



Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Strategic Defence and Security Review, HC 626

Tuesday 24 November 2015

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Richard Benyon; Douglas Chapman; James Gray; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Jim Shannon; Ruth Smeeth; Mr John Spellar; Bob Stewart; Phil Wilson

Questions 1–38

Witness[es]: **Dr David Blagden**, Strategy and Security Institute, Exeter University, **Professor Patrick Porter**, Strategy and Security Institute, Exeter University, **Professor John Gearson**, King's College, London, **Dr Chris Tuck**, King's College, London, and **Peter Roberts**, Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, gave evidence.

Chair: Good morning everybody. Welcome to this special session, which will focus on individual specialists' reactions in the short time that has passed since the SDSR and national security strategy were published together. I welcome our four witnesses today, and ask each of them to identify himself for the record.

Dr Blagden: I am Dr David Blagden, and I am the lecturer in international security and strategy at the University of Exeter.

Professor Porter: I am Professor Patrick Porter, at the University of Exeter.

Professor Gearson: I am Professor John Gearson, from King's College in London. I am a professor of national security studies, and I also direct our Centre for Defence Studies.

Dr Tuck: I am Dr Chris Tuck. I work at King's College London, but I am based at the Joint Services Command and Staff College.

Peter Roberts: I am Peter Roberts. I am a senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute.

Chair: Welcome, all. To start our questions, I call Richard Benyon.

Q1 Richard Benyon: The very first page of the SDSR talks about our vision. I wonder whether you can help us understand how the Government view what Britain is in the world

today. There are wide-ranging views within Parliament about whether we are still what we were back in the 1950s, whether we are Belgium with nukes, or whether we are somewhere in between. What do you see from that? Are the Government being realistic about our place in the world? I suspect, Chair, that you do not want all the witnesses to answer every question, but perhaps a short answer from each might be helpful at this stage.

Peter Roberts: I am happy to start. For me, it is fairly clear that the Government sees the United Kingdom as an economic power, that its economic grand strategy is front and centre in this review—which leads us to some slightly disappointing conclusions, probably—and that it places defence and security firmly subservient to those economic ends. It strikes me that the force design and aspirations that come out from this paper are based around an economic desire, rather than a desire for security and defence. It firmly subserviates those two points to being economically secure.

Dr Tuck: In some respects, it is a very traditional-looking defence paper with a very traditional perception of Britain's role in the world. It focuses very much on the notion that Britain is a global power with global interests. I think that it overstates the power that we have, particularly in the realm of things such as soft power. The aspirations are not met by the power resources that we have.

Professor Gearson: I would add that, following significant criticism from allies in private, this paper is trying to say that Britain is outward looking, not inward looking, in quite an important way. We will explore in this session whether or not that is backed up by the means to achieve what it declares. To me, it is quite striking how far it is speaking of a Britain engaged in the world. The 2010 review did not do so in the same way, and certainly not in the way in which we have been discussing our various problems since then. The paper faces the challenge of also trying to wrap up homeland security or insecurity in the minds of the public following the rise of ISIL. I am not sure if it has quite balanced those two points in this document.

Professor Porter: I would simply say that this document expresses a long-held view of the British Government that Britain is a co-defender of the liberal world order, led by the United States. Britain is a very important part of that, which is one of the things that makes it more than Belgium with nukes. There is a phrase that continually rings through the document, which is the “rules-based world order” which Britain has wanted to defend and wants to defend very much, as Professor Gearson says, on the front foot. Some credit is due that the document recognises a rapidly deteriorating security environment and tries to close the gap that Dr Tuck mentioned between capabilities and commitments. I think there are still some problems with the imbalance between them. Finally, it does what Britain has tried to do since World War II, which is to exert a disproportionate level of power compared with its so-called weight.

Dr Blagden: Yes, I would say that this is very much a vision of a particular kind of major power that is somewhere less than super but somewhere more than minor, with both the wherewithal and the responsibility and duty to project its values and its vision of itself on to the world. This review compared to 2010 is perhaps assigning a greater proportion of resources to try and match that sort of vision. I think the vision was there in 2010 as well and this is belatedly assigning some more capability to it.

Q2 Richard Benyon: Do you think that there is enough realism in this about the likelihood of us being part of multilateral, rather than unilateral, security force activity? The Falklands scenario is now so remote from the possibilities and we would like to be at least bilateral, more likely multilateral, in how we would carry out any military endeavour. Is this realistic?

Professor Gearson: It is quite striking that the document talks about a global projection role for Special Forces which are not increased in number but with a capability which is quite striking, but elsewhere talks repeatedly about allies and names a few countries that were not named previously. We obviously have all spoken about the UK and France. Germany is now identified as a key defence partner. I would like to see more detail on that and how that will develop. It then goes through, frankly, the entire world except for South America, naming countries that we have defence relationships with. I am in favour of the idea of making the most of the relationships that we have but it does sound very aspirational in many cases—so, desirable, but aspirational at this stage.

Dr Tuck: Also it is sometimes contradictory, because in some respects objectives that we need to achieve might be furthered by building a stronger relationship with China, for example, but in other respects China links to some of the threats that we face. So in trying to protect our interests, we lock ourselves into what I think are contradictory lines of activity.

Q3 Johnny Mercer: This SDSR points out four particular challenges likely to drive UK security priorities for the coming decade. They include the increasing threat of terrorism, the resurgence of state-based threats, the impact of technology and the erosion of rules-based order. In your view—starting with you, Dr Blagden—would tackling these four challenges sufficiently protect the UK against tier 1 risks, particularly those highlighted in the NSRA 2015 priority list?

Dr Blagden: One of the issues that we confront with the NSRA is that it creates very broad categories so it is hard to think what might not actually fall within those categories if we defined it in the right way. If we can indeed meet those four threats—sorry, those four identified objectives—that would be a very positive step towards the promotion of UK security. One of the issues that we will get into in the nuts and bolts of how we assign capabilities and staff, which the SDSR part—as opposed to the NSS—is trying to do, is trying to rank and prioritise within those. So in the context of the tier 1 NSRA risks, for example, we have instability overseas. Obviously it would be staggering if there was not instability overseas in the next five years, or international military crises.

Q4 Johnny Mercer: So these goals will be pretty easy to achieve, to an extent.

Dr Blagden: Yes. I think the issue is how, within those four, you are going to rank them in a way that is saying not just, “Look, we fulfilled the tier 1 risks, sort of by definition,” but, in fact, “How do we prioritise and draw some areas of focus out of the document?”

Professor Porter: Building on that point, we have a public document here and we have a set of capabilities that are being generated, so we have to bear both of those things in mind. There is something quite peculiar about a publicly declared national security strategy that is done for both an international and domestic audience, which, by definition, will restrict the authors on what they want to say and commit to. That is hardly surprising. Therefore, that creates this difficulty of the generality of some of the statements.

In terms of actual core capabilities, what we are seeing being generated for the moment is, in many respects, being very competent and doing things like raiding and disrupting—moving from a large-scale expeditionary footing like Afghanistan and Iraq to being able to raid and disrupt from a remove. My worry would be, if the security environment continues to deteriorate in a serious way—all the way from what is happening in North Africa and the Middle East to Afghanistan, which is very little mentioned in the document but which was such an important part of the last SDSR—that is going to raise a much more uncomfortable set of questions about alliances and not just the division of labour with current allies and partners, but difficult, complex relationships with people who are both partners and rivals in the Middle East and elsewhere. If things keep getting worse, it is going to get harder and harder for this set of capabilities to respond well, particularly with the ability to act with independent action in terms of the air maritime environment if things go really badly with a major competitor.

Q5 Mr Spellar: Is there a problem with this type of review in the sense that, like the US's quadrennial defence review, because you are putting it out to such a wide audience, you cannot really tackle some of the issues there; nevertheless it is still necessary to plan and think about those within Defence departments?

Professor Porter: I would say there is a difficulty. If the architects of this kind of document believe that the document suffices to create a national security strategy, there does have to be something off-camera where people are having much more precise conversations about what really does count as a ranked threat and ranked priority. My worry would be that—I hope that those conversations are happening. There almost has to be a two-level process here.

It is important to articulate something to the people who pay for these things. There has to be some consideration of the democratic context. But not all of it can be open and explicit.

Professor Gearson: The importance of this document is, first of all, the fact that it is being produced. I think on balance the five-year cycle is a good thing. There are arguments for and against a four or five-year cycle, but it is good to have it. But it will not achieve its objectives or be as good as it could be if the process reverts to what happened last time, which was that a lot of teams were pulled together in the 2010 SDSR and national security strategy and things were produced, and then everybody went back to their Departments and into their silos until these teams were pooled back again about six or nine months ago.

Even though there is talk about joint teams and reviewing the delivery of this document in its latter stages, there is a great danger that we will only get the full merits of this process if Whitehall starts having, in effect, a permanent security and defence capability in terms of thinking about these trends, because things will happen in the five-year period as well as in the 10-year period.

