Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

Oral evidence: The Work of the National Security Adviser

Wednesday 8 July 2020

3 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Margaret Beckett MP (The Chair); Lord Brennan; Lord Campbell of Pittenweem; Sarah Champion MP; Yvette Cooper MP; Tobias Elwood MP; Richard Graham MP; Lord Harris of Haringey; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Baroness Henig; Baroness Hodgson of Abinger; Darren Jones MP; Alicia Kearns MP; Lord King of Bridgwater; Baroness Lane-Fox; Angus Brendan MacNeil MP; Robert Neill MP; Baroness Neville-Jones; Lord Powell of Bayswater; Bob Stewart MP; Tom Tugendhat MP.

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Witness

I. Sir Mark Sedwill, Cabinet Secretary and National Security Adviser.

Examination of witness

Sir Mark Sedwill.

Q1 **The Chair:** Sir Mark, welcome to the Committee. Thank you very much for coming to give us evidence again. As you know, we have begun an inquiry into biosecurity as a national security issue. For that reason, and because we have not seen you since the last election or indeed for a little while, we decided to ask you to give evidence. Since we issued that invitation and you accepted it, you have resigned. Why?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Thank you for inviting me. It is good to be here and I look forward to helping the Committee with its inquiry.

I have not resigned. The Prime Minister and I agreed that I should step down. It was by agreement, and it was essentially because we had concluded that it was time to split the jobs again and to have a separate National Security Adviser and a separate Cabinet Secretary. The

combined model was right during my tenure, but we concluded that as we moved into this next phase of dealing with the Covid recovery and so on we needed a separate National Security Adviser and Cabinet Secretary, and that those people should see the Prime Minister through the rest of this Parliament. Therefore we agreed that it was the right time for me to step down and to allow my successors to take over and support him through the rest of this Parliament.

The Chair: Thank you. That is very clear. One thing that is not quite so clear to me is how many jobs are now replacing you.

Sir Mark Sedwill: We have created a new job in No. 10, which is actually a revival of a job that was there some years ago—that of the Permanent Secretary in No. 10.

The Chair: I remember it.

Sir Mark Sedwill: That job has been focused on Covid and has essentially taken over the effort that was already happening between No. 10 and the Cabinet Office at a lower level, leading the Covid response at the official level in support of the Prime Minister. It remains to be seen whether that job will continue with a broader remit.

My job, strictly speaking, is therefore being split into two. There is a separate National Security Adviser. David Frost is taking on that role in a slightly new format, as you know—I knew that you would ask about that. There is then the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service.

Q2 **The Chair:** There has been a lot of comment about the fact that the National Security Adviser might not have the degree of security experience that you had. Do you think that is likely to cause difficulty? Can you recall occasions when it was particularly useful or valuable to you to have had that security experience?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I am probably the worst person to ask, because it will sound as though I am giving myself a reference. It should not be forgotten that I was the first National Security Adviser to have run a big domestic department. All the others had diplomatic experience. Peter Ricketts had been Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, and Kim Darroch and Mark Lyall Grant had been senior ambassadors, but they had not run the Home Office and did not have massive domestic security experience. I think that was what I was able to bring to the job, as well as my diplomatic career. Of course, David Frost is a very experienced diplomat. He was an ambassador and led the strategy function in the Foreign Office before taking up a different career, and then he returned to government as a political adviser.

We have often talked about the span of my responsibilities and, as I have explained, the key here is that you are leading a team of experts. There is a really strong deputy on the global or international side—a former ambassador, David Quarrey—and a really strong deputy on the domestic security side, Beth Sizeland, who has worked in a range of departments, including dealing with terrorism and other incidents. David will have their

support and the support of the entire team. His job is not to try to be the expert but to draw on the expertise and represent the Prime Minister and the Government.

