckets. In my own department, one of the areas we look at is directed energy. We are looking at new engine technologies, some of which are obviously in the high-speed technologies, as well as engines for ranges, and sensors. All these things are key. Quantum is something that potentially defence and other sectors will benefit from. Space and cyber is obviously another one. In all the things we see our adversaries in, we are obviously exploring either how to defend against those or how to develop our own capabilities.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Just one last point. Will the Advanced Research and Invention Agency—ARIA, for short—be involved? What is the connection between what you have been describing and that agency?

Mr Ben Wallace: That is a BEIS-hosted one, is it not? Is that right? Can I write to you on that? It will certainly all be more co-ordinated through the national council that we sat on yesterday. BEIS, DIT, the Department for Transport—everyone was there to do that.

The Chair: Thank you. We are grateful to you for offering to write on that, because that is something that we can take into account later.

Q15 **Lord Alton of Liverpool:** Secretary of State, you said in answer to a question from the Chair earlier in our proceedings that you had read our report of 13 January and seen some of the warnings that were contained within it concerning Afghanistan. You will also have seen the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy report, which concluded: “Recent events in Afghanistan suggest the NSC and the cross-government machinery that supports its work are inadequate to the task”.

Do you agree with that statement? What role does the National Security Council currently play in identifying, discussing and developing strategies specifically for defence-related issues and challenges, and how will the MoD implement the 40 recommendations and subsets of recommendations in the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy report?

Mr Ben Wallace: That last question will be one for the National Security Adviser to answer. When he moved across from being my Permanent Secretary, he started a process of reviewing the NSIG and other NSC structures and has come up with recommendations, but the work is still ongoing.

Could I give a reflection on the NSC and COBRA, because these abbreviations and acronyms get bandied around, as in, “You haven’t had an NSC and that’s why you’ve got your policy wrong”, or, “Have a COBRA”? I have probably done more COBRAs than any other Secretary of State. I have done 30 or 40 COBRAs in my life, both as Security Minister and as Secretary of State. Sometimes you can have a COBRA and there is absolutely nothing to decide, because it has been called too early or it

has been, "Something must be done", but we are not the operators; we are not there to direct soldiers and police officers.

The NSC is very strategic insofar as you will have a subject, it will bring intelligence to bear and will involve key Secretaries of State, but it is rarely very prescriptive. It will say something along the lines of, "Do we want to have a strategy for dealing with al-Shabaab?" Then you go away and it is left to your own departments to formulate that and your officials working across government to do the detail.

Whether we have enough of them and whether they are crafting sophisticated strategy is more a question of the committees below that and the officials and professionals who are tasked with formulating a mission or a plan. In the past, the experience has been that sometimes those are too slow because the threat moves at a faster pace, or some departments—this goes to Lord Boateng's point about DfID in some areas—are not necessarily engaged on that agenda and so move at a different pace or put different resource into that. That would be a criticism I would have of the NSIG structure: that "We want to get on with it".

I heard the criticism in the committee yesterday that somehow there is no policy, and criticism about who is running the policy. The NSC comes up with lots of policies. The professionals then go away and turn those into detailed strategic plans, and the NSC will make significant decisions as the facts on the ground change. If something were to happen to Ukraine, you would call an NSC and discuss what next.

The knack is whether we anticipate enough in government, whether we think ahead. I will give you an example. We all know that China's stated aim is to unite Taiwan. That is not a secret; it is in its 2049 plan, or whatever it announced. Are the Government thinking about what if, or do they wait until something happens and then do it? Over my 17 years in Parliament, government has often been too reactive and not proactive enough, but I think we are improving on that, not only with more joint working but in taking lessons from counterterrorism, where we have been very good about being proactive.

I genuinely believe that the CONTEST strategy, which started in 2003, is one of the best counterterrorism strategies in the world. It has incredibly good results both at home and abroad. It gets refreshed. I authored the last one in 2018. That taught us how to work together in other areas—state competition, foreign policy. The 1HMG foreign policy which the Prime Minister introduced is about trying to pull together all those people in embassies to deliver a proper strategy. I think it works.

The fact of the matter, and it is a difficult fact to admit, is that in Afghanistan the Americans provided the fundamental framework. When they chose to go and chose the timetable, there was almost nothing we could do. We can argue on the head of a pin whether we could have got out more quickly or got out a few weeks later, but fundamentally they

took that decision, and it was a political decision on one level. The uncomfortable truth for us all is that we could do nothing to change that.