Dr Tuck: There are other processes ongoing. The services are going through a process of developing future operating concepts and that might provide some additional detail on the ways in which the capabilities could be used, but there are two things that I think are interesting. First of all, I do not think that the capabilities that would be generated by this document are markedly different from those we had before. If we had the capabilities that this SDR is looking to develop five years ago, would we have been in so much better a

position to have dealt with the problems that we have faced over the last five years? I think the answer is no.

That leads to the second point. I think that in this document there is a focus on developing objectives and capabilities, but the real problem that I think we have had over the past five years is how you link those two. The document refers, for example, to the fact that it has policies, and is developing capabilities, to deal with ISIL, but it is not policies in terms of objectives and capabilities that are the issue. It is the strategy—it is how you link the two—and, necessarily in this document, there is a lack of detail on that. We are giving ourselves—maybe—some increases in capability, but in terms of dealing with some of the real problems we face, there is not much new strategy in there which would help us.

Peter Roberts: My view is that the document is designed to do two things: first, to reassure the population and our allies, and, secondly, to deter our enemies. Potentially, it might well achieve the first; it might well assure the local population in the UK that a lot is being done, that we are buying some new gear and that all is very good. But I don't think it is going to have any impact whatever on the deterrence message, which we remain fairly weak in. The reality is that the force design and capabilities that are laid out in this document will not meet the challenges of the top four threats.

Q6 Mrs Moon: What worries me about this document—I would welcome your comments—is that it is jam tomorrow. We are talking about a five-year period, but most of the capability will begin to filter through only at the end of the five years. So we have another long period in which many of the capabilities that we have not had, and that we are now admitting we should have had, will only just be coming on stream as we are about to look at the next SDSR. What is your feeling about that? How vulnerable do we remain in the next, say, four years, before we actually start getting some of these key capabilities coming on stream?

Professor Gearson: The vulnerability is the usual one: once we have had a dozen years without Carrier Strike, there is a fairly difficult conversation to have about why we need Carrier Strike if we have lasted a dozen years without it. Nevertheless, the document is, to some extent, doing what the last one should have done, which was, in effect, to accept that we are going to procure these platforms and make the most of them. So, the document may, to some extent, be talking about a future capability in things like maritime surveillance, but the carriers are going to come online in the next four to five years. We are going to start to project our forces in different ways and to get certain ISR capabilities for reconnaissance and intelligence, which are as important as the platforms. You need the platforms to support them, ultimately, but they are moving, to some extent, in the right direction. So, yes, it is jam tomorrow—that is evident—but some of the decisions are things some of us would have approved of four or five years ago in the last review.

Dr Blagden: I think the document is displaying an awareness of this, in the sense of moving straight for the P8, for example, in the context of Maritime Patrol Aircraft, rather than going with a longer, drawn-out competition. That is very much a trade-off of a competitive process against a platform that is maturing and that has been proven with UK forces in the context of things like the Joint Warrior exercise, with the Americans bringing it over. The document displays some recognition of this and tries to make some choices that allow us to get things as quickly as possible, even if that has certain other consequences.

The flipside is that, had they left it another five years, some of these capabilities would have been much further from regeneration, if that makes sense—things like keeping the MPA seedcorn initiative going by keeping UK personnel embedded with the American and Canadian MPA fleets. These guys have a huge pool of expertise but are getting older—you can see that with the MPA crews that come over for things like Joint Warrior. So, in some ways, yes, the critique is completely legitimate, but, leaving this another five years, viewing it the other way round, would be even more mad, if that makes sense.

Professor Porter: Where there are gaps in capability because of this time lag—this long lead time—there are some positive things which have been done in the broader diplomatic picture to try and mitigate the environment around us—for example, the Anglo-French collaboration, which is another thing that comes through from the Lancaster House agreement onwards. I would also mention the Iranian interim agreement. Those are two steps you can take to try and reduce the threat environment, so that if it does take time to catch up, at least you have less of a problem around you. That needs to be considered beyond simply what physical kit is coming online, if that makes sense.

Dr Tuck: The document puts a lot of emphasis on co-operation. Co-operation with allies and other regional actors has over the past few years helped us to fill in some of the gaps in capability, such as Maritime Patrol Aircraft. There is no reason to assume that that would not help to bridge the gap.

Peter Roberts: You are absolutely right to be worried and it will get worse before it gets better. Most of the improvements in capability and the equipment programme that is being funded will come from the MoD's own efficiency savings, which means that the MoD will have to lose its core expertise, shed its most valuable—and most costly—people and will do so at a time when it is increasingly saying that it is going to be pulling back in a lot of that corporate knowledge that it was previously giving out to primes or other experts. So at the same time as you are going to be bringing in these responsibilities, you are going to shed and not only hollow out, but cut entire layers of corporate knowledge and expertise who will be responsible for delivering these major programmes over 10 years. We will be in the position of buying an enormous number of amazing capabilities with no one with the expertise to run them; we will have made all those people redundant and thrown them out, and we will not have a good thing to look at in five years' time when we come to review this—some lovely platforms arriving, but we do not know if there will be the skills or expertise to bring them into service or to operate them.

Dr Tuck: I am optimistic for pessimistic reasons. I do not think that the capabilities themselves will revolutionise our ability to deal with these problems; I do not think that the capability gaps before these new capabilities come on tap matter so much, because the real problems are to do with how we use the capabilities—it is the strategies that are problematic. There will be problems, because some of these capabilities come without commensurate increases in manpower and, although we have increases in the defence budget, they will not be enough to cover defence inflation, so we will only be slowing the rate at which problems emerge—we are not eradicating that problem. So I am probably more optimistic, but for pessimistic reasons. Capability is not the key issue.

Professor Gearson: We are talking about platforms again, but most defence academics always say—as Chris said—it is the strategy, not the platforms. If you read this document, it feels like a very traditional “there is something for all three services” again, but buried in

there—I do not have the page reference—are some approving comments about Joint Forces Command and how that will be leading the Armed Services in embracing information technology, which I would say is probably more important than an extra squadron of the Lightning being retained, because that is actually where we are still fairly behind, in embracing what is happening already.

I hope that what the document says about that will be delivered. After we have talked about the platform choices, those things are likely to be more influential in terms of our deployable capability and our ability to understand the environments we go into. That is my concern, that the cuts of whatever they might be—30% in MoD civilians—will inevitably hit some of those strategic thinkers, planners and defence intelligence. I would like the detail from the MoD, and I hope that the Committee will have the chance to get that out of them, because the last thing that we need to do is to undermine our capacity to think about the problems and where we send our Armed Forces, rather than just having a platform.

Q7 Mrs Moon: May I sum up that up? General Houghton said at RUSI that we are as a country “too platform focused and insufficiently concerned about enablers”, and critical enablers are personnel. Would you agree with that summary of what you have just said? Lots on platforms, but not enough about personnel.

Peter Roberts: Yes, and this review does nothing to reverse the increasing focus on equipment platforms. Platforms and equipment—this is the problem with the defence review meeting the four key challenges—do not answer the question. People and ideas answer the question, but there is nothing in here to support that. In fact, by hollowing out the force with an increasing number of efficiencies and by making people work harder, you are giving them less thinking time, so in essence the Government are saying, “We don’t really care about the concept of how you’re going to fight; we’re just going to give you lots of shiny kit to do it”, but there is little evidence that technology gives you a competitive edge that allows you to win. It might give you a competitive edge on paper. It might even be effective in terms of reassuring people. But it does not allow you to either defend yourselves effectively or win in an engagement. You are absolutely right: the people factor behind this, the concept of how you want to fight, what backs this up, in terms of what it looks like as a force design, and how you are going to use it—those are missing entirely.

Dr Tuck: Mine is a banal answer: they both matter, depending on the circumstance you are involved in. If we are serious about the potential for getting ourselves set up to be involved in a high-intensity conflict, then—particularly in the maritime environment and in the air environment—technology does matter. If you haven’t got good kit, you are likely to be on the receiving end, because in those environments the offence tends to be stronger than the defence. And you need numbers of that technology, because you have to be able to take losses. Otherwise, you will have a Potemkin military: it will look nice and shiny but as soon as you put it in theatre, and fly it out for a couple of days or sail it into a dangerous area, you are going to lose that capability very quickly. The technology matters.

At a basic level, however, you also need personnel and the right skills, and you need numbers of personnel, as well. That is not necessarily addressed in SDSR, which doesn’t reverse the previous cuts. You have an Army of 82,000. That is taking great risks in terms

of things like resilience, and so on. So mine is a banal answer: you need both if you are serious about meeting this range of threats.

Professor Porter: May I also offer a banal response? I absolutely agree with Chris that both manpower—personnel—and technology clearly matter. Apart from having the scale of manpower, which is getting more and more expensive itself—it is an increasingly expensive investment—there is the question of training. There is the need to educate your personnel in a certain doctrine, because to make technology work to achieve political outcomes at affordable cost, which is what we ideally use the military for, you need to educate them in ways of using those things effectively.

