

THURSDAY 29 OCTOBER 2015

Members present

Baroness Billingham
Baroness Coussins
Lord Dubs
Lord Horam
Earl of Oxford and Asquith
Lord Risby
Lord Stirrup
Baroness Suttie
Lord Triesman
Lord Tugendhat (Chairman)

Examination of Witness (via videolink)

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE, former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, NATO

Q109 The Chairman: Thank you very much for agreeing to come before us. I gather you are trying to finish a book. I know how time spent away from trying to finish a book is time out of life, so we are very grateful to you. This is a formal session as part of our inquiry into the emerging EU strategic review. Therefore, what you say is being recorded. If at the end of the meeting there is anything you want to nuance, remove and so forth, do tell us. Equally, if there is anything that on second thoughts you would like to add or clarify, again please let us know. We have worked out a number of questions, of which I think you have already had sight, but colleagues will ask supplementaries, and we will ask other questions as well. I will mention them by name before they put their question so you know to whom you are talking.

The first question is quite straightforward. In response to Russian action, NATO and Member States have been taking steps to strengthen their defence capacities and support the Baltic states. Do you think these are meaningful? Have they strengthened

the capacity of the EU and of NATO to respond, and are they likely to prove a deterrent to Russian action in the Baltic states?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: Before I answer that question, can I clear up one thing? Is this evidence session open to the media and the public?

The Chairman: Yes, it is. I do not see anybody here from the media, but it is open to the media.

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: The answer I give to the question is that the steps NATO and the EU are taking—sanctions—are certainly meaningful. The sanctions are probably the only decisive steps that can be taken that Russia will sit up and take notice of. Of course, the impact of sanctions is hurting the Russian economy. I am cognisant of the fact that sanctions can be a double-edged weapon, but generally, given the situation, it would appear that they are the only effective means right now.

As far as defence is concerned—this is principally an issue for NATO—some meaningful actions have been taken. We have to give credit to NATO for that, particularly some of the measures taken as a result of the NATO summit last year, but there is a gap between much of the rhetoric that came out of the summit last year and the reality on the ground. In order genuinely to deter Russia from any attempt on the Baltic states, however unlikely it may seem, my view is that NATO needs some form of permanently stationed forces there. It could be on a rotational basis; it does not necessarily need to replicate the old days of the British Army of the Rhine with those sorts of massive infrastructure issues, but it needs in-place forces. NATO needs the ability to respond really quickly and the means to sustain that. I think that at the moment there is a gap between what is required and the reality.

The Chairman: I note your reference to the British Army of the Rhine, of which at one time I was a minute cog.

Q110 Lord Horam: Member States of the European Union have pledged to increase their defence spending. As you know, the UK has committed to spending 2% of its GDP on defence. What is your judgment about how likely it is that those defence increases will be realised?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: I go back to the NATO summit. Where it fell down was the statement that, “We promise to try to reach 2% of defence spending in NATO within the next 10 years”, which to me smacked of the 1930s and the 10-year rule. I do not think that is very credible. Yes, Britain has pledged 2% of GDP and that is good news, but we need to look within that at the extent to which there has been an element of creative accounting by bringing in budgets from, for example, the intelligence agencies and the like.

Broadly, Europe still has a very long way to go as far as defence spending is concerned. For example, if you compare it with 25 years ago, the split in NATO defence spending between Europe and Canada and the United States was 50:50,

whereas now it is 75:25, with America picking up the burden. A number of European nations have pledged to increase defence spending, but many others are still way below the 2% limit. Even for those that have increased defence spending, or have pledged 2% defence spending, we have to recognise that the last decade and a half, if not the last two decades, has seen a progressive demilitarisation in Europe and in European nations as a result of the operations that have been the priority. If the European nations really want to deliver an effective deterrent capability, there is a very strong case that they need to increase defence spending quite a lot more than 2% of GDP.