Q16 Lord Alton of Liverpool: Thank you for answering that question so candidly. You referred to the situation concerning Taiwan and the South China Sea. The following report published by this committee was on China security and trade. We say in that report that this could become a catastrophic situation if we get it wrong.

Coming back to the JCNS report, at paragraph 154 it asks whether our failings were, in its words, "an intelligence failure ... an assessment and analysis failure ... a failure ... to marshal the vast knowledge and resources ... groupthink ... a reluctance by Ministers and/or senior officials to engage fully with the realities of information ... a failure of diplomacy to bring forward an alternative NATO coalition on the ground".

Have you had a chance to look at that list, and how would you calibrate them? These are hard questions, and I know you will want to think about them very seriously, but how would you calibrate and prioritise those things?

Mr Ben Wallace: I read that report. I do not want to criticise a report of a House of Parliament, but I do not think it was as thoughtful as your report. I think there was a lot of criticism just thrown in for criticism's sake. There were obviously some very valid points. I do not dispute that. I know the ISC is looking at the intelligence issue on Afghanistan.

For what it is worth, I wrote my first intelligence report as a young intelligence officer in 1994, albeit fairly junior. I am not sure that people often understand what intelligence is, what its limits are and what it is there for. Ultimately, we are paid to make a judgment, based on the intelligence that is there, to illuminate and inform. But as we know, all intelligence is caveated, all intelligence has a confidence level, and ultimately people have to make their choices.

I put a team into Afghanistan in January this year to start the plan that become Op Pitting, because in our department we plan for contingency, we plan for the whole range. Op Pitting itself was not invented on 12 or 15 August; it was designed by our military planners and forward-recce'd at the beginning of the year.

We should also, again, be honest about the limits of intelligence. When regimes collapse, it is inevitable that the intelligence available shrinks, because your footprint shrinks, your sources dry up. Some of your sources might get on an aeroplane and leave the country. Inevitably, your confidence level in the level of the intelligence you get shrinks, and it becomes less reliable, not more. We all remember the final collapse of the Soviet Union. We can all remember the press conference of Saddam Hussein's press spokesman—Comical Ali, they used to call him. He had a perfectly pressed uniform, took his beret off, got in a taxi and disappeared and that was the end of that.

Therefore, when in July I said that I felt the game was up, that was not based purely on the intelligence given to me. That was my knowledge of foreign affairs and my instinct that you cannot predict the end of the waterfall. You can do your best. If we step back, the intelligence assessments in both June and August predicted either a Taliban-dominated Government at the end of the year or a civil war. They were out by two or three months, I think, but in the scheme of 20 years—. It was not perfect, but intelligence is never the full picture. People sometimes think that it tells you everything, and it rarely does.

Q17 Baroness Fall: Can I turn to the issue of the size of the Army? As its keeper at the moment, does it concern you that it is getting rather small? I am mindful, of course, of modernisation cases and the other problems that we have with cyber and drones and things like that. Nevertheless, the Army is there to sustain and support, and it cannot be everywhere at once. Is it getting too small?

Mr Ben Wallace: I would not have agreed to it if I thought that it was too small. Its current establishment was to be 82,000, but it is actually at 75,000 and it is going down to 72,500, so the number of physical bodies that it will reduce by is 2,500. There have been some quite wild reports. I saw a report in the newspaper the other day that it was going to go to 65,000—by a huge amount. They are all wrong.

There are two parts to this. One is that you can do more with less. Certainly on land forces, that has been the trajectory ever since the First World War. Our battalions are not thousands of men. They are, depending on what function they are doing, less. We have always relied on coalitions. If you think about the idea that Britain could stand alone in 1956 and the north German plains never could, that is why we have NATO. We have always been in alliances. Even in the Second World War, our strong reliance on Commonwealth soldiers was how we got our mass. On the idea that going from 75,000 of warm bodies to 72,000 will mean that I can no longer unilaterally invade a country, I have to say that I never could. We should just remind people that that has never been the case.

Even when we had lots of numbers on paper, actually we did not. I was an officer in north Germany where we were supposed to have three divisions. We did not. If you remember, in the first and second Gulf War we effectively cannibalised half the Armed Forces to produce two armoured brigades. A commando brigade went, and it was not even a full division.