One of the dilemmas that faces Britain is what exactly you train people to do. You cannot train people to be excellent at everything—at least, that is very difficult. There is a difficult tension between wanting to have a flexible force that is competent across a spectrum of capabilities and having what we might call event specialists. What you cannot do is have excellent pentathletes across everything. That is very difficult. That works to your point about jam tomorrow—what kind of things are coming tomorrow, where today's training, doctrine and education are not doing the job?

Dr Blagden: I would like to expand somewhat on what Dr Tuck was saying. There are domains where capability and technology are very significant. For a high-wage, capital-intensive economy like the UK, a substitution of bodies for equipment is the sort of thing you would expect to rationally see, as it were. In talking about winning engagements, we are implicitly projecting our frame of reference of our recent Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns, and also what Libya and Syria look like. But in terms of thinking about how the UK could best make a really significant contribution to conventional deterrence in Europe, having 138 really top of the line strike aircraft that can do close air support and ground attack is really significant.

Again, thinking about the MPA gap, and the challenges posed by Russian submarines in the vicinity of UK territorial waters doing SIGINT and stuff like that, saying that the capability or the technology is not as important is not correct. The difference between having a Maritime Patrol Aircraft and not having one is actually quite profound, particularly if you are in the business of operating ballistic missile submarines. I am not trying to disagree with anything that has been said about the manpower issue, but I do not want us to be too down on the capability statements in the document, because some of them are non-trivial.

Q8 Mr Spellar: Can I tease out a bit more about defence intelligence capability? The SDSR says: “We will recruit and train over 1,900 additional security and intelligence staff across the agencies to respond to, and deter those behind, the increasing international terrorist, cyber and other global threats.” That is good, but how will it then link in with the different military and defence remits? And are we in danger, through the cuts in the core numbers of civilians inside the MoD, of degrading that capability, which would therefore significantly weaken both the contribution that they can make and the interaction and interoperability between the various agencies?

Professor Gearson: I am concerned about that, although, informally, information appears to show that intelligence capabilities within the Armed Services are being relatively protected. As I say, if you have a headline of a 30% reduction in MoD staff, it would be

very surprising if defence intelligence was not one of the victims of those cuts. I think it is often forgotten that that is a national asset. The intelligence and security agencies are not our primary source of analysis. They are collection agencies to a large extent, albeit that they increasingly do analysis, and the defence intelligence capability is very important for the national security strategy bit of this document.

Q9 Mr Spellar: It is an international asset as well, in terms of what we give for what we get, with other agencies in other countries.

Professor Gearson: That's right. Where this document is interesting is in suggesting that the Ministry of Defence should be drawn upon more regularly by other Government Departments and asked questions and asked to support the delivery of national security. Intelligence would be a key part of that. If that means that the Chief of the Defence Staff will protect defence intelligence, rather than giving it a 30% cut along with the rest of the MoD, fine, but I am concerned that we often forget it. Certainly, the announcements of increases in the single intelligence vote and also the numbers are going to go into the civilian agencies; I do not believe any of that is going to go to defence intelligence.

Q10 Chair: As the witnesses will know, the Committee will be assessing different dimensions of the SDSR, according to our own checklist report that we brought out at the weekend. One of the main themes of that report, apart from identifying key potential threats and vulnerabilities, was that we had doubts about the methodology of ranking the threats according to tier 1, tier 2 and tier 3. That was an innovation in 2010. Tier 1 seems simple enough: it is a threat that you regard as being highly probable and that would have a high impact. Tier 3 is a threat that you consider not all that probable and with a low impact, but tier 2 has, in our view, a difficulty, because that is a threat with a low probability but a high impact. You are all distinguished defence academics. What do you feel about the reliance on a methodology that puts, as a tier 2 threat, all the sorts of things that involve serious conflict—the outbreak of conventional war and the possibility that there could be nuclear blackmail—on the basis that historically, whenever something serious such as that has cropped up, it has usually happened with little and very often no significant warning at all?

Dr Tuck, you sent us in a paper for that particular inquiry that impressed us; it said that you doubted the whole approach of having such a risk-based analysis. Would you like to start off the discussion and see whether your colleagues on the panel agree?

Dr Tuck: My argument was based on looking at some of the research that had been done on prediction and to what extent you can predict the future and apportion probabilities to events, and then work out policy on that basis and predict the future accurately. The conclusion that I reached is that our ability to predict the future is extraordinarily poor. The key writer on this, Philip Tetlock, makes the point that in general, the ability of experts to predict future challenges is actually worse than a chimp with a set of darts—it is worse than 50:50. On that basis, predictive approaches are much less useful than we might imagine. It would be better to focus on a flexibility-based approach to try to deal with the future. That is not to say that a flexibility-based approach to try to deal with future challenges is a panacea; it isn't, because very few militaries would argue that they were inflexible.

There is a whole range of traits associated with this concept of flexibility. Some would lie outside a document like this, to do with a conceptual approach and the ethos of individual

services, but some wouldn't, in terms of the balance of capabilities, resilience, numbers—those sorts of things. Our ability to predict the future is extraordinarily poor. It might be better to focus on this idea of flexibility—building flexibility into our Armed Forces, but recognising that that is not an easy thing to do.

Q11 Chair: Before I come to Professor Porter, I want to tease out one more point. There is a clear implication in terms of whether you go down the route of trying to assess the likelihood of something serious happening or whether you recognise reality, which is that if something serious does happen, in all probability you will have little or no warning of it. What happened in 2010 was surely that they took various risks. They decided that certain risks were not going to arise in the next five years and therefore they let capability gaps come in.

The example I keep using is the aircraft carriers. They said, “Well, we’ve got new aircraft carriers coming in future years and we judge that we can safely get rid of fixed-wing flying from aircraft carriers for the next five years because we really don’t anticipate a need for that.” Then, less than 12 months later, there was the Libya campaign. What was the first vessel that our French allies sent to the east Mediterranean? It was an aircraft carrier. And what would have been the first vessel that we sent? It would also have been an aircraft carrier, but we couldn’t.

Surely the point is that if you recognise that risks are unpredictable, it is more important to prevent gaps from opening up. And if that is the case, to what extent are you satisfied that the gaps that were opened up in 2010 are now on their way to being filled?

Dr Tuck: The key problem, and one of the reasons why flexibility is not a panacea, is this. When we are talking about capability gaps, those gaps are between what we have and what we aspire to do in a foreign policy sense. The problem with flexibility can be that you try to build and maintain a full range of capabilities, but individually none of those capabilities is capable of doing what you want it to do. If you want genuine flexibility and you have as ambitious a foreign policy as Britain has, you actually need more spending, probably across the board. That would be my argument. You have those gaps that emerged. I’m not so sure that just developing a seedcorn capability for the sake of it necessarily fills that gap.

Professor Porter: I am very much in sympathy with Chris’s point, but I want to add that unfortunately with these kinds of questions, there is no free lunch. To purchase flexibility, one must sacrifice weight of forces that can be brought to bear, particularly if one has in mind the need to act independently, on one’s own, in a critical national security crisis. It is absolutely the case that expert prediction has a poor record, but it is not entirely imperfect. A very important prediction, risk estimate, was made in the mid-1930s in this country that Fighter Command and the defence of British airspace was absolutely the critical priority at the expense of other capabilities, and it turned out to be a pretty good punt. In that case, the dart landed in the 180, but I say that while still acknowledging Chris’s point. It is important to try to think harder about where the national interest suggests we should put the weight of forces. We don’t know where the problems are coming from necessarily, but we do know the kind of things—we can have a debate on what we truly care about. One of the things that could be brought into that is geography—Britain’s own maritime approaches and air approaches at the moment. Britain’s neighbourhood is again becoming a much more contested place in all sorts of ways, including cyber.

It is also important to actually prepare people, because the unexpected will happen. It is about preparing decision makers so that when the unexpected happens, it is not a shock—it is a surprise, but not a shock—and they are able to act, which means having the kind of simulation and training where people are preparing for the event that their policy has failed, and thinking the unthinkable. For example, what if Iran does develop a nuclear bomb after all? What if Assad suddenly falls tomorrow—a catastrophic success? It is about having people in place who have the intellectual capability to respond, as well as the right kit they can hopefully use in the situation.

Professor Gearson: It comes back to strategy. My critique of this document is that I do not really see the strategic vision. There are objectives in here, but if you set out a strategic approach for what Britain should be capable of doing, your capability picture will pretty quickly follow, and then you should inform that vision by the risk tiers. I suggest they should come second or third, but first, you have to decide what sort of country you want to be and how engaged you want to be. That will give clear guidance and clear parameters for your defence planners, who will then need to be informed by the risk tiers.

A risk-based management approach to defence policy is a dangerous approach; I agree with that, but we are defence academics. We have worked our whole careers in this field. We think defence is really important, but we have to remember that most people do not think about it that often. Given that we will not get a large-scale increase in funding, again, what you have to do is make some choices, and unless you have a clear strategic guide, it is very difficult to make those choices. We do not want to have a large contingent force that is just flexible for its own sake; it will not then be effective.

