HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Government foreign policy towards the United States HC 695

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Written evidence from witnesses

Watch the meeting

Members present: Richard Ottaway (Chair), Mr John Baron, Sir Menzies Campbell, Ann Clwyd, Mike Gapes, Mark Hendrick, Sandra Osborne, Andrew Rosindell, Frank Roy and Rory Stewart

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Rt Hon Hugh Robertson MP,** Minister of State, and **Kate Smith**, Director, Americas, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *gave evidence*.

Q115 Chair: This session is on the Government's foreign policy towards the United States. It is our third and final evidence session in this inquiry. I am pleased to welcome the witnesses: a warm welcome to you both. Minister, did the coalition, when it came into office in 2010, set out to change its approach to the United States in any way?

Hugh Robertson: In any way, yes. Since I have been reading the file, I have been thinking about this quite a lot—how on earth you categorise the strength of the relationship at different periods. It is, of course, quite a difficult question to answer, because it works on so many different levels. You can have different parts of it working better or less well at different times, if you look back over the last 50 or 60 years, but absolutely there have been changes recently. I am not sure they are particularly political; I think they evolve naturally over time. The creation of the National Security Council and the appointment of a National Security Adviser are two obvious ones. I think for all of us involved in it at the various different levels—I have certainly seen this in the six weeks I have been in the Foreign Office—it is a relationship that is very strong.

The US ambassador was in to see me in my first fortnight in the post. By the end of my first 10 days, I had met the US Secretary of State. We have Senator Rubio in tomorrow, and we had the Governor of Texas in last week, and so on.

It is a relationship that, at our level, works well. The Foreign Secretary is in constant contact with the Secretary of State, the Deputy Prime Minister with the Vice-President and,

clearly, the Prime Minister with the President. It is a strong relationship which is constantly evolving. If you asked me for one thing, it is probably the National Security Council.

Q116 Chair: We will come back to that. The Foreign Secretary said that the relationship should always be "solid but not slavish". Can you give any examples of being frank, not slavish?

Hugh Robertson: Yes: the death penalty would be a good one. When I saw Governor Perry at the end of what was my second or third week, I was able to lobby him in some depth about one particular issue. We clearly quite simply have a difference of opinion on this. That was something we rehearsed again with the US ambassador, so that would be one very obvious example. There are other consular cases and extradition cases that fall into the same category.

Q117 Chair: Sometimes I think colleagues or diplomats get embarrassed by using the expression "special relationship", so much so that people seem to go out of their way not to use it now, although interestingly enough we noticed when we were over in Washington that it was being used more there by the other side, as it were, than by our side. Do we have a policy on this?

Hugh Robertson: No—indeed, the very first thing written at the top of my briefing note is "Special Relationship". I absolutely promise you that there is no embarrassment here about using that phrase, nor should there be.

Q118 Mr Baron: Do you think that we are a bit too sensitive about the term "special relationship"? If it does not exist, somehow we feel as though our place in the world has slipped and all that sort of stuff, whereas in reality the relationship is firmly based on shared values and common interests, and we should be less sensitive about it. In fact, it is a good relationship, but we are a bit hypersensitive about the terminology.

Hugh Robertson: I think there is probably some truth in that. Getting hypersensitive over things is normally a sign of weakness, isn't it? If you are confident about something, you do not worry about it. I have never detected any worry or insecurity about this from the American side. From my observations, with six weeks in the job, there is absolutely no reason for us to be sensitive about it in any way. We should probably get on with doing it rather more, and worry about it rather less, which is a way of paraphrasing exactly what you just said.

Q119 Mr Baron: Following on from that, may I talk about some of the decisions that have recently been made by the British Government, and concerns about how they affect the relationship? You will remember, Minister, that after the Syria vote, there were more than a few who suggested that that was somehow going to affect the relationship. One had then to remind them that although we did not participate in Vietnam, there was a very healthy relationship very shortly afterwards between the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and

Ronald Reagan. Would you agree that this relationship is based on fundamental shared values and common interests, and that, coming back to the Chairman's original question, we should not worry about disagreeing with the US when we think we are right—we have done so in the past and the relationship has, perhaps, even benefited from that—as long as there is an honest exchange of views?

Hugh Robertson: You can answer that question in two ways, and again I think you are absolutely right. My eyes are drawn to the quote from the US ambassador—it is rather good, this—who said: "The idea that 13 votes…on a Thursday night at the end of the summer could disrupt seven decades of cooperation, World War Two and the Cold War and all the stuff we are engaged on now, just is incredible."

You wanted a more practical example. Looking back on my military career, I served in Northern Ireland, and a certain amount of money raised by the IRA came from Noraid, across the water. When I was a soldier in the first Gulf war, we served directly alongside and next to an American division with whom we swapped industrial quantities of kit, expertise and friendship.

At the end of my 10 years in the Army, I worked for the Foreign Office in Bosnia, where the Americans were arming the Bosnian Muslims. The mujaheddin brigade outside Mostar went from a rather badly equipped, second-rate operation to a group of people wearing American combat kit, with the newest weaponry, very little of which, I suspect, saw its time out in Bosnia. If you look back at the UK-US relationship, it has of course had bumpier moments, but you are absolutely right that that in no way undermines the fundamental relationship.

Q120 Mr Baron: Indeed, I remember escorting around the place in Northern Ireland American Senators who were not necessarily friendly to our cause.