Lord Horam: Some of the evidence we have had, particularly from the US ambassador to NATO, is that, "Europe's problem is not that it lacks an army. It is that it lacks a serious commitment to defence—national, European or transatlantic". Do you think the real issue is that there is a lack of political will in defence?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: I think that hits the nail absolutely on the head. It is an issue that sits in a moral component; it is an issue of mind. The reality in Europe is that, either by default or design, pretty well all western European nations have got themselves into a position where higher defence spending at the expense of social welfare spending is unacceptable to electorates and therefore unacceptable to politicians.

Q111 Lord Dubs: I would like to turn to the question of Britain's influence, or lack of it, on foreign policy. In February of this year you were quoted in the *Financial Times* as saying that the Prime Minister's failure to be more active over the Ukraine crisis had turned him into "a foreign policy irrelevance". Apart from Ukraine, how do you see British leadership? Is it really absent on foreign policy discussions in Europe?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: It is 18 months since I sat on the Political and Security Committee in the European Union. I am absolutely certain that Britain continues to play a part in discussions about foreign policy within Europe and of course in NATO. I did say those words, and they were quoted in the *Times*. My point is about British leadership. The issue there is that, particularly over Ukraine, Britain as one of the top-flight economies in the world, a United Nations Security Council member, still a leading European military power and capability, as well as a strong economy, and a signatory to the Budapest memorandum of 1994, is not seen to be taking a leading role. As a NATO and EU officer sitting across the water in Belgium and travelling widely within the Alliance, I pick up very strongly from colleagues from other nations a sense of surprise, disappointment almost, that Britain appears to be taking a back seat and not stepping up to the mark as a leader, because people expect some form of leadership from Britain.

The Chairman: I remember that interview very well. I think it was in connection with the report this Committee had produced about EU, Russia and Ukraine, which had been rather critical of the Government.

Q112 Lord Risby: You mentioned the fundamental importance of NATO in practice in any kind of defence architecture for Europe, and the extraordinary statistic you gave—75:25—says a great deal. Can you give us a sense of the view in the United States in general terms? You have already touched on that, but perhaps you would like to elaborate on it a bit. Very specifically, in the various crises facing the European Union at the moment, namely the relationship with Russia given the Ukraine situation, and the migrant crisis, do you have a sense of the view being expressed by the United States and its relevance to our discussion?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: My contacts in the United States are based principally on the time spent in my last post, and I am pretty out of date; I will be absolutely honest about that. But I think there is no doubt, anecdotally from my previous experience, that there is a sense of frustration in the United States about Europe's apparent inability to be decisive in matters of defence and foreign security policy. It may be a misunderstanding of Europe and the nature of decision-making, particularly in the EU, which makes it difficult to be agile and decisive, but I would certainly say that in the United States there is a pervading sense of frustration with Europe. That is manifested by the comments of successive US Secretaries of State for Defence highlighting the failure of Europe and European nations to step up to the mark in defence spending. As to your question on the specifics of the migrant crisis, I am afraid I cannot help you.

The Chairman: I think Lord Stirrup has a question linked to this, of which you have not had notice.

Q113 Lord Stirrup: Based upon your experience, do you think NATO-EU military co-operation, specifically the Berlin Plus arrangements, remains fit for task? You will have seen this at close hand. How well are they working these days? Is there a need to review those particular arrangements and put more in place?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: The fact of life is that Berlin Plus is dead in the water. Berlin Plus is a useful and important mechanism, as you will know better than anybody, having served under George Robertson when he was NATO's Secretary-General. It works really well, but the reality is that the only extant Berlin Plus operation is the small EU operation in Bosnia—Operation Althea. There you see the European Union calling upon NATO for planning capabilities and technical support. The operation commander is the Deputy SACEUR, which is the way Berlin Plus was meant to operate. It is a very effective operation and a very effective arrangement, but the reality is that because of the politics of the eastern Mediterranean—Cyprus, Turkey, Greece and so on—there will be no more Berlin Plus operations until the issues in the eastern Mediterranean are resolved.

I would go further, given the challenges we face in security in the 21st century. The obvious example is the security challenge presented by the Middle Eastern refugee crisis. That needs not only an effective Berlin Plus in which the EU can call upon NATO

but a form of reverse Berlin Plus in which NATO can call upon the EU for some of the soft power capabilities the EU can bring to the party, as well as finance and funding.