That is a long way of saying that this still seems to be trying to do a little bit of everything, as British defence policy has done for many years. I would like to see a clear articulation of what we think we should be able to do, but also an acknowledgment of things we will not be as capable of, and to then place that in the template of the risk table.

Dr Blagden: There is nothing wrong, per se, with trading off likelihood against impact. That should be one of our frames of strategic thought. Part of the problem is that when we do that, we then pretend it is cod science and start to plot it as a matrix. As soon as you do that, you are assigning quantitative values to things that you necessarily have very poor information about. We would probably all agree that the Paris attacks were a high-impact event, that a 9/11 scale attack is a very high-impact event and that a conventional war with Russia in Europe would be very, very high.

Q12 Chair: These things come into tier 2, generally, and then you get into arguments where people say, “That’s only a tier 2 threat, not a tier 1 threat.”

Dr Blagden: The other issue, of course, is that because you have incentives not to be wrong in producing a thing like this, you end up stretching your categories and gutting them so that you cannot do strategic prioritisation. In order to not be caught out on a tier 1 risk, you end up widening the categories to the point where, after the fact, you could say that any event fell within them, rather than have the egg on your face of missing something. Making that trade-off of impact versus likelihood is not bad per se, but it is once you start using it as an over-confident basis for prediction.

Professor Porter: There is a very important distinction between risk and uncertainty that sometimes gets lost: risk implies confidence that you know the probability beforehand, whereas with uncertainty, you are much less confident that you even know how likely something is.

Q13 Jim Shannon: In the last while, the SDSR has, many feel, exposed the flexibility gaps facing UK defence. With that being the case, I wonder, are both geopolitical and technological advances achievable in the context of the varied demands of British defence? I am not sure who wants to answer that; you are all very capable.

Dr Tuck: The paper I wrote was on the issue of flexibility, and I highlighted some themes that relate to what might make forces more or less flexible. When we look at what we have in the SDSR 2015, some elements that are outside the SDSR relate to things like the concepts and doctrine that military means will be using to deal with threats, and that is being dealt with in the sense that the services have processes to look at that. In terms of some of the other key categories, the problem is that we are back to the theme that we were just talking about, which is that flexibility is based in part on things like having a broad range of capabilities, but also having resilience and having the numbers so that when unexpected contingencies come up, you have the personnel to deal with them, or, if things go wrong, you have the ability to take casualties while you work out what it is that you need to do. In terms of that, the problem is that there are only marginal increases in manpower, so you are still looking at Armed Forces that are going to be just as stretched, probably more so in the future than was the case previously.

Then there is the issue that comes back to what we were talking about earlier of training and the resources for training. When resources are tight, things get cut. Training gets cut and stockpiles get run down, so your ability to equip people and prepare them for the challenges that they face is reduced. On that basis, I don't think there has been any revolution in the flexibility of the force in terms of meeting some of the key gaps that exist.

Peter Roberts: Interestingly, in terms of flexibility, there are no readiness scales associated with anything within this paper. Nor is there anything about numbers in the fact sheet that was long promised. Readiness associated with any of these formations that they have come out with has all disappeared. The planning assumptions have largely disappeared in terms of what they are to be scaled at. The ability to deploy has largely been neglected, so there is no understanding of how we will deploy, whether it is strike brigades or anything else. We have no idea about how we are going to scale these in terms of readiness, so we could declare an aircraft carrier available, but it might be at two years' notice. Some of these very real capabilities that really underpin flexibility are just neglected entirely. There is some talk of our reliance on space, and that is worrying. There is very little about electronic warfare and nothing about our ability to operate in high north or difficult, hazardous areas. There is nothing about CBRN—chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear. There is nothing at all about them in this review. All those building blocks that previously we have seen in these really thick reports that have come out are gone. So we lack all that detail on which to make an assessment of flexibility. Because that is lacking, one cannot help but get the feeling that some of this will be removed and undermined.

Professor Gearson: One of the things that most people approved of in the original SDR in 1998 was the introduction of the sustainability measurements and the idea of how long and at what scale we would be able to sustain our capability. Again, it seems very aspirational in here. There is talk about a 50,000-strength divisional level of capability, but not, as has been mentioned, how long it would take to deploy, and also, for the medium-scale and single-service focused commitments, what sort of length of time we might be capable of sustaining and supporting that. It is disappointing that that seems to have been lost in this document, albeit there are positive things about how different parts of our national security space will support this defence posture. I think those things are positive, but the detail is sadly lacking in this document.

Q14 Douglas Chapman: My first question is about Trident. I noticed that in the Public Accounts Committee oral evidence that was taken in October, Jon Thompson, the permanent under-secretary at the Ministry of Defence, said that the project he worried about most was in relation to the future financial risk of what he calls the nuclear enterprise: “That is the project that most keeps me awake at night. It is the biggest project the Ministry of Defence will...take on.” Given that in the SDSR, the figures for Trident were inflated even beyond what Jon Thompson’s views were, how might that affect the capability of conventional forces that we might wish to deploy in future years? We have already heard about some of the problems that might arise from the 30% cut in MoD staff. In terms of the additional spend that we may have to put into Trident, would that be something, in terms of conventional forces, that would keep you awake at night?

Peter Roberts: My gut feeling on the Trident announcements is that the real concern is a slippage in the delivery of hulls, which means that you will have a run-on of the existing Vanguard submarines beyond their expected life, up to perhaps even 40 years. One of this Committee’s reports was done in 2007, when the then strategy director of the Ministry of Defence, Tom McKane, said that if you talked about extending the service life for another five years—something that we are now planning to do—the cost would go into billions of pounds. I think that is the impact on the Ministry of Defence’s running budget that will be of the greatest concern. Delaying maingate decisions around the Vanguard class brings with it costs. Industry will tell you that time and time again. They are not going to bear the cost of this. They are not the ones who are interested in buying it. That gets transferred to the customer, and the customer then makes those decisions.

Effectively, by delaying the decision, which this SDSR does, and bringing in the first hull into the 2030s, you are going to cause an enormous number of problems, longer term, to MoD core finances. You are doing that in order to smooth the curve of how you are procuring some of this more bright and shiny gear that is being brought in earlier on, and trying to realise some of those efficiency measures that the MoD will have to take—to be announced, possibly, in the CSR tomorrow—to try to balance out some of that. So they have had to slip it, but that slippage comes at an increasing additional cost, and perhaps the £10 billion risk that is assigned to it is going to be taken up with another Vanguard life extension programme.

With the problems, I think what would keep me up at night about it is that a 40-year-old nuclear submarine is going to be more prone to technical issues, particularly where you do not put in the support for the people and the engineers who run this stuff. Where you do

that, you place additional risk on to the continuous at-sea capability of the deterrent. That is something that would keep me up at night, rather than the longer-term figures.

Dr Blagden: Part of this is a moral duty to the people we send to sea in them—the men, and soon women, who go to sea in these submarines. If we are going to be invested in this enterprise, we have to move soon because we will be sending them to sea in 40-plus-year-old submarines. If you wanted to conceive of a nightmare scenario of a submarine having a really serious incident, the older you make them, the more likely that becomes. Part of it is also the effectiveness piece: the more they rattle, the less undetectable they are.

In terms of the trade-offs with conventional forces, part of this is a political question. Would you recoup that money to spend on conventional kit? Certainly, when people make that argument, that is the trade-off that they are positing—that they will get this money back to spend on other things. My perspective on this is that the international system of the coming years is not going to be conducive to a widespread multilateral disarmament deal. Given that some of the states we may be involved in confrontations with will be either in possession of a nuclear arsenal or able to acquire one, saying that we will have better conventional capabilities in lieu of a nuclear arsenal is kind of like saying that you are going to bring a better set of knives to a gunfight. When nuclear weapons came into the international system, like it or loathe it, the international system changed. That is my perspective.

Dr Tuck: Dr Roberts is absolutely right. If you look historically, it might well cost twice as much as it is supposed to, because I think that is what Trident cost. If you have a look at the implications for conventional capabilities, if you look at the past, it is probably not likely to be so much in terms of cutting headline capabilities. Picking up Professor Gearson's point, the danger is that over a period of time we recoup that cost by running down stocks of things and reducing training, or by leaving ships tied up for longer. That sort of gradual run-down of conventional capabilities is the potential problem.

I am agnostic about the successor to Trident. One thing that I think is interesting, though, is that there seems to be tension between the logic of a Trident successor and our conventional capabilities. Much of SDSR 15 is focused on the idea of working with allies, which is one key way to augment our conventional capabilities, but the logic of a Trident successor is more about independence. Either we believe that we can rely on our allies or we don't, but the logic of a Trident successor is the logic of trying to ensure that our conventional capabilities are genuinely capable of independent action.

Professor Gearson: Also, there is the traditional desire to have another centre of decision and not to rely on the United States or France to provide that nuclear umbrella. It is ultimately a political decision. As an historian, I have read some nice MoD documents and pages in the press from around the time of our moving towards a more nuclear-based defence policy, which ultimately was supposed to save money and allow us to reduce the size of our Armed Forces, so you can see a strange historical logic to it.