The Chair: My impression is that his role is, frankly, less senior than that of Peter Ricketts, Kim Darroch or you.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Not as National Security Adviser. He does not sit in the Civil Service hierarchy. The key to that job is to speak authentically and with authority on behalf of the Prime Minister. The full title of the job has now reverted to "the Prime Minister's National Security Adviser". That is what other Governments want when they deal with that person. Of course, in other systems it is quite common for the National Security Adviser to be a political appointee who is closely aligned with the Head of Government. That will be the case in many of the countries that we deal with the most.

Therefore, as for any National Security Adviser, David's authority comes from his proximity to the Head of Government and the degree to which he can speak on behalf of the Prime Minister and the National Security Council within government and overseas.

The Chair: It is not clear to me how that will work with his Brexit responsibilities and how we can be sure of getting an independent voice on the whole issue of Brexit. That might be quite key in the coming months.

Sir Mark Sedwill: He will continue to be the Sherpa and the lead negotiator for Brexit, but of course the Government's objective is to complete those negotiations fairly swiftly. Again, as I pointed out, he will have a very strong team supporting him. I shall still be here until the end of September and will be in transition at some point between now and then. He will have a very strong team supporting him and I am confident that that team can give him, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet the support that they need.

Q3 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** The issue of personalities is surely central here. There were briefings and leaks. How many of them were against you?

Sir Mark Sedwill: It is never pleasant to find oneself, particularly as an official, in the midst of stories of that kind. I am not the only official who that has happened to—indeed, others have sometimes had it worse—but we appear to be in an era where some of us are fair game in the media, and I am afraid that it now goes with the territory.

My guess is that my successors will have to deal with some of that as well. I could probably wax lyrical about why particular events or decisions that I made throughout the different jobs that I have done in my career might have attracted that kind of attention, but it is just a feature. I do not think it is ever pleasant when that happens in government, whether it is against or between Ministers, and it is particularly not pleasant when there are briefings against officials to which they cannot reply—

particularly those who are off the record and snipe away. However, I am afraid that it is a regrettable feature of modern politics.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The former Cabinet Secretary, Sir Gus O'Donnell, has expressed concern that you might be being replaced by yes-men. Do you think that at the heart of this is a question of personalities rather than qualifications?

Sir Mark Sedwill: No. The Prime Minister and I have a really good relationship. This decision was taken by the two of us. The timing of it was at my initiative, but it has been entirely amicable. As you will see, he has asked me, when I am out of government, to perform an envoy role and to chair a G7 panel, which some of my predecessors have done in different configurations. Nigel Sheinwald, for example, was an envoy to the tech companies for a period after he retired, so that kind of model very much exists. I expect to continue to have a good, positive relationship with both the Prime Minister and government. So, no, I do not think that personalities were an issue here at all.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Our population of 60 million, for instance, did not manage to remove Dominic Cummings, but it seems that quite few people were able to remove you from your role. Do you think that if the situation had been different and these briefings had not happened, you would be continuing as you were?

Sir Mark Sedwill: No, not really. At some point between the election and the middle part of this Parliament, it would have been sensible for me to move on. Do not forget that I stepped in as Cabinet Secretary because of the tragic circumstances of Jeremy Heywood's illness and then premature death. I never intended to be Cabinet Secretary. I had never sought this job. I had the job that I felt I had spent 30 years qualifying myself for but, because of the circumstances of Jeremy's tragic illness, the then Prime Minister asked me to step in as Cabinet Secretary. It was never my intention to do that long term.

The longest I would have run until would have been a little later in this Parliament. I am in my mid-50s and hope that I still have quite a lot of life left in me for other activities. I would in any event have wanted to move on to those at some stage. Therefore, the timing was a question of when it was the right time to do so for the job and the institution. I always felt that once the combined model had seen its course and it was right to go back to a split model, that would probably be the right time for me to step down, and of course the Covid crisis has had an effect on that timing.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Finally, I am no medical expert but you are looking good for someone in his mid-50s. I assume that we will not be hearing a different tune, but so far this afternoon you have been very loyal in many ways to those who perhaps have not been so loyal to you.