I took the view that taking the money and investing properly in the workforce, giving them better conditions, support and equipment, meant that, yes, I would have fewer people but they would be better equipped and I would be more honest. I would rather make sure that it does what it says on the side of the tin than play top trumps. Some of our colleagues like to say, "We've got all these ships, we've got all these battalions", but they are all empty. What is the point in boasting that you have all these warships when they are all tied up in Portsmouth wrapped

in plastic because they do not work? That is what has been happening with the Type 45 ships. We have six Type 45s at £1 billion each, and you are lucky if you have three working at any one time.

I thought, "What you see is what you're going to get". Yes, that means a few fewer people. Does it mean that we will be less potent? No. Does it mean that we can be less ready? No. In fact, what we are going to see is an increase in operational availability because of the investment in capability but also in forward presence. We are going to be more forward in the world—in Kenya, in Oman and places like that—on more occasions. Some of the changes we have already made in the Navy have produced more days at sea than it has had for decades.

In design, you can design out some people. In the future support ship competition, I insisted that we took 10% out of the crew through automation. Currently, a ship has 117 people, and I said that I wanted it to be 107. I was told, "Oh, you can't possibly do that. No one will bid". We got nine bids. It is not hard in this day and age in some areas where you do not necessarily need mass.

Our adversaries have swapped mass in some areas for speed and readiness. If you are quick or you are there before your enemy, you are usually the one that is going to dominate and commit. So, yes, there were some trade-offs, but you will get an Armed Forces that is ready to prevent conflict. You will get things like a ranger battalion—land forces—and an Armed Forces that are properly equipped to nation build. One of the issues with Iraq was that we rolled out Iraqi tank divisions pretty quickly and then constantly replaced them with other armoured brigades. They are not designed to build nations. They are designed to take out other tanks. It was always quite odd watching an armoured brigade take over another armoured brigade. You could argue that Basra's history speaks for itself.

I think we will have a readier, more dynamic, more forward Armed Forces. We took some views on the difference between more Navy or more ships. With the Air Force, I wanted to continue to commit to purchasing more F35s. I wanted to continue to ensure that the equipment we had invested in, like the Meteor missile, was going to continue, and we had a new generation of radar. Those were the trade-offs we made. The response from our allies has been very positive. The response from the Americans on how we are going to do our business through the IOpC, which is the operating concept, tells me that we made the right decisions.

Q18 Baroness Fall: Thank you very much. Coming back to general priorities and spending, it sometimes seems that it is in the middle of a pandemic where we have reduced—I do not call it soft power, I call it hard soft power—money that we spend on militating against disease, mass migration, terrorism, the things that begin wars. We have cut that money, yet we have increased the money we spend on nuclear and we have reduced the size of our army. It feels like a slightly odd priority. Is that your view?

Ben Wallace: No, because part of my point about being in conflict prevention is that what we have invested in our Armed Forces is the ability to do more of that soft power. We had an engineer troop or squadron in Sudan building dams. The Armed Forces very often deliver international aid or humanitarian support in some of the most dangerous places, which aid agencies either will not go to or will not do it how we have been doing it. I think you will get an army that will be able to deliver more of that and a navy able to do more disaster relief with our reconfiguration.

It was not a trade-off between more nuclear and fewer soldiers. The nuclear part was from the Treasury contingency to continue to deliver the Dreadnought programme. We increased the warhead numbers to make sure that we retained credibility in the deterrent.

Q19 **The Chair:** Secretary of State, thank you. We are about to come to the last question, which I shall ask. However, at this moment I remind my colleagues that, as we will have time for supplementaries, they should indicate to Amy if they wish to ask them, as she is making a list.

Secretary of State, we have just launched an inquiry—our first evidence-taking session was last week—on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and whether it is fit for purpose in the 21st century. You have already mentioned, in answer to one question, a Royal Navy visit to the Black Sea. My question is: what role do you see for the Royal Navy in protecting and upholding the existing international law of the sea regime, in particular that of freedom of navigation?

Ben Wallace: A warship is a great convenor. If you look at our carrier group deployment to the Pacific, we have had Dutch and Canadian ships exercising with us. The Dutch ship is with us for the whole journey, there and back. We had the USS “The Sullivans”, the United States Aegis destroyer, with us, therefore upholding the law of the sea and showing resolve. That is one of the key words of today, I think, along with strategic competition. We need to show resolve and be resolved to stand together. The Royal Navy has a very important role in bringing together other nations to demonstrate that freedom of the sea.