It is obviously dangerous for the MoD that the deterrent has been brought into the debate about defence spending overall. It is for you ladies and gentlemen to decide how far you want to allow it to distort other capabilities ultimately, if the decision is taken to take it forward. I am sorry to go back to strategy, but it doesn't have to. We are able to say that Parliament has made a decision to proceed and we won't allow it to undermine our stated

conventional capability, but that doesn't mean that within each cycle of a defence review there won't be very significant consequences.

Professor Porter: Building on those points, one particularly worrying potential scenario is on NATO's eastern flank, where, if you don't get the symbiosis right between extraordinary nuclear capabilities and conventional ones, all of a sudden two sides can have very short ladders of escalation. In other words, I think crisis management is going to be one of the big challenges—we were reminded of that brutally this morning on the Turkish border. An era of dangerous confrontation could be upon us. Therefore, it is necessary to have adequate conventional forces so that there is some control over the process before you suddenly get to that really dangerous threshold. There is an important relationship between those two things.

Dr Blagden: Uncannily, my point was going to be almost identical to that. The logic of deterrence relies on some sort of credible scenario of how you could get there. If the only viable response to some sort of crisis in the Baltic states, for example, is to use Special Forces—high-end infantry such as 3 Commando Brigade and 16 Air Assault Brigade—to expel the little green men, that may not work if, say, some tanks come in behind the little green men. If the trade-off is light infantry or strategic nuclear weapons, not only do we not want that choice, but it is not a credible deterrent ladder.

Professor Gearson: While I am not a scholar of Russian military doctrine in detail, my limited understanding is that over the past few years the Russians have increasingly used nuclear weapons as part of their exercises in eastern Europe and for their deployments. They don't treat their nuclear weapons in the same way we treat ours—as an ultimate deterrent. They are part of a crisis-management scenario that they are exercising actively. When we talk about hybrid warfare, it is about not just little green men, but conventional forces supported by nuclear-capable forces or nuclear weapons themselves, which our named adversary is actively doing.

Q15 Chair: It is interesting how these tier-2 threats keep rising to the surface. Can I check one point? Historically, is it correct to say that the Polaris submarine build and the first incarnation of the Trident submarine build came in on budget and on time?

Dr Tuck: No. As I understand it, Trident was originally supposed to cost £6 billion and ended up costing £13 billion.

Chair: Any advances on that? Polaris certainly came in on time and on budget. I think you wanted to come in, David.

Dr Blagden: No.

Q16 Douglas Chapman: In 2010—let me move the agenda on a bit—we committed to an expeditionary force of 30,000 troops. By 2025, we learn, that will increase to 50,000. Are these revised investments—committing troops and that capability—sufficient to deter aggression from Russia, in addition to countering terrorism from Islamic State?

Professor Gearson: If I may, there are a couple of things to start with. I am not clear from this document whether the 10,000 members of the Armed Forces on standby to support the police and other agencies in the event of a terror attack are separate from this deployable 50,000. That would be one of my first questions to the MoD, which has form when it

comes to double-hatting people. The Committee might recall that there was a previous model, the Civil Contingency Reaction Force, following the new chapter to the strategic defence review. It turned out that the 7,000 Reserves across the UK who were allocated were actually deployed in significant numbers in Afghanistan. This was one of the problems that ultimately led to the abandonment of the whole scheme, because it was just not a reliable force.

In answer to your question, this 50,000 figure does now seem to be the UK's full effort, and I would be surprised to see that used on a discretionary intervention basis. I suppose it is within the realms of possibility that we might decide to be part of a ground campaign against ISIL, but would we send our 50,000 full-effect force? I doubt it. I think this is what we used to call full effort. Previously, we used to have large, medium and small-scale, but now I think we just have this maximum effort, and the other effort is the single service-based figure of more like 10,000, which is quite a big change.

Dr Tuck: Again, this is a banal answer, but whether it is sufficient depends on the context you are looking at. For example, if we are looking at a campaign in which we are assuming that the Americans will get involved, and if our primary reason for getting involved is to demonstrate to the Americans that we are involved, then this is potentially a serious capability that demonstrates that we are making a major effort. The issue, however—this relates to Professor Gearson's point about things like sustainability and whether we can pull those troops—is whether it is a sufficient force for other kinds of activities.

If, as SDSR 2015 is indicating, we are very interested in dealing with fragile states, is this a sufficient force to engage successfully in stabilisation-type operations? Well, we do not really have a strategy for that that works—that is the first point. You might double the numbers and it would not help, but certainly 50,000 is not a large number, based on our experiences in Afghanistan, because a lot of those personnel could not be deployed for stabilisation-type operations. So it is not a large number for that sort of operation.

Whether it would deter Russia, again I suppose you could deduce from what they are doing in eastern Ukraine that there is certainly a level of activity about which they do not believe we can make credible threats to use military force.

Professor Porter: There is a very important issue underscored in this document. It goes out of its way to present the Armed Forces also as forces of conflict prevention, with quite an ambitious agenda of capacity building. That is not just on the large scale, but on the smaller scale. Part of the Army's case for its existence and its utility is that it can go around doing this stuff.

Without wishing to dismiss that, or to say that it is the wrong thing, I think there has been some underestimation of the complexities of arming, training and building auxiliary, proxy or friendly forces. The problem is not so much vetting; the problem is injecting resources and capabilities into a volatile or corrupt situation, which can sometimes fuel disorder, because—it's a funny old thing—other states that are friendly to us sometimes have their own sets of separate interests; they might like some of what you are offering, but they might use it for other things; or some of the people you are providing the resources to will do different things with them than what you expect.

That does not mean you don't ever do it; the Prevent agenda is not necessarily the wrong agenda, but there needs to be much more thinking about things like conditionality and the wider relationship, to get a closer link between the intention and the outcome in these things. What we have seen in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq is a lot of quite tragic situations where, with the best intent in the world, conflict prevention has actually helped to fuel rebellion against the state that you are implicated in helping. That doesn't mean that you don't do it, but there is a much more serious debate about defence engagement—about how you do these things better.

Dr Tuck: Today's problems are yesterday's solutions. In terms of trying to deal with what has happened in Syria, we are looking at outcomes that have come as a result of perfectly well-intentioned efforts to try to maximise our influence—to try to export good governance and so on to other countries. There are real limits on what the military can achieve, even with twice the number of forces.

Q17 Chair: The law of unintended consequences and unpredictability yet again. David.

Dr Blagden: My point was going to be that 50,000, from an essentially unchanged Regular force size, is a very ambitious tooth-to-tail target—it is certainly bigger than what was sent to Iraq from a much larger base force. In the specific context of your question about eastern Europe and contributing to deterrence, 50,000 exercised in combined arms manoeuvre warfare and appropriately equipped with heavy equipment, which this document is comparatively quiet about—it does not seem terribly fashionable at the moment—are a very different proposition from 50,000 who have been cobbled together to meet a number. So, 50,000 is very impressive if it can be met from an army of 82,500 Regulars. Of course, we will have had longer to deliver the Reservist numbers by then, compared to the present.

Q18 Chair: Before I come to Madeleine Moon, can I ask for a brief answer on one point? Does it concern you that there does not appear to be any list of defence planning assumptions in the document?

Dr Blagden: Yes. Part of it comes back to the issue that Patrick has already raised: this is a glossy document for public consumption. The more explicit we are about our defence planning assumptions in a document that anyone around the world can download from the internet, the more information they will have about our defence planning assumptions—it's a funny old thing. But, yes, that notwithstanding, it is a concern.

Chair: Thank you very much. Any other comments on that? If not, Madeleine has a question.

Q19 Mrs Moon: How many of the 50,000 force are actually part of a fighting force, as opposed to support and enabling forces? When we deployed to Helmand, we had 600 who could actually go out through the gates of the fort; everybody else was inside making it possible for the 600 to go out. Do you have a rough estimate of how many of this 50,000 would actually be able to take part in fighting?

Peter Roberts: The problem is that there is very little information—for example, beyond a brief, one-page look at what an Army strike brigade looks like, we have no idea. With the increased reliance on technology, do we foresee a greater level of automation to provide the guy on the ground with on-call fire power, logistics support or whatever he else needs,

therefore reducing the tail, or do we see greater automation on the battlefield itself, with more of this 50,000 back in barracks? We have no idea what this force construct looks like, even in terms of this great new concept of the strike brigades. We have no idea how it is constructed, apart from it looks a little bit like FRES of old. We just do not know how it will come out. It is very difficult to understand, therefore, whether this is a British expeditionary force à la 1939-40, or something very different, very new, very sleek. Where is the balance? I have no idea what it brings in terms of fighting power.

Q20 Mrs Moon: The issue of Russia has been exercising me quite a bit? You have touched on it. The SDSR cites Russia as a key partner in global security matters, in particular in fighting Daesh, but we seem to have this strange dichotomy of how to engage and co-operate with Russia on Daesh, while at the same time mount a force to deal with perhaps Russian aggression against the West coming from the east. How will we balance this? Does the SDSR begin to address this complex difficulty that we face?