Q114 Earl of Oxford and Asquith: Germany has announced that it is going to be conducting a strategic review of its foreign defence policy. The German Defence Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, has announced that German defence spending will increase by about 6% over four years—by €8 billion. Whether or not that is significant in military spending, she said the new review should reflect on Germany's ambitions in foreign policy. Do you think that Germany will take a more ambitious view?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: I am not a crystal ball gazer and I do not know what the outcome of that will be. Within Europe, Germany already plays quite a major role in defence and security: for example, in its commitment to troop levels for NATO operations. When I left NATO, Germany was quite some way ahead of the United Kingdom in that sense. Germany within Europe has certainly picked up the battle in the Balkans, particularly in Kosovo, in a most impressive way, and has underwritten that capability.

With German defence and security, the issue is not so much about security as about defence. The Bundeswehr has changed dramatically over recent years, particularly as a result of Afghanistan, but the notion of Germany being prepared to step up and support, for example, an Article 5 commitment under collective defence must be open to question because of the almost pacifist nature of German society. The notion of the use of armed force by the state for legal reasons is still an issue, for very obvious reasons, so the question is not whether Germany will play a major role in CSDP, which I think it will, but whether it will fight? That is the question I would have.

The Chairman: At the moment I am reading Niall Ferguson's biography of Kissinger. It deals with the 1950s and 1960s. A running theme at that time was German unease—one might almost say fear—that in the end the Americans would not be willing to fight for Berlin, or perhaps even for West Germany. You have analysed the German position on Article 5, but do you think that would apply even to countries very close to Germany. In other words, if the Baltics were threatened, do you think that the German inhibitions to which you referred would apply, or do you think they apply only to threats rather further afield that would not actually threaten the German homeland?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: I think those inhibitions would apply in an Article 5 collective defence context even if the Baltic states were threatened. I do not think that Germany is alone there; those inhibitions would apply to other NATO countries as well: for example, the United Kingdom. There would be real difficulties. Really difficult questions would be asked about the notion of British soldiers fighting, and if necessary dying, for Latvian, Estonian or Lithuanian freedom. We live in a world where there is an expectation that peace remains the default setting, and the notion of actually having to step up and fight for our freedoms is seen almost as something from another era.

Q115 Baroness Billingham: How would you assess the effectiveness of the CSDP as a tool of crisis management? What priorities would you highlight in order to improve the effectiveness of the CSDP, and what can the High Representative's strategic review contribute in that regard?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: In answer to the first aspect—the effectiveness—it is almost axiomatic that 28 nations working together are going to be more effective than smaller groups of nations or individual nations. Even the strongest nation will be more effective on foreign and security policy if it is part of a grouping of 28, but it needs an effective decision-making mechanism. The second point would be the critical importance of an effective decision-making mechanism, and I am not sure that the Political and Security Committee of the EU has that. Take for example the question of deploying the European Union battle group: it is a tiny organisation, but it would require the agreement of every one of the 28 member nations to deploy it, which does not fill me with much hope that it is a particularly agile organisation.

I would add to any wish list for what would come out of the review, first, the need for an agile decision-making mechanism. Going back to Lord Stirrup's point, No. 2 would be the importance of the NATO-EU relationship. Building on that point, at the moment the only issue that the North Atlantic Council and the PSC discuss is Bosnia; everything else is off limits because of the politics of the eastern Mediterranean. The third area is meeting the strategic challenge of the age, which is the whole notion of building stability in fragile states on Europe's periphery. The failure to do that is the refugee crisis. Of course, the horse has now left the stable, but how much better and cost-effective to build stability through capacity-building. I do not mean just military capacity building. That is part of it. Building professional armed forces to stabilise the state is a really important aspect, but it is wider than that; it is law and order, governance, education, health, tackling corruption, and having effective administrators in civil ministries. Europe has to come to grips with that and think it through to prevent the sorts of crises in the Middle East and Africa that are now impacting directly on Europe's security. It is the business of tackling things upstream rather than trying to deal with the consequences, which are always messy, and very expensive and difficult to deal with.