Sir Mark Sedwill: That is very kind of you. Loyalty to the elected Government and loyalty to the person behind us [indicating portrait of Queen behind him] for whom we all work is an essential part of the job.

The Chair: I am very mindful of taking quite a bit of time on this question, and I know that Ms Cooper wants to come in as well. Ms Cooper?

Q4 **Yvette Cooper:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Sir Mark. Very briefly, I understand that the Cabinet Office has said that your successor will not be responsible for the performance reviews of the intelligence agency heads in the way that you have been. Can you confirm whether you expect your successor to have responsibility for the intelligence agencies' budgets and to continue to be the accounting officer for those agencies?

Given that this is a political appointment but not a ministerial appointment that is accountable to Parliament in the same way, what do you see as the potential risks to the relationships with the intelligence agencies that your successor will need to guard against, such as political tensions or the risk of being seen to politicise the intelligence agencies in any way?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Essentially, your proposition is correct. As Cabinet Secretary, my successor will line manage the intelligence agency heads, as he or she will do for all the other heads of agencies and Permanent Secretaries. Of course, that was the case until the creation of the National Security Adviser role in 2010; previous Cabinet Secretaries always did that.

They were also the accounting officer for the single intelligence account. Again, that will be the case because, as a political appointee, David Frost cannot perform those functions; they must be performed by a civil servant. That is the line of managerial and financial accountability.

Of course, David will be in charge of national security policy. He will have a close relationship with the agencies. I must say that, from what I have seen, he conducts himself with great professionalism. I do not anticipate any friction of that kind. The lines of accountability are clear.

Q5 **Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho:** Good afternoon. I am interested in moving on to Covid, which you would not wish on anybody. I certainly hope that you have felt okay through everything that we have experienced.

I am interested in your views on the machinery of government and how well you think it has coped with the crisis. There has been a lot of talk about centralisation versus decentralisation; that might be a bit of a clunky separation. Do you think there are things you would do now to make the machinery of government cope more effectively?

Sir Mark Sedwill: The first thing I should say for the record is how proud I am of the way in which the entire public service has responded to Covid. I realise that you will want to talk about the lessons that we have

learned, but I should just put that on the record. Think of the speed with which we set up a shielding programme—no one had ever done that before—and a track and trace programme. Dido Harding, who has been overseeing that, said that it was essentially the equivalent of setting up an entire online retail business in the space of six weeks. There is the furlough programme to support people's jobs. No one in this country who needed a ventilator was not able to have one. No one did not access to the medical treatment they needed. That was all because we acted at the beginning of the crisis to ensure that those capabilities were in place.

I can talk about that further. The Army and the military performed an extraordinary role, providing planning capability, logistic expertise and, when needed, boots on the ground, but it was a synthesis of them, health professionals, civil servants and so on that essentially did the work and got the Nightingale Hospitals up and running. I should make that point to start with.

My second point is that obviously we will have to learn lessons from this. I am sure that, as the Prime Minister has acknowledged, there will be an inquiry in some format once the Covid is over. Of course, we do not know whether we have reached even the halfway point yet, but this crisis is still rolling round the globe. The time for lessons to be learned will be once the crisis is through. Then we need to judge whether the Government took the right decisions at the right time and whether the evidence and material that they had was adequate for those decisions.

What I can say is that we sought at every stage to provide Ministers with the full suite of evidence that was available to us. Of course, this was an unknown disease; we learned about it as the crisis developed and Ministers sought to take decisions on the basis of the best material from medical scientists that they had available to them while taking into account other economic factors and so on.

I think that government responded well. There will of course be questions about whether we had enough contingent capability—those resource choices are made by many Governments over years—and whether there are capabilities that other countries had chosen to develop in their healthcare systems but that we had chosen not to resource. There will always be a question about the degree to which we invest in other areas of health, as well as in contingent capability versus current priorities.