In conclusion, do you think we should be doing more as a country—both sides, perhaps—to play down the terminology and talk up more what the relationship is based on? We perhaps do not hear enough about that, apart from in arenas such as this.

Hugh Robertson: In a sense, I would return to your first question to me. I do not think that we should be too sensitive about it. It is a relationship that works extraordinarily. It feels natural when you come into a job such as mine. It just feels right. Coming back to the Chairman's first question, it does not stop us having differences and raising points of difference, but it just feels right. Returning to my first answer to you, there is much to be said for getting on and doing it rather more, which I think we do anyway, and agonising about it rather less, because the fundamentals are so strong.

Q121 Sir Menzies Campbell: I was interested in your personal experience and was going to ask you about that, but you have, in a sense, answered my questions.

One way to put it would be that the Americans and the British see each other as the first ally, although, of course, we are not able to join in that in every circumstance; Vietnam is a clear indication of that. As a matter of choice, we would rather go to war with each

other—on the same side. That is one element. Second is the right that the British Government have to access the Trident missile system, which no other country possesses. The third, which is perhaps more controversial at the moment, is the whole question of intelligence. There are the Five Eyes, which we all know, but the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom is closer than any other relationship that the United States has with anything else and vice versa. In all of that, it would appear that there is a military background. Is that enough? Do you see other areas? Do the Government see other areas of co-operation that would raise the relationship beyond what would appear sometimes to be purely military?

Hugh Robertson: It is a good question. There are essentially three areas on which we concentrate, which are defence, in terms of conventional forces, intelligence and economic co-operation. Underpinning all that, however, is a sense of shared value, heritage and the like, which brings us close to the Americans. It clearly works in terms of the economy and defence. If people ask me for practical examples of where this works well, I would say the economy, defence and intelligence sharing, which are exactly the areas that you highlight. There is a whole piece of cultural values that lies around that that makes the relationship so strong. On top is an interwoven series of personal relationships—Prime Minister to President, Deputy Prime Minister to Vice-President, Foreign Secretary to Secretary of State and so on—that oil the wheels on a regular basis.

Q122 Rory Stewart: How much of your time do you spend on the bilateral relationship with the United States?

Hugh Robertson: In six weeks, which is probably not a fair or representative sample, given that during that time we have had the Syria issue and the Iran issue, and I have been in the Middle East, which would be the Department's third priority, and then to Libya, which is very important to us for other reasons, it has not had a huge amount of my time. In part, however, that is the case anyway, as there are so many other people working on it on so many different levels. At my level, you often follow the trouble a little more—if I can put it that way—and it clearly has not proven to be necessary.

Q123 Rory Stewart: Ballpark figure going forward? 10%? 20%?

Hugh Robertson: I am not sure. You are going to hate me for saying this, but I am not sure that I would want to be tied down, because one of the joys of the job that I do—Middle East and North Africa—is that you never quite know what lies around the corner at any one time. If I were to commit myself to something, you would undoubtedly have me back in six months' time and say that some new crisis has arisen somewhere that you have spent a lot of time on.

Q124 Rory Stewart: There might be an argument—perhaps this is a bit perfectionist—that either you should have a Minister focused full time on the United States, in which case you might be able think about who your natural interlocutor would be to differentiate you from the National Security Adviser, or the Deputy Prime Minister or Foreign Secretary, or, vice versa, you should not really bother at all and just leave it to the

Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, because there are so many relations at that level anyway.

Hugh Robertson: I profoundly disagree with that, because the strength of the relationship is that it works at so many different levels. We have talked about the three key relationships at the top of the tree—Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary—but there is then a whole range of other relationships that work incredibly well underneath that. I have checked the figures for this. We have 886 people across Government working across all Departments on the US network. There are then a further 573 MOD personnel, so you have a range of defence relationships working there. At official level, there is a further series of relationships—you have exchanges and all the rest. There are then parliamentary relationships. Part of the reason why I am able not to spend 25% or so of my time on this particular relationship is because it is well managed at so many different levels.

There is a minor structural issue, in that my equivalent does not really exist in the United States in quite the same way. On the other hand, there is a constant flow of US visitors coming through London. The United States very often uses London as a first stopping-off point—noticeably, the Secretary of State, post-Geneva, came back to London to regroup before going back out to the Middle East—so you have a constant flow of visitors coming through at any time. That enables us to manage the relationship very effectively.

Q125 Rory Stewart: Following on from your observation about the staff, and indeed the increase in the number of staff you have in Washington, there seems to be a challenge in how the embassy connects into the British system. The American system is a very different beast and American foreign policy is very different. It is very theoretical—some of our other witnesses have talked about the way in which military academies produce policy—and very contested. It is very public and can go through rapid lurches. Over Afghanistan, Libya or Syria, we can suddenly find ourselves left—or over Iran, more recently—as the United States can suddenly swing position and we are left looking at the last position. Have we learned the lessons of the past 10 years? What reforms have we introduced into the embassy in Washington to make sure that we are better able to sense the possible lurches, rather than connecting ourselves to whatever happens to be the Administration's establishment wisdom at the time?

Hugh Robertson: I will say a few words on this and then bring in Kate afterwards. In a sense, what that analysis underplays is the strength of the personal relationship that exists between the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State. I suspect, although I have not checked this with him, that very few weeks pass when they do not speak, and they have spent quite a lot of time in each other's company just recently.