Professor Porter: You have absolutely put your finger on it. We are entering this period of diplomatic ambiguity, which is historically not that unusual, but we are not very comfortable with having people who are both partners and rivals—I would put it no more strongly than that—at the same time, which means a lot more hard bargaining will have to be done at some point. That can be done, and I am very encouraged by the positive and constructive role Britain played in the Iran interim agreement in that sense. There is a very complex relationship with Iran as well: we have some common interests, but there are some things that we do not like about what is happening in Iraq and that sort of thing.

Partly, at some level, there has to be a recognition that to do this, you have to compromise some of these liberal values that are so resonant in this document. For there to be meaningful compromise, you will have to give some things up at the bargaining table. We will not like what will probably be a very unsatisfactory de facto settlement of the Ukraine question, but we might decide that something else, such as Islamic State, matters to us more. Russia also needs to do some bargaining at some point. It will mean that, at some level, even if it is not stated explicitly, we will have to hold our nose and have a much closer look at what really matters to us as a kind of hierarchy. Not all good things will come together at the same time, and that is a shock to us now, but it is not necessarily historically abnormal.

Professor Gearson: I think it is based on what your judgment of Russian objectives is and what President Putin is trying to achieve. A number of quite serious commentators who have looked at this believe that what he wants is to be part of the solution in the Middle East and to be treated as an equal in some of these global matters. That will not stop Russian aircraft, submarines and ships coming into our airspace or waters, but it does mean that if Russia gains some of the things that it is after, there will possibly be accommodations. It is possible that the Russians want to have a more stable situation in Ukraine, frankly, having got to where we have got to, which is now a fairly firm and clear position from NATO and the Western powers. An objective is for President Putin to get out of this quandary, and Syria might offer it in some way. Having said that, the events of this morning show just how difficult it is going to be to do that. Ultimately, it is not just holding our noses. What are our objectives for post-Assad Syria? They are probably not the same as Russia's, and they are certainly not the same as Iran's.

Professor Porter: Just to clarify—I am very much agreeing—when I say bargaining, I mean bargaining preferably from a position of strength, which is one of the things that I think NATO has achieved.

Dr Tuck: There may be limits, though, to the bargaining you would need, depending on the ally and the circumstances. I think this is a longer running problem. As Britain's material strength has declined, we have basically embraced a strategy of alliances. Our alliances have not always been with actors who have always had the same interests as we have—you just have to look at Afghanistan and our ally Pakistan to see the difficulties there. There may be limits to what it is that we can achieve—there certainly were with Pakistan. There are other difficult allies—Saudi Arabia, for example. Our alliance with Saudi Arabia doesn't sit with any of the positive themes that are developed in SDSR 2015. I think I mentioned at the start that there are other issues. If you are keen, in order to develop Britain economically, to do trade deals with China, or to allow China to buy elements of your energy infrastructure, what does that then say about your ability to influence China in other environments? This is a long-running problem, and as Professors Gearson and Porter indicated, there will be a point at which we just have to apply an element of realpolitik, which will not sit well with the tone of some of what is in this current document.

Dr Blagden: We can sit around trying to define Putin's intent, and even assume that he will always be the complete driver of all sorts of Russian foreign policy—many learned people would say that, actually, the Russian state is more complex than just him—but the big thing to always bear in mind is that trying to divine intent in international politics is really hard. So we have to pay quite a lot of attention to capabilities, because we can estimate and measure them. That is the case for us. The fact that Russia's capabilities have increased again after their post-cold war nadir means we cannot get away from the fact that we have to pay attention to Russia's capabilities.

The same is true for Russia, of course. Obviously, we think, “How could anyone impute malign intent to NATO?” but trying to divine NATO intent from Moscow may be very hard as well. Lo and behold, we have very impressive capabilities—we have done all these things to expand NATO, and we have these overtures with Ukraine and Georgia, and things like that. As Patrick clearly set out, that does not preclude areas of shared interest. Prior to the first world war, you had states competing ferociously for colonies while being alliance partners in the European theatre, or states that were each other's principal strategic threats in the European theatre clubbing together on some sort of colonisation project elsewhere in the world. Actually, this is not some historical abnormality; it is about getting used to multipolarity again—to there being multiple centres of power in the world and navigating through Venn diagrams of shared interests and mutual threat.

Professor Gearson: The document, interestingly, names Japan as a key strategic partner in defence terms in the future, after a significant period of—well, “benign neglect” would be a generous interpretation of our south-east Asia and north Asia policy. Nevertheless, that comes at the same time as a relationship with China that is supposed to deliver economic benefits. The point is that, if we are an enabler and partner of regional powers—in some cases, small and medium ones, as well as large ones, like Japan—that can still have an effect, which does not necessarily undermine our economic relationship.

Dr Tuck: It does, but what interests me is that we often seem to make the assumption that other actors are out there, just waiting for Britain to ask them to get involved. I was out in Japan not so long ago, and the key question the audience were interested in was, “What do we do about China?” Britain is not irrelevant to that question, in the sense that we have a seat on the UN Security Council, but we are really not the most relevant actor. The assumption we make—that other actors are going to be keen and very enthusiastic to engage in deep relationships with us—is not necessarily going to be true.

Professor Porter: Absolutely. Forgive me for mentioning it one more time, but one possible eventuality, which could make these problems even sharper, is the potential unravelling of Afghanistan over the next few years—whether it is a grinding stalemate or something considerably worse. The document talks about wanting to help set the conditions for long-term stability. What we have there is an aid contribution and some help with the NATO HQ and the staff college, but if the tendencies we are seeing at the moment keep going, it is going to have to be a very serious bit of bargaining between a number of powers in the region—including Britain as someone who is involved, with Russia, China and Pakistan—about some kind of possible settlement on that issue. Britain did identify a very important security interest there five years ago; it was a very important part of the Defence and Security Review in 2010. Islamic State does seem to have some kind of foothold there, and it is next door to a nuclear state, so this is non-trivial. I do not think it is a first-order threat, but it is non-trivial, so the very issue you raise about Syria and Russia could also be restaged on the other side, if you see what I mean.

Dr Blagden: I know we are drifting away from your original Russia question and thinking more about complex relationships with emerging major powers. The China one, which has been touched on, is very interesting in the sense that the UK is tying itself in knots somewhat in trying to sustain multiple bandwagoning relationships with major powers at once. We had the proud announcement of the development of the Bahrain naval base just recently. The expanded UK presence in the Gulf is an exercise in burden sharing with the US. Why is the US interested in burden sharing in the Gulf? Because it wants to pivot to east Asia. So implicitly, the UK is getting involved in the US’s balancing—even containment, if you want to call it that—efforts vis-à-vis China, while throwing itself headlong into the economic relationship.

There could be all kinds of uncomfortable tension. For example, if there were a US-Chinese crisis unfolding in the South China sea, and it just so happened that one of our shiny new aircraft carriers was now the western aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf, and there were some Chinese warships there, the Americans might say, “Could you please stop them leaving the Persian Gulf?” We have a very complex relationship developing there.

Professor Gearson: To go back to my original point at the start of the session, if the impression from this review is that Britain is now front foot and outward looking, rather than inward looking and focused on its debates about Europe and austerity and so on, and if it is rather now an engaged and militarily capable power, that has important implications for deterrent postures, and not just by us. This document talks about deterring other people, but the people who write these things often forget that our opponents deter us. One of the things the Chinese are trying to achieve is a denial of entry for western power forces such as the United States, Australia and Britain into that region—into the South China sea. Having a front facing, capable defence policy, even if it does not include great mass, at

least pushes a little bit back against the idea that we will necessarily be denied entry into areas in crises.

We have to remember that it is not just a question of “no plan survives contact with the enemy”. Our deterrent posture is also about what the other side does, and they are thinking about us, so impressions do matter, albeit they have to be backed up by meaningful capability of some sort. I don’t think the Ministry of Defence is wrong to think about achieving a greater effect from relatively modest changes in terms of our ability to act not just independently but as a contributor to going against other countries’ deterrents.

Chair: We have a few questions left. Time is beginning to go against us. If people could perhaps not feel obliged to comment on every question, we should get through the lot shortly after, if not by, 1 o’clock.

Q21 Mrs Moon: I want to ask you about two sums of money that were announced last week. The first is £2 billion for cyber-defence. Do you think some of that money should also go into developing cyber-offensive capability?

Peter Roberts: I am happy to have a go at that. The documentation that has come out is fairly clear, in that it is going to be full-spectrum cyber that we start talking about more openly, with the national offensive cyber programme. Interestingly, we talk about the part that commercial suppliers will play in active defence—the taking of the archer’s fingers. That is really interesting, and one wonders how, when the cyber-strategy comes out, the breaking out of some of this apportionment of money and duties is going to take place, because it is opening a massive can of legal and ethical concerns in terms of actions within cyberspace that either state or commercial actors can take. Money is needed for the national offensive cyber programme, but there is a need to focus on securing your own networks first before you have the ability to take down the enemy’s. Trying to understand exactly what you want to do in military and security terms in cyberspace is really important. There is not much evidence that we have nailed that down completely yet. My understanding is that part of that money will go to offensive capabilities. How much of that, I would not expect us to find out in any great detail.