Inevitably, there is always a resource-constrained environment. Those are choices that Governments have to make. I imagine that we will want to learn lessons from this crisis to make judgments about whether we got that balance right over many years.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: While I appreciate that we are still in the throes of this and very much unable to look at things effectively, we still find ourselves in a significantly worse position than many other countries. You talk about resource issues. I am interested in where you would have put those resources—not necessarily in health but perhaps in more central government or distributed to departments. In particular, did the

NSC Secretariat get more resource? Do you feel that there were other places that should have had more resources but did not receive them? There must be places where now, with hindsight, you would like to have moved those resources earlier.

Sir Mark Sedwill: We have tried to learn lessons as we have gone through this, but there are no particular areas that I feel were significantly under-resourced, particularly in central government.

We had to develop resources for this, of course. For example, we took significant resources away from the contingency planning for the transition at the end of this year from the transition period into our post-Brexit arrangements. A lot of the people whom we switched to Covid had been doing quite a lot of contingency planning on that and had been involved in the Operation Yellowhammer work in the past couple of years, planning for a no-deal Brexit if it happened. We had therefore trained a lot of those people in how to deal with different contingencies.

I do not think that resources at the centre were a particular issue. We definitely had issues where individuals became ill and we had to find others to replace them, but we were able to do that quite swiftly. Other government priorities were essentially put on ice while we applied this.

My own view, although preliminary, is that it is not fair to say that this country has fared worse than other countries; we do not know that yet, because we do not know what the eventual outcome will be in terms of excess deaths, the impact on the economy and so on—nor do we know the reasons for it. There may be underlying structural reasons to do with population density, demographics, obesity, pre-existing health conditions and so on that are a more significant explanation of the course of this disease than the machinery and structures of government.

The big issues will be the questions about resourcing, particularly in the healthcare system, and the balance between contingent capability and current priorities. Those are the really big angles to this, rather than particular resources at the centre of government.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho: In our last meeting, we had an interesting presentation from the Cabinet Office on the national security strategy and the risk register. It was particularly interesting to note that the global pandemic had been placed in "global risks" rather than "domestic risks". Do you think that is the right decision? Would you change it now?

Sir Mark Sedwill: It is both. It is a global risk that has severe domestic consequences, as we have seen. Again, if we look at the Covid crisis as a whole and compare it to the financial crisis, for example, the global system has not functioned. We have sought to learn lessons from other countries and see what has worked and what has not. But think back to the financial crisis and the way in which the global leadership came together—particularly under the leadership of the United States but also of the British Government at the time—and the G20 got a grip on the issues. That has not happened this time.

There are questions for global Governments in dealing with a pandemic at this time. We must remember that we are the most globalised economy in the G20 and just about the most open society. Therefore, this country is highly exposed to global risks of that kind, whether they are economic or health risks. So I do not think that it is a matter of categorising your global order messages; it is a global issue with clearly very severe domestic health, economic and social consequences.

Q6 **Baroness Neville-Jones:** You list a whole lot of achievements during the pandemic, but as seen from outside there was a very strong element of improvisation rather than pre-planning. I want to ask you about some of the organisational aspects that have run alongside the NSC. In recent weeks, No. 10 has established the Joint Biosecurity Centre. Can you explain what you think its function is and what kind of impact it is designed to have in relation to the NSC? Does it help or hinder the existing structure? There seems to be a lot of duplication.

Sir Mark Sedwill: On your first point, like everyone else, we were learning about Covid as we went along, as in any major crisis—in this case, a public health threat of unknown characteristics. We learned only some time into the pandemic about the degree to which asymptomatic transmission of the disease was a factor. You have to adapt if you are dealing with something of this kind. A great deal of pre-planning had been done on the basis of previous exercises—Exercise Cygnus, et cetera. For example, the legislation that came forward in response to Covid was based on draft legislation that we already had in place. The Civil Contingencies Secretariat is essentially at the core of running the Government's systems for this crisis. You will recognise from your own time in government that it runs the COBRA machinery and so on.

I would not say that we did not pre-plan, but we were dealing with a disease that had characteristics different from any other disease that we had seen before and different from the pandemic flu, which was the example for which we had prepared.