As I said, at the end of the Iran talks, the Secretary of State came back to London and spent the afternoon with the Foreign Secretary talking about a series of issues, and then they saw the Libyan Prime Minister together. Constantly at that level you have the relationship being managed. The Prime Minister speaks to the President on a regular basis and just before we came in here, we were talking about the Deputy Prime Minister's possible visit in the new year, which will take in parts of America. I think that, at those levels, we speak to them so often that we are in an extraordinarily good position to see any changes of policy as they occur.

Q126 Rory Stewart: Minister, just to challenge that, you could almost turn that round and say that that is exactly why we keep getting it wrong. We tend to assume that the American system is like ours and that if you talk to the American Secretary of State, you know where things are going. That is why we find, for example, that policy will reverse on Afghanistan, but we won't really have seen it coming because we were not close enough, in that case, to people opposing David Petraeus within the Department of Defence, and not close enough to a new shift in the Chief of Staff in the White House. We do not understand the way in which new donors or new pressures coming out of think-tanks are beginning to shift policy.

It is very tempting, because we have a centralised system, to think that what the President or Secretary of State seems to be saying to you at one time is the direction in which things are going to go. Then, in three weeks, we suddenly find that what we have convinced ourselves is their policy on Iran is no longer be their policy on Iran, because it is a much more open, fragile and rapidly changing system.

Hugh Robertson: All I can tell you is that on the basis of my experience thus far, I have been surprised and impressed by the closeness of the relationship, the way it works on many different levels and the fact that there seem to be so few surprises. To give you a practical example of how this works, when I was in the Middle East a couple of weeks ago, I was crisscrossing the path of the United States Secretary of State, who was also out there. We had a meeting with one of the key interlocutors before he did. We had a slightly surprising outcome, so the very first thing we did on leaving the meeting was to get hold of his private office and give it a download on exactly what had happened so that he could help us to move the thing along. I cannot think of many other people with whom we have that sort of relationship. I recognise the intellectual logic of what you are saying, but on the basis of my own experience thus far, that is not occurring here. I don't know if Kate wants to add anything on the embassy side of things?

Kate Smith: Mr Stewart was absolutely right to describe the US policy-making landscape as he did. It is very complex and very multifaceted. There are a lot of agencies involved, and there are also influences outside the Government agencies, and of course Congress as well. That underlines how important it is to have a large and well-resourced embassy in Washington, which we do, with 617 FCO-employed staff across the network. Their purpose is to stay across all those different tendencies, agencies and actors on the political scene so that we do not suffer some of the slips that Mr Stewart is describing, as 99% of the time we don't—we cover it very well. Back in London, of course we have a much more centralised system, but we now have the National Security Council, which is intended exactly to bring around the table a number of the UK players who have their own relationships in Washington when we are looking at any specific issue that is being discussed, be it Afghanistan or whatever.

Q127 Rory Stewart: I am talking too much, so this will be my final question, but let me just pin you with a very concrete example. If you look at how we failed to anticipate the shift in US policy on Afghanistan, it was because you were trying to track your attention between Vice-President Biden, Secretary Clinton, Ambassador Holbrooke and General

Petraeus. All of them had radically different views on counter-insurgency, negotiation with the Taliban, whether we were likely to succeed and whether the mission was failing. Those were very senior people, and the debate took place in a very private context. We tended always to be two or three months behind the curve, because we tended to reflect the conventional wisdom coming out of the White House. We failed to distinguish just how much tension there was, and we failed to realise that, in the end, the Petraeus position was not going to win though. How do you learn lessons from that? How you do you change your profile in Washington to get round that problem?

Kate Smith: I think I wasn't around in the particular period you are describing, Mr Stewart, but I reiterate that I think the embassy goes about its political work in Washington with exactly that intent in mind. It aims to cover all the bases and make sure that we stay up to speed with what is happening in Washington. As I say, my impression is that the embassy does that extremely well. We don't just see reports back from one or two particular actors. They cover a very wide range of players, and that is synthesised through the person of the ambassador and other people who report to us from the embassy back into the system here.

Hugh Robertson: If I can reassure you, on the three big foreign policy issues of the moment—Iran, Syria and the Middle East peace process—I do not think that we would anticipate that happening.

Q128 Sandra Osborne: As a follow-up to that, we have heard evidence that the Government—and the FCO in particular—do not examine their approach to the US, and the UK's relationship with the US, in the strategic fashion that you do with other countries, for which specific analysts are looking at internal politics and changes. In the US, we have the pivot to Asia. What is your view about that evidence? Is the process due to these things depending so much on personal relationships, or a sort of misplaced sense of familiarity due to the special relationship?

Hugh Robertson: It is reassuring that we talked about this when we did some preparation for this session, and I was thinking about it in some depth over the weekend. It is terribly easy to think of this as a procedural, structural thing, and that you need to have a long-term strategic outlook. I am trying to think of anything that would have been done differently or what this would add to the process. The relationship is so well established—it works well on so many different levels—and the relationships are so well embedded in all the ways we have talked about thus far that I struggle to see quite what it would add that is not, in any event, happening there already.

Q129 Sandra Osborne: But things in the US have changed a great deal politically. There is this pivot to Asia, which I think other Members will ask about in more detail, so does not that say that we should view the situation differently and analyse the internal politics of the US in the same way as for every other country, rather than just take it for granted?

Hugh Robertson: As Kate said, our embassy—I presume it is our biggest embassy anywhere in the world—which is very well resourced, is engaged in that process day in, day out and week in, week out. You then have this series of other interlocking relationships that I already described, which makes us very well positioned to read this sort of thing. Things will

change from time to time—they do here, after all—but I am not convinced that there is an absence of an overarching, strategic look at this. Even if you accept that there is—and I do not—I am not sure what that would add to the picture.