Q22 Mrs Moon: We have also said £2 billion towards Special Forces. There are two problems. One is with depleting the numbers coming in to Regular forces, from which we draw our Special Forces, so the base from which you select and recruit Special Forces is diminished. Do you also have concerns about the fact that by increasing Special Forces—and I appreciate some of that £2 billion will be for helicopter capability—we are increasing the number of forces that are not accountable to parliamentary scrutiny? Perhaps one of you could reply to that, as we are eager to move on.

Chair: Any observations?

Professor Gearson: I will make an observation, if I may. I have found the arguments unconvincing that parliamentary scrutiny should not apply to Special Forces as well as our Regular forces. But it would only matter if these forces are conducting campaigns that do not involve Regular forces at all, because you would still be able to scrutinise. What would be worrying is if we have a covert campaign that significantly grows and is somehow argued not to be worthy of being discussed. You are more expert than I am on this. We are in an interesting period of parliamentary authority and scrutiny, with the Prime Minister

clearly arguing that he wants parliamentary authority to launch airstrikes with conventional weapons, but also says he has the right not even to discuss with Parliament the use of drone-targeted killings. So it is a very interesting period where obviously Royal Prerogative was used differently in the past. I think Special Forces should not fall into that gap. I would be concerned if they fell into that drone, self-defensive category that the Prime Minister seems to have defined as not requiring scrutiny. I would be surprised if they did, to some extent, not least because ultimately these are serving members of the British Armed Forces, and if they are killed or captured that will affect our defence and foreign policy.

Q23 Mr Spellar: Briefly, one of the key commitments of the Government has been to increase the Reserve forces to 35,000. Frankly, do we think that is sufficient to compensate for the reduction in Regular military personnel? Are the Government on the way to achieving that, or is it frankly even achievable?

Dr Tuck: It is hugely problematic, I think, because what we have done is create a structure that we are calling Reserves but by any historical standard are not Reserves. Reserves historically are there for contingency purposes. What we are doing is to create a cadre of individuals upon whom we are relying in order to have capabilities. Expanding them to 35,000 is problematic because it has been difficult to recruit them. I think it would be difficult to retain those people. There are issues about how they are used and the impact it has on them, in terms of higher rates of post-traumatic stress. We have created a body that we are calling Reserves, but they are not Reserves as we would understand them historically. What we have done is increasingly move towards taking key capabilities and make them part-time.

Dr Blagden: Full disclosure on this: I am a Navy Reserve officer, but I am very much here with my civvy hat on, so none of what I have said today is in any way official. The thing with Reserves is partly when people say, “Oh yeah, we can’t possibly attract these numbers,” partly they are doing some quite bad economics. The first year undergraduate economics class would say, “If you raise the annual bounty from £1,600 to £10,000 tax-free, watch the numbers roll in.” Part of it is a willingness to pay for Reservist numbers. The broader point—I am very much echoing Dr Tuck—is that they are a fantastic pool of unique skills. For example, I have friends who are media operations officers in the Navy Reserve who also work in TV. These are completely the people who should be media operations officers, rather than people who have had a 20-year career at sea and then meet a camera for the first time. That is a fantastic use, but trying to turn them into routinely deployable part-time soldiers becomes very problematic.

You see certain branches of the Reserves get broken by overuse. If you start expecting people to deploy one year in three, they cannot stay in a civilian career. If they are used as pockets of unique skills, which the modern knowledge-intensive war environment requires, that is fantastic. If you start trying to have one year in three, nearly Regular, soldiers, that becomes much more problematic.

Professor Gearson: On the other side, I would like to see the MoD being much more innovative about what used to be called sponsored Reserves and try to bring capabilities from the private sector to allow people to be deployable in support of operations if required. They may not want to be a traditional Reservist who gives up every weekend and so on, but nevertheless they may be able to augment our existing capabilities. I know that

this has been spoken about, but I haven't actually seen it delivered for operational capability.

Professor Porter: Some of the research done by colleagues at the Strategy and Security Institute highlights the sheer scale of the cultural problem of what has to happen in the workplace—in the minds and attitudes of the private workplace—in order to make this possible. I think the Government are taking some important steps to try to bridge this gap, but it is going to take a long time.

Chair: We have Jim Shannon briefly and then Phil, who has been waiting very patiently in our batting order and a brief word from Madeleine as well, when you signal. Do you want to do that now?

Mrs Moon: If I may.

Chair: May I take Jim first, and then Phil?

Mrs Moon: Yes, of course.

Q24 Jim Shannon: I have a particularly deep interest in Reservists because I was one myself for eleven and a half years and am therefore very conscious of the necessity. My experience was way back in the cold war times and perhaps a wee bit different from where we are today.

The Reserves are a critical factor as we move forward. I think we all accept that. The numbers at the moment, I think, are 21,000. We are 9,000 short of 30,000, never mind 35,000. There is a need to have your Reservists at a peak of fitness. This is said very respectfully, because I am very conscious that the Reservists have to make a commitment. They should be able to pass their annual fitness test. I would say some would have a challenge when it comes to the weapons test. I would expect at least five out of 10 of their shots would hit the target; if they don't, they need to practise. I say this with respect. I just wonder sometimes what you feel as a panel we need to do to lift our Reservists from being a social, part-time soldier and being focused on his or her role in the future.

I did bring this up the other week, Mr Chairman. For instance, when it comes to dentistry, the Reservists have to make sure that their teeth are right. If you are called up and your teeth are wrong, you are back home again. These are small things, but in the big picture they are important. I would like to have the thoughts of one of the panel members.

Chair: Who is the volunteer? Who is the Reservist?

Dr Blagden: I am a Reservist. I think largely a lot of that culture shift has already happened. Certainly fitness tests are an annual requirement now. If you fail them, you are straight on to a penal regime, as it were, and then they will kick people out. The weapons test would be much more of a concern for, say, an infantryman than a submarine controller or a media ops officer. If they get to the point where they are firing, we are already in trouble.

That culture shift is under way and I think you are right that increasing measures are needed to support matters such as, where the burden of health responsibility lies. You have heard horror stories of people being injured on Reservist duties, but because they are not

mobilised, it is just a training weekend, it is like, “Well, here you are at the train station. Make your way home.” You do get horror stories, but I think they are moving in a positive direction with things like rolling out pensions benefits, annual leave—of course, you don’t take time off; you get extra pay—the roll-out of the Armed Forces railcard scheme to Reservists. So there is a concerted effort to match the increasing demands of professionalisation with increased support, but that effort needs to be monitored very closely to ensure that people you are asking these things of are not left in a position where all kinds of burdens that should really be an institutional responsibility of Defence are landing with them personally.

Q25 Mrs Moon: I am very worried about this 30% cut to the 41,000 MoD civilians. I raised it with the Prime Minister yesterday and he said: “The hon. Lady makes an important point. There are civilian roles in the MoD that are hugely important, and she mentioned some of them. What we have done with this budget is say that we will meet the 2% of defence spending and that we have created this joint security fund that can be bid for by our intelligence services as well as our defence services. We said to the military, ‘Every penny you can save through efficiencies, you now know will go into extra capabilities.’ That is why I can stand here today and talk about new squadrons, more members of the RAF and more people joining the Royal Navy, but all of that should be done without damaging any of the vital capabilities that civilians provide.”

Well, okay. What exactly do you think we can lose? How much will be just outsourced, and will outsourcing save any money? What will be the actual impact of these reductions? I am sorry, we are again going to have to limit your responses because of time, but I think that that was a most amazing response.

Peter Roberts: May I go first? I think you are right: it is an incredible response and does not bear much relation to the question, it strikes me. The problem with thinning out of MoD civil servants is that they will come from specialist areas. The great hope is that when you get rid of the Defence estate, of which you are selling off great swathes, the people who would normally look after that and who are employed there would disappear with that part of the estate and therefore you would lose people through wastage in that way. That ignores the fact that you have certain skills that are irreplaceable within the civil service. That is the area of greatest concern.

It is the project managers, the long deep specialists, not just in intelligence but in systems that we are running over: frigate and destroyer maintenance engineers that have the only knowledge of the systems that allow these ships to be kept running well beyond their hull life—for the Type 23s, running on to be on 30 years when they were designed to have a 15-year hull life. The expertise in these engineering and design areas are civil servants and these are the guys that we need to focus on and ensure are retained. There is nothing within this document that shows me that that amount of consideration is being given at all. It is an area of deep concern and should continue to be.

Mrs Moon: Chairman, I am aware we are tight for time. Can I ask that if the witnesses have something to add to that, would they please write to us? It would be most helpful.

Chair: That is very kind of you, Madeleine; that helps. Saving the best till last, Phil has two quite important questions.