Q116 Baroness Coussins: In your last answer you gave a very good, detailed definition of what the EU has always called its desire to produce a comprehensive approach to crisis management, combining military and civilian instruments. That has often been seen as a particular strength of the EU when it comes to foreign affairs. Do you agree with that assessment? Could you say something about what the strategic review could do to improve the co-ordination of military and civilian EU tools, especially bearing in mind the very disparate positions, policies and priorities within the 28 Member States?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: I think it is a strength, but at the moment it is on a pretty minuscule basis. In order to tackle the challenges, there needs to be a gear shift in ambition and readiness to take on a much greater role. For example, the EU operation in the Horn of Africa has been very successful; it certainly was when I was still in harness. It was very effective in combining, under an effective High Representative, a very small military capacity-building mission in Somalia with economic and other reconstruction efforts in the Horn of Africa, as well as the EU counterpiracy mission. That is a good example of the EU's comprehensive approach. When targeted, the EU has been effective in a number of relatively small areas, but the challenge is wider now. Given the scale and size of the European Union, how better to build military-civil co-operation? I come back to the great issue of NATO and the EU. NATO has the military capability. We do not need a major parallel EU military structure. It is a complete waste of time, money and effort. If we were able to revive Berlin Plus, all the mechanisms are there to build precisely that linkage between the EU and NATO and deliver more effective civil-military co-operation. If you add to that the point I made earlier about a reverse Berlin Plus, you have what is needed to meet the challenges.

Q117 Baroness Suttie: If the United Kingdom votes in the referendum to leave the European Union, what do you believe will be the likely consequences for the CSDP and the broader EU defence capacity?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: It will be much weaker, because one of the strongest nations of Europe will be out. I think it is worth highlighting that one area where it has been effective, and we are benefiting strategically from it, is the impact of the EU on security in the western Balkans. Without the magnet and the clout of the European Union, I do not think there is the slightest chance that, for example, the comprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia would have been signed. That was thanks to Baroness Ashton's very impressive negotiating and diplomatic skill, and she deserves a real plaudit for that. Why is Serbia looking to behave better? Why did Serbia sign? Because ultimately Serbia wants to join the European Union. That is a good example of the stabilising impact of the European Union in one specific security area. If Britain is out of that, I go back to my point that 28 nations are better than one, and 27 nations are not as good as 28 nations.

Lord Dubs: If Britain were to leave the EU—I certainly hope we will not—would that not automatically put more onus on NATO to make up for the weaker position of the CSDP?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: NATO is there to defend the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation area. NATO is the critical defence mechanism that underpins European security. The CSDP has been effective in specific areas or on specific missions where NATO has not wanted to be involved, probably because the Americans did not want to get involved—in a number of the missions in Africa, for example.

Turning my argument around, if Britain comes out of the European Union, does that affect Britain's position in NATO? In nuts and bolts terms, probably not a great deal, because North America, Canada and Norway are not part of the European Union, but they are very important members of NATO. Does it affect attitudes to Britain? Does it affect Britain's ability to leverage power in Brussels—the corridors of power? Does it affect attitudes to Britain? It probably does.

Q118 The Chairman: We were in Brussels last week. One of the points made to us was that although foreign policy in its broadest sense is a matter for Governments rather than being within the EU framework, the instruments by which foreign policy is exercised are increasingly in the hands of the Commission, so rather than it being the External Action Service that implements decisions, those decisions require the active participation of the Commission. I was very struck by that point, because, to come back to Lord Dubs, if we were not in the European Union it would be more difficult for us, even mechanically, to make our influence felt.

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: You are going into a technical area that is beyond my competence, but I think the logic of that makes great sense.

Q119 Lord Stirrup: Can I go back to the point about EU co-operation with others? You made some key points about the relationship with NATO, but the EU has been trying to upgrade its relationship with the United Nations and other regional actors, such as the OSCE, the African Union and so forth. Have you seen any evidence of success in that? Are they building relationships that will serve EU foreign policy better in future?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: Have I seen evidence of that? No, I have not, but I have been out of harness for a bit. Do I think it is important? Absolutely important. The stronger the relationships between international organisations, the better. For example, to go back to the example of Libya, one saw the increasing importance of regional organisations such as the African Union and the Arab League in building legitimacy for operations and taking on tasks. Going back to the business of building stability in fragile states, it can only be a good thing if the EU builds relationships with the AU and other regional organisations, but the proof of it will be what comes out of those relationships.