Kate Smith: I would not want the Committee to get the impression that our embassy does not cover those issues. We get a constant stream of really top-quality analysis about internal political developments in the United States. Shifts like the pivot or rebalance to Asia, demographic trends and their impact on politics are just a few. Constantly—every week—we will get some piece of analysis like that from Washington. The question is perhaps more about what is then done with that sort of analysis and how it feeds into policy making here in Whitehall, which is a slightly different one, but certainly we get a great deal of very good, in-depth analysis from the embassy.

Q130 Sandra Osborne: Would you be aware, for example, of whether the National Security Council has ever discussed trends in US politics as a strategic issue?

Hugh Robertson: I would have thought that there are very few meetings of the National Security Council at which the position of the United States is not considered in considerable detail. Clearly, we need to be a little bit careful about what we say about this in public, but, certainly at the NSC meetings that I have been to, the US position has been very well analysed and covered.

Q131 Mr Roy: Minister, we have heard criticism of the underperformance of the UK-US Joint Strategy Board. You said earlier on that you would not like to be pinned down on an answer, but I would absolutely like to pin you down on some of the answers you have given me. The creation of the Joint Strategy Board was announced during President Obama's much heralded state visit to the United Kingdom in May 2011. The board was to report to the United Kingdom and US National Security Advisers and was to meet "quarterly" in alternate UK and US locations. The original No. 10 announcement about the Joint Strategy Board said that the two National Security Advisers would review its status and whether to renew its mandate after year 1. However, Minister, in an answer to me on 22 October to a question I asked about a review, you said, "The Government has no plans to review the work of the UK-US Joint Strategy Board which is only in its second year." Why the change from 2011 to 2013?

Hugh Robertson: The Joint Strategy Board, as you correctly said, was a recent initiative, set up during the state visit, that was designed to try to influence longer-term thinking and deep dives into particular policy areas. The board has met on a number of occasions and had discussions on a variety of issues that complement the various other policy conversations that happen on a daily basis at almost every level of government. The detail—this is where we get into slightly difficult territory—of those discussions is not routinely disclosed.

Q132 Mr Roy: That was not I asked you, Minister. In your answer, you told me that there would be no review, but the Prime Minister said that there would be a review. Who should the Committee believe?

Hugh Robertson: You should believe the answer that you received from me.

Q133 Mr Roy: Not the Prime Minister.

Hugh Robertson: Well, the Prime Minister's quote is presumably from a long time back—

Mr Roy: 2011.

Hugh Robertson: Yes, exactly. So the answer you have now—

Q134 Mr Roy: The Prime Minister said that there would be a review after one year.

Hugh Robertson: Yes. Well, he probably said that when the thing was being set up.

Mr Roy: He did say that.

Hugh Robertson: And the answer you have had now is with the benefit of having seen the board operate.

Q135 Mr Roy: So it was not reviewed.

Hugh Robertson: It is a Government policy that was perfectly sensibly adjusted in the light of experience—

Mr Roy: I want to be absolutely specific.

Hugh Robertson: The answer you have received from me is the correct one.

Q136 Mr Roy: So what was said in 2011 by No. 10 was wrong.

Hugh Robertson: Well, it was their intention to do that. On the basis of our experience and what we have learned over the past couple of years, we have adjusted what we do in line with the answer we have given you.

Q137 Mr Roy: So you have not had a review and you do not plan to have a review.

You just said that the board met on a number of occasions. However, you did say that it would meet "quarterly" in alternate UK and US locations. Minister, how many times has the Joint Strategy Board met since its creation in 2011? I am asking exactly the same thing

that I asked you in my written question: how many times has the board met since its inception? I do not want to know what was said or the content of the meeting. How many times has it met?

Kate Smith: May I take that question, Mr Roy? I do not think I can give you an exact answer. When the JSB was set up, it was a new and quite experimental form. The intention to have regular, quarterly meetings and a formal review was right at the time, but as it developed and as we have got used to working with it, that has changed. I would say that it is in a state of constant review to see whether it is still useful and doing what it was intended to do. We are still at that sort of stage with it.

Q138 Mr Roy: We have moved on from the review, with respect. The question is: how many times have you met? The answer you gave me was: "The Government has had a number of discussions with US partners on a range of matters of mutual interest", which did not answer the question. The question to you was: how many times has it met? You said that it was going to meet quarterly. If I work out the quarters, I would say that it has met roughly 10 times. I am not asking you for an average. It is easy to look up how many times it has met. What is the problem with just letting people know how many times it has met?

Kate Smith: We can certainly do that. It is fair to say that it will not be as many as you just described, Mr Roy, because we have changed its modus operandi.

Q139 Mr Roy: Okay, I accept that. You just said that you can certainly do that. I am sorry that you could not do that for the written questions I asked, because that was not what you said. If it is easy to do it now, it should have been easy enough to give me those figures in a written reply on 22 October. I am really sorry that the FCO decided—

Chair: Will you agree to write to the Committee about this?

Hugh Robertson: Yes.

Q140 Mr Roy: Minister, is your UK-US Joint Strategy Board, which was created in May 2011, performing a useful function, and if it is, what is it?