I was in Vietnam in July. It was a fascinating trip. I gave a speech in front of the hammer and sickle, which reminded me of my days in Scottish politics, but there we are. It was interesting, because the Vietnamese are very worried about Chinese threats to their fishing ground and challenges. Solidarity matters—maybe the hammer and sickle was a clue—and the Royal Navy can be that convenor. When it sails into any part of the oceans, whether the Arctic or anywhere, it brings with it NATO in some areas, it brings with it our support and it brings with it like-minded nations. The role of upholding the law of the sea is to go wherever you can to do it, not to be put off by intimidation and not let to people rewrite it. That may be Britain and America. It may be Britain and Vietnam. We sent a ship to Vietnam recently. One of the carrier group peeled off and went to Vietnam. We will continue to do that.

It is very interesting that the other ship that was with us in the Black Sea was from Holland. Holland, as an ancient or very old trading nation, also deeply understands the importance of freedom of navigation of the seas. It was clearly very important to Holland to be with us on the carrier and to transit in certain parts of the oceans, because that is its pedigree, just like ours.

The Chair: Secretary of State, thank you. Having launched our new inquiry, we are at the moment deep in thought and consideration of the legal aspects. Thank you for explaining the more human element.

Ben Wallace: The people who will be able to tell you best are the Navy. They are amazing. The naval officers in the MoD are incredibly knowledgeable about that. It is very important to them. I am a simple soldier who does not really understand that sort of thing, but my Navy officers absolutely will talk to you about it. We have a new First Sea Lord. I am sure he will be delighted to talk to you about that.

The Chair: That sounds like a very good offer. I shall refer to those words when we make an invitation.

Q20 **Lord Stirrup:** Secretary of State, can I take you to a wider government issue, one that certainly involves your department and your people very often, which is national resilience. That is a very broad spectrum of issues ranging from pandemics to floods to cyberattacks to fuel shortages. The military is very often involved. The Armed Forces exercise from time to time with the other emergency services and the police to make sure they can operate together effectively.

Of course, as you said, COBRA is convened when such a situation arises, but, as you rightly pointed out, COBRA is not a command-and-control centre. The responses required can be very swift, but sometimes they can be rather slow. Again, you mentioned earlier that you place a premium on speed, and I think we would agree with that. Quite often, slowness is to do with different departments arguing over who should pay for the various bits of the response.

Is there a gap here, in your view? Given your experience of these situations, is there a requirement for a national resilience centre that can provide, if you like, a core command-and-control facility for these kinds of situations that can be expanded in time of crisis to fill that gap? As you said, COBRA convenes sometimes too soon, because you have nothing to decide in policy terms, perhaps because there has been nobody working together in a joint fashion to develop those options. Is there something here that we should be looking at?

Ben Wallace: I think there are lessons to be learned from Covid. With Covid, the Government produced a team of the lead Secretaries of State, who met almost daily. It was not a COBRA, but it was a proper Covid team of the relevant Secretaries of State whose job, day in and day out, is to cut through all that.

I think the lesson is that Government have seen what you can do when you bring people together. Whether you need a formal structure or a resilience centre to do that, the Government know that you need better data even to start doing that. We had to learn that on the job. I was authorising MACAs and sending people from the defence intelligence corps all over government to help them to process and collate data and to put it in order so that people could then present it to decision-makers. The lesson is that we need more data. We need to be able to dragoon it in the right order. Then, if you choose to have a centre to do that or indeed just to inform Ministers better, you can make that decision later.

First and foremost, we have to get the data centralised and understood. I think the lesson from Covid is probably to bring people together more. I suspect that, if you look at Governments over the last 20, 30 or 40 years, some had more Ministers around the table than others. I think that is a trait of different Ministers and Governments. Fundamentally, it works when you are all together. One reason why it works, in my experience, is that officials do not interpret what you say. Sometimes you go to a meeting and it is, "His direction does not really quite mean that".

It is usually only when all the Secretaries of State who are relevant are in the same room and all their officials hear the single decision that it gets carried through. Otherwise, in the translation from one department to another, it dissipates. That, I think, is the polite way of saying that it might be reinterpreted on behalf of the Minister, which can be even more dangerous.