Q120 Lord Horam: What is your view of the Russian action in Syria? Some people would say that it is a very clever move by Putin; it will enhance his influence in the Middle East, and that is what it is all about. Others say that militarily he is walking into a quagmire; there is no end to it and he will be bogged down, just as NATO was bogged down in Afghanistan. Do you have a view on that? If so, I would be interested in it.

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: Arguably, both points are right. He could well be walking into a quagmire, but he has also increased his influence in a key area. What he is doing demonstrates that, without partnership with Russia, the ghastly hell

of the Syrian saga cannot be resolved by the international community. He has demonstrated rapid and ruthless decision-making, and in doing so he has highlighted the lack of any credible western strategy towards Syria.

Q121 Lord Horam: What should be the reaction of the European Union to this action?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: I think the European Union and the West have to be pretty ruthless and pragmatic and recognise that we may have to talk to bad people. We have to prioritise. Selection and maintenance of the aim is the first principle of war. What is the aim? Is the aim to get rid of ISIS, ISIL or Daesh—whatever you want to call it? Is it to get rid of Assad? The two are probably incompatible. If it is to get rid of Daesh, we may well have to talk to Assad and work alongside the Russians in order to do so, but that is going to be a really difficult political question for western leaders, who have already nailed their colours to the mast over Assad's previous use of chemical weapons.

Q122 The Chairman: While we are on Syria, do you think there is any scope in that area particularly for subgroups of EU and NATO states? I was going to ask you about the potential role of subgroups anyway, but it perhaps arises naturally in the context of Syria.

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: The notion of groups of nations operating together under the aegis or banner of NATO and/or the EU makes eminent sense, particularly in the business of trying to build defence capability; the British-French agreement makes a lot of sense. Whether you call it the entente frugale or not, it is building capabilities, and the northern group of nations do things similarly. There may be scope for working together with other like-minded nations to build consensus over the strategies that need to be adopted to deal with the problem of Syria.

Q123 Lord Triesman: In an earlier answer to the Chairman you made the point—I do not want to put words into your mouth, so if I have got it wrong please tell me—that there was perhaps an unwillingness for electoral and political reasons to embrace some of the obligations under Article 5, and that that would create an ongoing weakness and maybe a drift towards looking at a number of problems with regard to Article 4, because that seems less difficult. I know you did not make the latter point; it is one that perhaps I would make. I assume that if that reading of it is one we might come to, it is very likely that Russia and President Putin are coming to the same reading. In those circumstances, would he, in your view, be more inclined in picking his policy options to feel very much less constrained, and should we be looking at the risks of a very much less constrained Russia than we have seen even in the last couple of years? What might the counterplays be to that, if it is the correct reading?

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: Yes is the answer to that question. Deterrence depends on capability and on being able to communicate that capability,

and ultimately it depends on credibility. At the moment, I think that NATO fails on all three counts. That will not have been lost on President Putin. There is no 100% guarantee, but the best way to guarantee that the dynamic started by President Putin in Crimea and Ukraine is stopped is to hold up a very large stop sign based on a genuinely credible defensive capability and a belief in the determination that we are prepared to use it. Until that happens, with a leader like Putin there will always be the chance that he will think, "I might be able to get away with that".

To go back to Syria, there is a strategic linkage between what Putin observes of western inability to come up with a coherent strategy on Syria and the assessment that he might make about whether the alliance is prepared to step up to the mark: for example, to defend the Baltic states. It comes back to credible defensive capability. Smoke and mirrors and pretending we have capabilities when we do not have genuinely capable forces will only make matters worse, because he will see through all that.

The Chairman: Sir Richard, thank you very much indeed. We have been through the list of questions. It has been very crisp. We have got through more quickly than I anticipated, but I think we have achieved everything we wished to achieve. I wish you luck with your writing.

General Sir Richard Shirreff KCB CBE: Thank you very much indeed. It has been a pleasure.