Hugh Robertson: It performs the function that I outlined at the start of my answer to you. It provides a framework for longer-term thinking and it deep-dives into particular policy areas when we and the United States agree that a more co-ordinated focus would help to strengthen our understanding of any particular issue.

Q141 Mr Roy: Is that medium to long-term thinking as well, Minister?

Hugh Robertson: Yes, but the crucial thing is that if the content of the discussions is made public, it does rather inhibit the nature of the frank discussions.

Q142 Mr Roy: Are the Government planning to consult or involve the US in the preparation of the United Kingdom's next national security strategy and strategic defence and security review? If so, how?

Hugh Robertson: It is inconceivable, after having set up the NSC and having a National Security Adviser, given the strength of the relationship on intelligence matters, that any form of review will take place without considerable input from the United States, so the answer to your question is yes.

Q143 Mr Roy: Thank you. Can I just ask that when you get a parliamentary question, you answer with the specific numbers? It really would have been helpful to get that information.

Hugh Robertson: If we have caused offence in any way, I apologise, but the substance of the answer was correct.

Q144 Mr Roy: It just looks as though you are trying to hide something; I am not offended by it.

Hugh Robertson: I do not think we should get too hung up on the fact that after a policy or process is announced, you see how it works and you adjust it in the light of your experience.

Chair: Minister, I think Mr Roy has made his point and I think you have got it. We look forward to getting your letter. Thank you.

Q145 Sir Menzies Campbell: I am interested in the reference to long-term thinking. We now have a policy of having a Strategic Defence Review at prescribed intervals, whereas in the past they came up as and when they were thought necessary. We know that there is one scheduled in 2015. We discussed a little earlier what I described as the fact of both countries preferring each other to be, as it were, the first ally. How far would the Foreign Office seek to influence the outcome of that 2015 Strategic Defence Review to ensure that the preference for each other remains and, in particular, that the United Kingdom would be able to fulfil its obligations?

Hugh Robertson: The strength of our defence relationship with the United States is such that it is inconceivable, given the importance of the interoperability of our forces, that we would embark on a defence review without considerable input from the United States, although clearly it is a national defence review and it will be done in that way.

Q146 Sir Menzies Campbell: There is, of course, the question of resources. I think only four members of NATO now reach the suggested figure of 2% of GDP. Would you expect some concern from the point of view of the United States were we to reduce the capacity for interoperability, as you have described, under the influence of budgetary considerations?

Hugh Robertson: I would be very surprised, if that were to happen, if we did not receive representations from the United States because of the strength of the defence relationship, the importance of interoperability, and, of course, the importance to the United States of having their key ally alongside them in military operations. Absolutely, they will want to know that that will continue post any Strategic Defence Review.

Q147 Sir Menzies Campbell: In particular, would the question of resilience be important? As a former serving soldier, you know that it is not enough to go and do six months and come back; sometimes you have to go for extended periods and have the capacity for what they used to call roulement—the rotation of forces—in order to maintain a position.

Hugh Robertson: Yes, it is important. Clearly, the size of force you need to conduct a particular roulement or rotation depends on what you have got committed to the operation. I am confident that our armed forces are of a size where they can continue to conduct operations, as they say in the Ministry of Defence, at a high tempo. Absolutely, that would be part of any future review of strategy.

Sir Menzies Campbell: May I turn to another issue, geographically as much anything else? *[Interruption.]*

Hugh Robertson: A call from a United States interlocutor.

Q148 Sir Menzies Campbell: Perhaps the CIA are listening in. I would be disappointed if they were not. When we were in the United States recently, half the people we met talked about a pivot, and the other half talked about rebalancing. Everyone seemed to go out of their way to suggest that the idea that Europe, and therefore the United Kingdom as part of Europe, was going to be abandoned in response to a perceived requirement to spend more time and resources in Asia—there seems to have been a modifying of the original impression and perception that was given by that. From the point of view of foreign policy, what do Her Majesty's Government believe is the significance of the United States talking in terms of what we might call rebalancing? Does that have implications for the United Kingdom? Does it have implications for Europe in general?

Hugh Robertson: That is a very good question, and it lies at the centre of much of the UK-US relationship. My own observation is that we may have over-interpreted this. Remember that we are having this discussion today, while the Prime Minister is in China with the largest-ever trade mission. We have made a virtue of trying to reach out to the BRICs and other economies like that, so you could equally allege that we are in a process of rebalancing. If you look at where the United States Secretary of State has been spending his time just recently, it is on Syria, Iran, the Middle East peace process and Libya. I suspect that if you pinched Mr Stewart's analysis and asked him how much time he had spent on the rebalanced countries and how much he had spent on his traditional priorities, he would very firmly—it's probably 90% on the traditional priorities and a tiny amount on the rebalanced ones.

As a move of tactical significance, it may have been a bit overblown. I suspect that what people told you in Washington is entirely reflective of what we have experienced.

Q149 Sir Menzies Campbell: Should it bring about any change, either in substance or in emphasis, in the policy of Her Majesty's Government towards the United States?

Hugh Robertson: Clearly, we need to know what they are doing, understand why they are doing it and examine the reasons behind the various changes of policy, but as I say, it's a process that in a sense we are undertaking in parallel. You can look at the way British foreign policy has started to take greater account of the emerging economic powerhouses around the world. That is something we discuss with the Americans regularly. I have discussed it myself with the US ambassador. He rather downplayed the significance of this Asian rebalancing or Pacific Rim rebalancing and said the relationship between the UK and the US remains at the core of American foreign policy.