So I would say definitely more centralised understanding of the data, but does it need to be a COBRA or just the relevant ad hoc?

On the pace and challenges, the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure is starting to move at pace to get to grips with 21st century infrastructure. What is critical national infrastructure in the 21st century? When it really came about, it would have been water and electricity. There would not have been all these computer networks that are now as important as anything else. Therefore, I think it will be incredibly important.

Government departments have learned how important resilience is. In defence, as you know, our middle name is resilience. It is what we are there to do. Resilience and concurrence are probably the two things. For a lot of other departments, we noticed in the early parts of Covid that, when one person was off ill, if they did not have a deputy they did not have resilience. Their department was not built that way because they were not used to those shocks. The importance of resilience is a lesson for everyone in the Government. That is the same across Europe, I think. Everyone has learned that.

Q21 Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: You may answer some of these questions by saying that, since there is a review going on, it is not possible to be definitive. However, I am perhaps more concerned with the principle.

I visited Estonia some years ago and saw the enhanced forward presence. The Estonians, and of course the other Baltic countries, obviously regard it as very important that we take up that responsibility. As I understand it, it is a battlegroup in Estonia and is based on armoured infantry. Without going into the detail of Ajax, it is proving to be difficult.

Ben Wallace: "Troubled" is the word I would use. It is a troubled programme.

Q22 **Lord Campbell of Pittenweem:** Do you have an alternative? As I understand it, at one stage there was an argument as to whether the Warriors should be the subject of a very considerable upgrade. I think there are still some Warriors that are operational.

My question, if I can round it off, is: what importance do you attach to armoured infantry? Are you satisfied that you have sufficient equipment, plant and vehicles to fulfil all our actual, and even possible, obligations?

Ben Wallace: The Ajax is a recce vehicle. It does not take troops in the back, whereas the Warrior is an armoured infantry vehicle. In the defence settlement, I brought forward the Boxer, the big wheeled armoured vehicle. These things are vast. There will be 100 more of them and they will be brought forward.

The Warrior will come out in 2025. We said that we were not going to progress with replacing the turret. However, it had to have a drivetrain change anyway mid-2026 or 2027, which would have been significant. I started in Warriors in 1991. I do not think they are getting old, but everyone else does.

The Boxer will be there in 2026. We brought it forward. Sixty-five per cent of it is made in Britain, in Telford, and it is an extremely good bit of kit. The armoured infantry will have that.

The prototype for the Ajax was first committed to in March 2010, and in 2014 it went out to contract for manufacture. It is a troubled programme. If I were to speculate on alternatives, I would find myself potentially with contractual issues.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Of course, I understand.

Ben Wallace: Our mission is to work with the prime contractor to deliver what we have bought and paid for and what we expect to be delivered to us. We are in the middle of trials to assess what the problems were.

It is a troubled programme, as I say. It makes sorry reading. I think a health and safety executive review has been done of it and will be published in due course. I am determined to get to the bottom of it. My Minister for Defence Procurement, Jeremy Quin, is absolutely on it, right through to going through emails of the past and understanding why we got into this position. It is one of the 20-year programmes that I can

genuinely say I inherited. We have to fix it, because we have to give that capability to our Armed Forces.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Will the Boxer have a mounted weapon?

Ben Wallace: The Boxer could. I can bore you to death on things like that. You can fit Javelin anti-tank missiles. The Australians—I think it is the Australians—are trying to integrate a turret on their Boxers. You can also have different variants. Rheinmetall has looked at putting a 155-millimetre gun with significant range on the back.

The amazing thing about the Boxer is that it is modular: you can take off a box and mix and match it. If you get a chance to see one, they are a formidable thing. They are not tracked, but they are better armoured underneath than the Warrior, so they make a big difference.

The point of armoured infantry is interesting. Two weeks ago, I stood in an armoured battlegroup of 270-odd vehicles on Salisbury Plain. It had almost not changed since 1991. The challenge of the investment required to modernise our land fleet is significant. It looked identical to the one I was in in 1991. Apart from some new short-range anti-air missiles and better sights and communications, it had not changed.

To be fair to the Army, that is how far back they went. It is also what happens when you hollow out, when you are not honest with your budget or you overspec, or when you buy things; you suddenly have to correct a programme that you cannot cancel half way through—it might be a ship and it is taking 20 years to build—and the other services in the cycle take a hit. The Army had taken a hit on its armoured fleet. That is where we end up: 15 years behind—behind our allies, predominately, let alone our adversaries. We are rectifying that.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: I remember seeing them do extremely good work in Bosnia.