Q26 Phil Wilson: The SDSR says that the Government have identified £11 billion-worth of savings from the MoD. That is obviously an enormous amount of money. What do you think is being disposed of, and how do you think they will achieve such savings?

Professor Gearson: I think that they are hoping to save a lot of money from the Defence estate and to realise some capital benefits. I did a study into the Defence estate a few years ago. The hoped-for savings or returns are lower than expected in many cases. That said, there seems to be an aspiration here to reduce the footprint dramatically; it is like the civil service number—a 30% reduction in our Defence estate footprint, which is significant. The impression we got is that most of the valuable property has already been sold off. Maybe one way to achieve this is to be more innovative in how facilities in the remaining Defence estate are shared with surrounding communities and areas. I know that developers are interested in trying to get away from the concept of being either behind or in front of the wire, and are moving towards trying to share resources, so there might be scope for it there.

Peter Roberts: Can I just throw in some critical stuff? Paying allowances: we are yet to see how that pans out. I think we get the announcement tomorrow as part of the CSR. I think there could be dramatic changes. The impact of that on retention, but not necessarily recruitment, will be key, because the people we need to fill these special-purpose battalions and man and retain the submarines—the engineering skills and deep specialists that we need in middle and senior management—will not be attracted by the new stuff of getting rid of the x factor in various posts and the rest of it. There are some deeply worrying parts to that where I think they will try to make savings.

There are also worrying areas that I think are yet to be revealed. There is no mention, for example, of spending on CBRN. There is a lack of information about the commitment to both space and ballistic missile defence programmes. There are assumptions in there about the costing of complex weapons programmes and partnerships in the future, but nothing about resourcing of long-term deployments and, critically, training. What happens in the Middle East, in terms of Army training and the arrangements that we believed we were going to see in the Gulf—where has all that gone? It has disappeared, from what we saw in the discussion in the past few months. There are a lot of activities that are now not kept in here.

The biggest saving that can be made will be, or could be, through a reduction in readiness. Once you say that you can keep units and formations at lower levels of readiness, you then effectively take risk on them. Instead of saying that you can deploy them in 48 hours, you say that you can deploy them in 12 weeks, 6 months or a year, and that means that you do not have to supply them, upkeep them and fit them out, and you can take a huge amount of risk. As that is not detailed in the documentation or on the factsheet, there is a real problem that we might be taking an enormous risk, because MoD has to generate these savings.

Chair: Any other comments? No. Those were very full answers.

Q27 Phil Wilson: The proposed structure of the National Security Council, chaired by the Prime Minister and including Secretaries of State of major Government Departments, would not, as we understand it, include any military input. Is this a reasonable structure, sufficient to

include opinions from all necessary experts? To what extent could this result in disconnect between political policy and expert military advice?

Professor Gearson: Could I go first, please? I have been looking at this area and I am giving a lecture on it next week at King's College. It depends partly on what officials the National Security Council has on it. At the level below the NSC, we are chaired by the Prime Minister. I think it is a positive step that a military adviser has been placed back into No. 10, having not had one for some time—

Q28 Chair: At what rank is that?

Professor Gearson: I believe it is relatively junior—

Chair: They usually are.

Professor Gearson: I think it is OF5 colonel—maybe a one-star-equivalent now.

Q29 Phil Wilson: When did we last have that?

Professor Gearson: We did have military advice coming through the foreign policy adviser who had a Defence brief, but that was moved out when the national security adviser was appointed. The national security adviser has moved into the Cabinet Office, and there was no military advice, to my knowledge, inside No. 10.

Q30 Chair: So you will have a one-star military adviser with the ear of the Prime Minister—

Professor Gearson: Or colonel.

Chair: One star or below, but the Chief of Defence Staff, let alone the heads of the services, are not on this council. Is that correct?

Professor Gearson: I think the Chief of Defence Staff has regularly attended the NSC, but I think attendance is by invitation. In defence terms, one of the surprises was also that Chief of Defence Intelligence is the only intelligence head not regularly invited to the NSC. The reply was that the Chief of Defence Staff will cover that brief, but you have the heads of the three other agencies there and not CDI. In answer to your question, there is lots of talk about embedding military experience in Government Departments and in the Cabinet Office at a lower level. I am still concerned that this understanding should go to the top level.

Q31 Chair: Forgive me, Phil, but I just want to come in again on this point. The predecessor Committee to this produced a report before the general election called “Decision-making in Defence Policy”, which made a particular recommendation. Historically, the service chiefs had been at the heart of giving joint strategic military advice to Government. They had now been totally isolated from it, and it all fell on the shoulders of the CDS, who might or might not be invited. Therefore, the Committee proposed that the Chiefs of Staff Committee should be reconstituted as the Military Sub-Committee of the National Security Council, which obviously has that element of democratically elected politicians at the highest level. Curiously enough, despite the Government's normal response being to reply to every major recommendation in a report, there was no reference whatever to our suggestion in their official reply. What do you think about that idea? Why do those of you with a knowledge of

Whitehall ways think that it is apparently rather sensitive and unwelcome to restore a situation in which the heads of the Army, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force and the Chief of the Defence Staff can tender joint strategic military advice to the politicians?

Peter Roberts: One of the things we were perhaps hoping for from the review was a review of how command and control works throughout—from the top to the bottom, including the National Security Council; the role played by the fourth floor, or the Ops Directorate, in the Ministry of Defence; and the role played by the permanent joint headquarters—to understand to a degree how much politics is in the military advice they give, and how much it is watered down. There are some really interesting points in there. Some would argue that the UK has a phenomenally large command and control structure for what are, actually, very small forces.

Q32 Chair: With respect, Peter, I really want to keep this at the top level—about the Chiefs of Staff and the Chief of the Defence Staff—because time is so limited. Do you have an observation on that particular point?

Peter Roberts: I think you are right: it is very strange that this would not be done. I was under the impression that it was because the command and control was going to be looked at specifically as part of the defence review.

Q33 Chair: I had heard a suggestion that it was because it was inconsistent with the Levene report, which was largely responsible for sidelining the Chiefs of Staff in the first place. I do not know whether anybody else can throw any light on that, or give any other reason.

Professor Gearson: I would just give an observation: the development of the national security approach seems to have left the MoD, which is very big and very well resourced compared with other Departments—they would say—on its own across the road. I would like to see a deputy national security adviser (military). There are several deputy national security advisers, but they are all civil servants, and they are not military. Some may come from the Ministry of Defence in the future—we may have officials from there—but, to my mind, you need to embed some sort of military advice at the highest levels, albeit that I am sure that, if you had the national security adviser here, he would say, “I talk to my military colleagues all the time.” That is not the same as having them as part of your planning and thinking process.

Q34 Chair: Who would like to take that further? David?

Dr Blagden: I seem to recall that the rationale was an exercise in reducing service tribalism, in the sense that if you somewhat reduce service heads’ access, that is likely to result in better jointery, rather than fiefdoms. That is my recollection of that review of the MoD.

Q35 Chair: I understand that, and it is true that inter-service rivalries have done no one any favours, but if the price to be paid for that is that the system that won the second world war has been destroyed, is that not rather a question of throwing out the baby with the bathwater? Patrick, what do you think?

Professor Porter: I agree.

Q36 Chair: Please tell us why.

Professor Porter: I would strongly welcome the general thrust of trying to integrate Government, as a machine, so that policies and the instruments of state can be synthesised. I do not see the strength of the rationale for making an exception in this case. I am afraid that is all I have to add.

Q37 Chair: A last word from each of you.

Professor Gearson: Just one little thing on the previous point. It is partly because we are looking at a period of mistrust of the Ministry of Defence in the Cabinet Office and No. 10 in the last four years, and at an unwillingness to adopt military approaches to thinking about “grand strategy”. I know other Committees have done inquiries into this. We have heard it from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who has talked about how we are not a grand strategic nation. There is a reluctance to bring the military in, because there is a concern that they will talk about strategy, and the rest of Whitehall does not want to.

Q38 Mrs Moon: If Professor Gearson could give us a copy of his lecture after he has given it, that would be extremely helpful to all of us.

Chair: An excellent idea, as always, Madeleine. Thank you for that. A final word from Dr Tuck.

Dr Tuck: First, I am sympathetic to the idea that you would have the single service chiefs present. One of the critiques of what we did in Afghanistan was that just having the Chief of Defence Staff means the single service perspectives get filtered out, but I am not sure these changes would revolutionise our effectiveness, because the structures that won us the second world war also lost us plenty of wars as well. There are many other reasons why we have found strategy-making difficult.

Chair: My only observation in concluding this and thanking you all is that sometimes, problems have to be considered from the purely military aspect alone, and then the politicians can decide whether or not those interests, thus defined from the military aspect alone, should override political considerations. The problem is that if that is not fed in in the first place, the politicians are seeing a skewed picture. If that does not provoke anyone into immediately contradicting me, I shall quit while we are ahead. I thank all our witnesses today, and all colleagues who have been able to stay to the end of this slightly longer-than-usual session. Thank you.