I think you can slightly over-analyse it. It is something we are aware of, but it is very easy to deal with, because in a sense it mirrors the majority of our own thinking.

Q150 Sir Menzies Campbell: I shall ask one last question on this issue, then. Would you expect the policy of the United States and the United Kingdom therefore to be one of co-operation in relation to the opportunities and the responsibilities that undoubtedly will arise in the event of a much more active attitude, either collectively—well, it will be mainly individually—in Asia?

Hugh Robertson: Where our national interests are aligned, the answer to that is yes.

Q151 Sir Menzies Campbell: Can you give any illustration of that? I won't ask you a parliamentary question, but can you give any illustration of that?

Hugh Robertson: Yes. If you look at some of the causes of instability in the region, they are issues that we discuss regularly. Actually, I'll tell you the best example. Funnily enough, it's not in a straight area of foreign policy; it's probably over the Philippines recently, when our experience of operating with the United States allowed us to tie in our aid efforts very closely with them and co-operate and operate alongside them, to the benefit of all concerned.

Q152 Chair: Minister, if you were resident in Japan at the moment, you would probably be rather pleased if there was a pivot to Asia, looking at the tensions, so would you agree that, in effect, policy is dictated by events rather than it being a case of "This is where we're going"?

Hugh Robertson: Generations of many much more distinguished diplomats than me have pointed out that the policy is the process. It is not a strictly US example, but I was very struck when I was in Vancouver a couple of years ago, just before the election. I remembered being there 20 years previously, when I was serving in the armed forces. I had not been there between those two visits, and as a city it had changed out of all recognition because of the influence of the Pacific Rim. The character of the city had just changed completely in those

20 years. It is a reflection of the new reality and the economic powerhouse that you see in the Pacific Rim. They look across the Pacific Ocean. They buy property there. They have relatives who work there. They have family connections and all the rest of it. It's sort of a statement of the new reality.

Q153 Chair: If you contrast Florida with Vancouver, you realise that the country itself is—

Hugh Robertson: Correct; yes.

Q154 Mark Hendrick: Minister, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, taken in conjunction with the Trans-Pacific Partnership, is seen by some as a failure of the multilateral trade rounds that have happened in the past to go much further. Neither TTIP nor the TPP includes China. It almost seems as though the United States has gone out of its way not to include China. Do you feel that working with the US on TTIP jeopardises UK interests in China?

Kate Smith: On TTIP?

Mark Hendrick: Yes.

Kate Smith: Certainly not. TTIP, obviously, is essentially a bilateral trade agreement between the EU and the US. It is very ambitious and will be rather a different kind of trade agreement from some of the ones you are more familiar with, being really focused on regulatory coherence. You alluded to TPP and perhaps how that will interact with TTIP. We actually see opportunities there, to pick up the earlier discussion, and I think the door is still open in the future for China to come into TPP. They are not part of the original group, but I do not think they have been excluded—eventually. On TTIP, clearly an ambition is very much, in certain areas, to set global standards in that practice of regulatory coherence. That may be something that participants in the global economy outside will want to look at and consider whether they would see an advantage in conforming to some of those standards. I think that is something that will obviously have an impact on China and on many other countries as well.

Q155 Mark Hendrick: To pick up on one or two points, it is very interesting that the Prime Minister is in China at the moment, talking about a UK-China trade relationship, when he knows full well that the EU does trade negotiations for members of the European Union, and not the individual nations themselves. Whether he is forecasting the outcome of a possible referendum in the next Government, if they are Conservative, I do not know, because obviously the UK would then negotiate its own trading arrangements, as it would not be a member of the EU. However, I would guess that that is not the Prime Minister's meaning, but it concerns me that China might not react kindly to the sort of pincer arrangement of the TPP and TTIP taking place, with it, although it might not be excluded eventually, not being invited, as the second-biggest economy in the world, to take part in the beginning.

Kate Smith: We are not part of TPP, so it would not be for us to comment on who—

Q156 Mark Hendrick: I am asking about TTIP as well.

Kate Smith: Well, TTIP, as I said, is very ambitious as a transatlantic trade agreement. I think we will have our work cut out to conclude that. It will be a very complex deal to negotiate. The question of whether China eventually will come into any of these plurilateral trade agreements is probably very much for the future.

Q157 Mark Hendrick: Do you feel that the Government are perhaps over-optimistic about the prospects for TTIP, particularly in terms of the time frame? If you look at the European Union, 28 different countries worked for decades to try and create a coherent single market, with diverse directives, technical standards, consumer protection and regulations—28 countries really working hard to get compromises that map into EU law and then national legislation—how do you think this is going to play out when, on a single market and these trading issues, we come, as a European Union, to try to do this with the United States? Will some individual countries in the European Union be a bit miffed that perhaps some of the directives are being watered down or relaxed in the case of the United States? It is going to be a very much more difficult problem to crack than the timetable might suggest.

Hugh Robertson: In a sense, you may be right. You are absolutely right to point out that this is not a simple negotiation in any way, shape or form, but both sides have spent a very considerable amount of time looking at it and working out what needed to be done, and both sides remain absolutely committed to it. I hope very much, certainly from my point of view, that this will be a good thing. We need to work through whatever problems there are and attempt to get this signed as quickly as possible.

Q158 Mark Hendrick: What about the time frame? I am trying to get a feel for where you are on the time frame.