Q23 **Lord Alton of Liverpool:** Thank you, Lord Chair. In our report on China we referenced the decision of the House of Commons, your House, to refer to events in Xinjiang against the Uighurs as a genocide. We have all seen the destruction of democracy in Hong Kong and the abrogation of the Sino-British international treaty. We puzzle over the origins of Covid. We worry about the subversion of international institutions at the United Nations and here at home. We worry about things like cyber warfare. We rejoice, many of us, in the consolidation of Five Eyes and AUKUS in particular as a response to these events.

You identified earlier, and I think you were absolutely right to do so, the dangers the 23 million people of Taiwan face. How prepared are we for an invasion of Taiwan, and how will we respond?

Ben Wallace: What I will say about how we are going to respond is that it is obviously for the Government to take a view about these things. All I can really do is reiterate our policy, which is that we recognise the unique

Taiwan-China relationship. We urge, in the strongest possible terms, that this is resolved through dialogue and negotiation. That is obviously the position of the Government. It is a long-held policy.

I do not want to speculate on all the different options, because at the moment China has not done as you speculated. China has laid claim to uniting by 2049; I think that was its line. We have been very clear about being deeply upset by the Hong Kong issue, recognising that it is a breach of the agreement. I think there is a follow-up, though, which is that the "one state, two systems" also applies to Taiwan. If that is what we have seen in Hong Kong, we should definitely be worried about that. We make our position clear with China on the Uighur issues.

The challenge for the West, including the United States and the United Kingdom, is to indicate to China that there is a better path. What do we expect from China? That is something that we should all produce on together and talk about.

Q24 Lord Boateng: Secretary of State, we owe our service people a debt of gratitude. Service takes a toll on personnel and their families. You were an officer on the north German plains. A short but very instructive period in my life was as a Ministry of Defence lawyer in Bielefeld, north Germany. I have seen at first hand the impact of military life on service families. When I became a Minister, first in the Department of Health and then in the Home Office, I saw the consequences of some of those strains and pressures—homelessness and mental ill health. There were severe repercussions and implications for the service personnel, their families and, indeed, society as a whole.

Your department commissioned a very good report, *Living In Our Shoes*, from Professor Janet Walker and our colleague, Andrew Selous. What has happened to that report? How are you planning to implement it? Even more recently, can you tell us something about how the threat to the mental health funding for 340 homeless veterans was resolved in the end?

Ben Wallace: I will have to write to you about the detail of that, because it has not come to me.

What I will say is that it is a very different place from when you and I were in the Armed Forces. I finished 10 years in the Army, including two operational tours in Northern Ireland, and I do not think anyone even said goodbye. It was just, "You're done". I think there were even still debates, going around in circles, about whether PTSD existed.

Fast forward to today and we have a GP network specifically for mental health, for example. We have been through much more regional co-ordination of mental health treatment capacity for our veterans. We have a much more co-ordinated veterans' charity sector, allowing touchpoints with veterans and pathways into it. After Afghanistan we gave an extra £2.7 million on top of the already extra funding for Op Courage, which I think is about £19 million, because we recognised that it would trigger

things in many veterans' minds. A consequence of Covid was the amount of work on rough sleepers, which of course will include veterans as well.

There is still a way to go. I think today the Budget has announced more money for the Office for Veterans' Affairs, which is a Cabinet office body with a joint Minister, obviously Ministry of Defence people and veterans. I definitely think it is in a much better place. I am president of a Scots Guards association in Lancashire, so I see my veterans quite a lot. People are more aware.

The Government's changes have been quite good. However, mental health is a challenge in our health service, full stop, and we need to make sure that we have enough qualified psychiatrists and assistance to do so. We need to be on the lookout, because I do not think it goes away for many people.

Q25 **Baroness Blackstone:** Thank you. I would like to ask you about landmines. We have been a global leader since 1997 when we were a founder signatory of the mine ban treaty. The Government's decision to cut our ODA budget from 0.7% of GNI to 0.5% has led to a very big reduction in funding for mine clearance; it is down by 80%. In light of that cut, how are the Government going to fulfil their commitment to a landmine-free world by 2025?