Kate Smith: There is a famous quote from just before negotiations started about the desire to get this done "on a single tank of gas", but I am not sure how that converts into a time frame for a trade negotiation. There is an ambition to get this done reasonably quickly, but as you said, Mr Hendrick, it is very complex. However, progress has been remarkably good so far.

While clearly there will be particular issues for specific member states—they will have interests that they want to preserve—and that will take time to overcome, there is such good will on both sides to get this done that the sort of time frame we have been thinking about is probably over one to two years from the start of negotiations. No one can predict that it will remain within that time frame, but that is the sort of level of ambition that negotiators are looking at.

Q159 Mark Hendrick: Looking at the FCO's advocacy for TTIP with the Administration and in Congress, is the FCO just stressing the potential economic benefits of the agreement, or is it getting involved in any potential strategic ones as well?

Hugh Robertson: Funnily enough, when I saw our ambassador to Washington in my first week, he actually made a point of saying to me that the primary benefits were economic, but that there were strategic benefits as well.

Q160 Mark Hendrick: Such as?

Hugh Robertson: We have talked quite a lot this afternoon about how the relationship with the United States works well on a number of different levels—economic, intelligence, defence—and if we conclude a trade agreement on top of this, that is another area of co-operation, which will therefore strengthen the relationship.

Kate Smith: I think I mentioned before, Mr Hendrick, the outcome of this, which will be to influence and set global rules and standards. It gives an opportunity to Europe and the US to influence the wider world just through what they create in this agreement. That is the strategic import of it.

Mark Hendrick: I think that will be the main one.

Kate Smith: Yes. Also, the boost to economic growth on both sides of the Atlantic—which we hope will be the result of this—will demonstrate worldwide that it is not only in the emerging powers that economic growth can come from the recovery. That will be an important strategic message globally as well.

Q161 Mike Gapes: Minister, may I take you to the very important NATO summit that we are going to be hosting in Cardiff, I think in September next year? What do the Government want to get out of this in terms of the signals and the message sent to the United States about the importance of NATO? In that context, concern has been expressed—including in evidence that we have received—that the US is giving less emphasis to NATO nowadays and is seeing TTIP and other things as more important for its transatlantic focus.

Hugh Robertson: That is a good question. The Foreign Secretary is meeting NATO Foreign Ministers this afternoon, as we sit here.

It is a pretty open secret that US concern about NATO is less about the US desire to see NATO remain strong than about the commitment of some of the partners in NATO to fulfil their commitments. For us here in the United Kingdom, a key part of our policy towards NATO is to encourage other member nations—our partners in Europe—to work hard to ensure that they fulfil their commitments and to prove to the United States that this is an alliance that will prove as successful going forward as it has proved thus far.

Q162 Mike Gapes: When we were in the States recently, we had some interesting discussions, including with people who said to us that even without the possible fiscal cliff,

the US will be cutting $500 billion over a 10-year period—$50 billion a year—from its defence budget. As you know, the US now spends 75% of the total NATO defence spend, whereas it used to be 50%. Clearly, that has enormous implications for Europe. What are we doing to encourage other NATO allies to spend more than they currently spend and perhaps spend the percentage of GDP that we spend? Does it help or hinder us if we are seen to be arguing almost at the behest of the US?

Hugh Robertson: I think that people at the top level of NATO are sophisticated enough to understand where we are coming from on this. They know that the United States is a key ally and they recognise the pivotal importance of the United States to NATO. We have opportunities in December at the European Council on defence to encourage other European countries to live up to their commitments. As you correctly said, we are hosting a NATO summit next year.

Everyone is undergoing some form of retrenchment with defence budgets. If you look at the US figures, they can look fairly alarming if you present them in a fairly alarming way. Sometimes, you tend to forget the sheer scale of the United States armed forces and just how much of this kit they have. You have presumably seen those photographs of endless tank regiments stretched out in the desert. Even if they do go through a period of retrenchment of the sort that you are talking about, they will still have considerable armed forces.

Q163 Mike Gapes: You have ministerial responsibility for the UK-US relationship, but the Minister for Europe is responsible for the NATO relationship in the Foreign Office team. Why is that, and how does that division of labour work?

Hugh Robertson: Reasonably easily is the answer. As you will probably know almost better than me, given your long history of involvement in this area—I am responsible for the US, but I also do the Middle East, North Africa and counter-terrorism—we all have to do a number of things and it depends on how it is divided up. It has not proved to be an obstacle thus far, let me put it that way.

Q164 Mike Gapes: Okay. We can probably pursue this at a later point, but not now.

Can I take you to the implications of the vote by the House of Commons on Syria? We have been in the States and talked to people there about what happened. I am interested in the FCO's perception. Did the vote at the end of August, which was clearly unexpected and unplanned, give the FCO's US desk difficulties in explaining and dealing with that issue, at least until President Obama changed his approach?

Hugh Robertson: We have not detected any detrimental impact on the relationship in the Foreign Office. I quoted the US ambassador on that earlier in the session. As you correctly said, subsequent to that vote, events moved pretty quickly in all sorts of ways. The situation in Syria is rather different from what it was at the end of August, but, no, I do not think that we have noticed that the vote has presented any substantive difficulties at all.

Q165 Mike Gapes: Will there be any lasting impact on the US perception of the UK from that vote?

Hugh Robertson: Not that we have detected thus far. If you look at the areas of UK-US military co-operation in Afghanistan and in Libya on a much smaller scale, where we are involved in the process of training Libyan troops, there is absolutely no sign that that is the case at all.

Q166 Mike Gapes: There is not a perception that we are less likely to be engaged in military action or that the public mood in this country has moved more in that direction.

Hugh Robertson: No.

Q167 Mike Gapes: Even though it has also seemed to have moved that way in the US as well.

Hugh Robertson: It does, but there are many reasons that you could ascribe in explaining why the vote went the way it did. I think we would all agree that the bar for military involvement might have been raised somewhat, but I do not think that anyone thinks that that means never again in the future will we undertake military action.

Q168 Mike Gapes: In the Government document they published before the vote here, there was legal advice that there could be a legal basis for possible military action without a specific resolution authorising it from the Security Council. The French Government produced advice to the Assemblée Nationale along similar lines—that, legally, they felt that they could take military action without a Security Council resolution. Is it your understanding that the US had the same position as regards the legal position on action?

Hugh Robertson: To be honest, I don't know. Because the US legal system is clearly different from ours, I don't directly know.

Kate Smith: I don't know either.

Q169 Mike Gapes: We had some discussions in which it was suggested to us that the perception in the US was that it might have been "illegal but legitimate". That certainly is a view that some people put to us. I am interested in the FCO's view. Perhaps you can write to us.

Hugh Robertson: We can certainly undertake to see whether we made any assessment of that at the time and what the position is. We will most certainly write to the Committee on that, but I am not a legal expert here, let alone in the States.

Q170 Chair: Can I continue to press you on the doctrine of responsibility to protect? If, as you say, you are not an expert, do write to us.

The position of the British Government was that we had a responsibility to protect innocent citizens in Syria; that was the justification. Given that the responsibility to protect is a UN concept, is allowing an attack under the doctrine of responsibility to protect without a UN Security Council resolution not wandering off track a bit, given that a large body of opinion thinks that you do need a UN Security Council resolution? When we were in the UN, we were told informally that the majority of UN members believed that there should be a Security Council resolution.

Hugh Robertson: Based on my experience, I think that if you can achieve a UN resolution, that is always the best way to proceed, viz. Gulf war one, which was done under a clear UN resolution and that held the alliance together.

We have the advice here that gives you the three conditions that need to be met, if you are to do this. There are legal means by which you can do it without a UN resolution, but I think most people would probably agree that if you can get that UN resolution, that is the better way to proceed.

Q171 Chair: Without the UN resolution, however, it is whatever the country drawing up the legal opinion thinks it is.

Hugh Robertson: It is their interpretation of UN law, correct.

Q172 Chair: So where does that leave the UN?

Hugh Robertson: If it disagrees?

Q173 Chair: It is a UN concept, where the UN is not consulted.

Hugh Robertson: As I am not a QC, the best thing might be if we got you the legal advice.

Q174 Chair: We would love to see the legal advice.

Hugh Robertson: The question you are seeking to answer, if I have got this right, is, in the absence of a UN resolution, what would be the basis for intervention? Is that correct?

Q175 Mike Gapes: Didn't we have the legal advice in the note to the House of Commons, which was less detailed than the French advice?

Hugh Robertson: I do not think that was quite the question that was asked, was it? As I understood it, your question was that in the absence of a UN resolution, what would the implications be for the UN if we were to take action?

Q176 Chair: I am dancing around the issue of the fact that responsibility to protect is a UN concept and when it was drawn up it was always envisaged that it would have the backing of the Security Council. That was at the world summit that gave birth to the concept.

We have taken the view that you do not need a Security Council resolution, so my question is—and by all means, reflect on this and write to us—where do you think that leaves the UN? I have to confess that it is a question I posed to the Foreign Secretary, who gave a circuitous answer as well.

Hugh Robertson: The relief that washed over me when you said that was palpable; I was having one of those "This is above my pay grade" moments. We will absolutely get you the detailed advice.

Q177 Chair: When you do write, I would be grateful if you set out whether you believe that the US has the same view as us. Whether we are right or wrong, we do not know. What we would really like to know is whether we are on the same hymn sheet as the United States.

Hugh Robertson: I absolutely see the rationale of the question. Do you want to write to us with the key legal questions you want answered? We will ensure that you receive a timely answer.

Chair: I'd like to think that those sitting behind you may have just taken note of this conversation.

Hugh Robertson: If it is just that question, we will go ahead and do it.

Chair: It is.

Q178 Sir Menzies Campbell: When you do so, will you ask those responsible for preparing the answer to take account of the intervention in Kosovo?

Chair: Can I add to my learned friend's point here? The intervention in Kosovo—this is where the phrase "illegal but legitimate" comes from—was drawn up before the World summit of 2005, which rewrote the rulebook on the responsibility to protect. We are now on a new page in this. If it is the Foreign Office's position that we are not—that we are still on the old policy—then I would like to hear about it.

Hugh Robertson: Point made. We will write to you.

Sir Menzies Campbell: You must understand that there is no unanimity of view on this.

Hugh Robertson: Point made. We will try and write to you.

Q179 Chair: It is a perfectly legitimate case of international law that intervention without a Security Council resolution can be justified. I would like to know how the British Government have got from Gulf War one to today.

Mike Gapes: And the US position, and the relationship with the US.

Chair: Minister, that completes our questions. Is there any point you would like to make or any aspect that you think we have not pushed you on?

Hugh Robertson: No. I think you have more than amply travelled the ground and will provide a number of board meetings for what was contentious today.

Chair: I thank you and Kate Smith for being here today. It is very much appreciated.