Ben Wallace: First, the reduction is temporary, as the Prime Minister announced. Secondly, we still are working alongside those types of charities. The actual grant to them might have been reduced, but we will still work alongside them to help deliver that.

Our position on landmines is clear, and it is not only to try to remove them. This year or last year, the very last Falkland Island mines were removed. Work is definitely ongoing. Plus, I committed more money in Kenya to the IED/mine school that we have there. That is a Kenyan-run place to teach people how to help defuse IEDs and others. It now teaches other African states. In fact, although my officials recommended that I do not continue the funding, I decided that we would.

I think there is still lots of good work going on in that space. Coming back to my point about the Command Paper being about training accompanying assistance, it will include things like the Royal Engineers' support to nations that need that help. We are not "not in the business" of doing that. We will continue to do it.

I hear what you say about aid reduction. However, as the Government said, it is temporary.

The Chair: Thank you. We have perhaps seen one of the side comments today in the Budget about when it finally might get back to 0.7%. I am sure you will realise what an interest this committee takes in that.

Q26 **Baroness Fall:** Thank you. Congratulations on the AUKUS deal, if I can call it that. I thought it was a very innovative and interesting new alliance.

I wanted to get your view on whether it had legs as a new convening alliance, pushing back against China's hegemony—not hegemony, its growing presence—in the Indo-Pacific. Do you see it as acting as a link to the Quad, which obviously we are not a member of? Do you think it will grow? Are we to see Japan joining AUKUS and us to join the Quad, for example?

Ben Wallace: Whether the members of the Quad want us to join is in their hands. We have ASEAN status. In fact, it is often forgotten that the oldest defence agreement or treaty alignment in that part of the world is the Five Power Defence group. It is 50 years of age this year. Long before it became fashionable, we had this agreement with Malaysia, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. It is the oldest one. Definitely investing in that type of relationship matters.

AUKUS, first and foremost, is a submarine arrangement that involves the sharing of nuclear technology for propulsion and capability. It nestles, in a sense, within Five Eyes, because for the other stuff, like cyber, New Zealand, Australia, Canada—with Pacific and Atlantic coasts—alongside the United States are all really important. Five Eyes will be one of the main tools for our ability to share each other's intelligence, knowledge and technology in a trusted environment to help build our resilience.

AUKUS is a good thing. It was an Australian choice of their partners, as I have said. It is a strategic decision by Australia to join a very exclusive club of people who can manage and run nuclear attack submarines.

On Japan, I saw a statement by one of the Ministers that they might consider or were looking at nuclear submarines. That says, and it is something I feel quite strongly about, that at the moment we talk about our big surface fleets, our carriers, and in the future subsea will get more important. First, the barrier to entry is quite high. In other domains, the proliferation of technology and precision that we see means that capabilities that used to belong to very few countries are now, maybe sub-optimally but nevertheless, maintained by other people.

If you look at the type of the missiles that the Houthis fire—Houthis are predominately a militia type—they are firing missiles with similar accuracy to the Tomahawks that we saw in the first Gulf war. However, you cannot engage under water unless you have a pretty big pocket. That is probably true for the next decade or two because of the ability to remain very hidden because of the physics. Therefore, you can spend all the money you like on air defence—if you are Russia, for example—but if I can sail underneath it in a submarine and pop up from underneath or fire a munition from underneath and you cannot detect me, it gives a capability that very few have.

Therefore, it is a really important capability that Australia has chosen. I can understand why it has done it. It will give it a strategic capability, predominately unmatched in that region, and it will certainly make its adversaries and rivals think.

Q27 **Baroness Rawlings:** Secretary of State, thank you very much for your very candid and fulsome replies.

If I could return to Afghanistan, I am rather worried that, 10 days before the deadline of 1 September for evacuation from Kabul airport, government spokesmen, including the Armed Forces Minister James Heappey, said that British Embassy security staff employed by private contractors were being evacuated and would be granted the right to enter the UK. As you well know, that did not happen. In the event, several hundred guards who made their way to the airport through Taliban checkpoints, without any assistance from HMG, were turned away at the gate by British soldiers.

Can you say what steps the MoD and the Government collectively are taking to evacuate Afghans whose lives are still in danger because of their service to the Crown?

Ben Wallace: I can only speak for ARAP. I cannot speak for the wider leaves outside the rules, which were administered by other departments.

Some 311 ARAP personnel were called forward who were not evacuated, plus their families. I am getting exact figures for you. One hundred and ninety-nine are still in Afghanistan or are known to be. That equates to 1,155 people, including their dependants. Thirty-seven, or 125 including their dependants, are in third countries. Further to that, 94 are in the UK. We lost communication with 37 from the very beginning and have not been in touch. We have one, plus one dependant, who has decided that they want to stay.

Of that initial phase there are 311. We are getting them out. I cannot, for security reasons, tell you how we do that. What I can say is that some of them have got out on normal chartered flights on planes provided by Pakistan, because some of them are also potentially dual-passport holders or have been allowed through, or some have got to third countries under their own steam. In fact, we found that some of the ones in third countries are literally all over the world; we found some in Australia and we found some in the United States. I think that was partly because some of them jumped on to whatever plane they wanted to. Not surprisingly, some of them have found themselves in countries and said, "Actually, I think I'd rather stay here". You cannot beat Australian weather. We have definitely seen that.

Again, the uncomfortable truth is that when the Taliban swept into Kabul—even they were surprised, and they are on record as being surprised; I think they all thought that Kabul would hold out and there would be a negotiation—our ability to drive to and from outside the airport was pretty much zero, so we could not really go and get people. We tried to manage many of them through. There were huge numbers of genuine people applying through the system, but they were refugees and not ARAP.

That was one of the challenges for our military in trying to manage this and for me in trying to politically communicate to people. Some 60,000-

odd started to try to apply through the ARAP scheme. Every one had to be checked. Every one had to be sifted. You can imagine that trying to get to the genuine applicants took time. I do not blame all the other people trying; I would probably try. Some of them were multiple-applying; they were applying through all the different schemes at the same time and to many other countries at the same time. We worked through them. The scheme is still open and will be open-ended. ARAP will continue and people will apply.

We have to be very careful with third countries. We do not want to make them worried so that they close their borders, which will not help anyone. I do not publicly talk about where people have come from, because what you do not want is an adverse reaction from a third country, which could close its borders. We will continue to get as many people out as possible.

Until March 2020, it was called the ex gratia scheme, and 1,300 came out. The Home Secretary and I were not happy with the pace, so before November/Christmas last year we changed the rules and another 230 got out. Then, from April to August, when ARAP started, we had 1,978. Then, from Op Pitting, we had 4,800.

Given that the original estimate was, I think, 4,000 and we have taken out 8,000—it is not an easy thing—I think it was a significant achievement. The others, British passport holders and so on, make up the rest of the 15,000 people.

We have used 650 soldiers in the last few weeks to start surveying them all to make sure that we know where the ones in Britain are and what regiments they had links with so that we can put them in touch with the veterans through the British Legion. Pastoral care is really important for them. The mental health of some of them will be as damaged as some of our soldiers'. Some of them literally took off their uniforms, got on a plane and the next thing they knew they were in Britain. That was it. There was probably no planning. They had been in the crowds helping us, very bravely going out and spotting people. Part of the reason was because there were 20,000 to 30,000 people outside the Abbey gate. You can imagine the challenge of getting people through. Also, out of desperation, the families were massive. It was not just their natural small family; they suddenly grew and grew and some of them had no paperwork. It was a really difficult decision for the soldiers on the gate. Then, of course, we had Mr Farthing and his pets.

The Chair: Secretary of State, thank you. There are some very uncomfortable truths in so many parts of the world when we seek to do the right thing.

You refer to the difficulties of those who were leaving Afghanistan. We commend the way in which assistance was given to those who were able to leave. Two of my colleagues who are here today joined me in a virtual meeting recently with a lady who, until she was evacuated in August from Afghanistan, was the acting Women's Minister and had been a Minister for some years. What struck me—I hope my colleagues might agree—was

her dignified approach, her lack of concern for herself and her deep concern for the left behind. That is something I shall certainly remember. I know my colleagues are working closely with some organisations.

Lord Teverson: If I could just add, Lord Chair, there was also her great thanks to the United Kingdom for having given her the opportunity to survive. She was very complimentary.

The Chair: As you say, it was with family. She had her husband and children with her. It is something that none of us remembers, but those who are left behind want to have a future.

Thank you very much indeed for being so candid with us today and spending two hours giving us detailed answers. We are grateful, Secretary of State. Thank you.