On the Joint Biosecurity Centre, essentially we concluded that we needed to beef up the intelligence capability to track the course of the disease. If you think of the analogy of a forest fire, when the fire is raging you just have to suppress the entire thing, and that is what the national lockdown was about. After you have done that, there is always the risk of small outbreaks in tinder that is still smouldering. To spot those, react quickly and respond with precise local lockdowns rather than a blanket lockdown across the country, in effect you need an intelligence system that identifies warnings and indicators, preferably in advance, pulls a whole load of data together and triggers the right operational response. This is mostly based on Public Health England's existing capabilities, but in response to the nature and scale of this pandemic we needed to improve both the scale and scope of that capability, including with the testing and tracing programme.

The paradigm for the Joint Biosecurity Centre—this is where the national security community supported the public health community—was JTAC.

When we set it up, I asked people from the OSCT and the Home Office who used to work for me when I was there to help set it up. It was clear that we needed something akin to an intelligence capability that could scrutinise networks where a virus was moving. There was a close analogy to some of the work in classic homeland security work. We were able to apply those techniques and build up that capability. There will be some structural changes in due course, but of course you do not mess with those things when you are in the middle of the crisis. This was an additional capability on top of the existing Public Health England capabilities that we had.

Baroness Neville-Jones: Modelling it on the JTAC would suggest that this was an intelligence and analytical tool. You then talked about a lot of implementation taking place under its authority during Covid—testing and tracing through Public Health England. I am not quite clear. Is this a policy-making body, an assessment body or an implementation body, or is it all those things? Is it a long-term institution or is it in existence just for the existing crisis?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Essentially, it is an assessment body. The concept is that it looks at all the sources of data and tries to identify whether there is an emerging problem. You will have seen that we have recently had a significant problem in Leicester, but you will not be aware of the places where we were able to spot a problem earlier and take more precise action to suppress more localised outbreaks. There were several of those around the country.

So it is essentially an assessment tool, but it then triggers an executive response, just as you would expect in other areas of government activity, including national security activity. That executive response is at the local level. It will involve local authorities, Public Health England and NHS capacity if required, and it might even involve law enforcement if there is an element of that to it as well. That is organised through the local resilience fora at the local level and through local authorities.

Therefore, the executive action is taken a local level, not by the JBC. The JBC and the mechanisms in central government essentially trigger it by identifying an emerging problem.

Baroness Neville-Jones: What are the sources from which it gets the information on which it makes its assessments?

Sir Mark Sedwill: There is a range of sources, and we are seeking to enrich the data all the time. There is the testing programme, which is countrywide, but there is also a great deal of very rich data in the NHS. If, for example, a GP practice records that it has had an unusual number of people coming in with Covid symptoms, we would expect that information to flow from the NHS data systems—the NHS now has a very sophisticated data management system—into the JBC, and it would look at that piece of information alongside others. You can even use social media as a source of data in some of these areas, and there are other forms of testing—testing water and so on—that can enable the virus to be

spotted. The idea is that, as in other areas, it synthesises all that data and tries to identify whether there is essentially a smouldering coal.

Q7 **Bob Stewart:** Thank you so much for coming today, Sir Mark. Can you tell me the real difference between COBRA and the NSC, particularly with reference to the Covid-19 crisis? I am confused about the role of each.

Sir Mark Sedwill: In language that you are more familiar with than me, the NSC's job is to be the strategic leadership group and COBRA's job relates to the operation. COBRA might meet with strategic-level people in it, chaired by the Prime Minister, by a Cabinet Minister, by me or whoever, but its job is essentially to respond to an emerging problem. We convened COBRA after Salisbury, we convene it after terrorist attacks and floods, and we convened it for this pandemic.

Of course, the NSC is a Cabinet sub-committee and its job is to provide a strategic direction for that portfolio of government. There are other Cabinet committees. There is XS, which is the Brexit strategy committee, chaired by the PM, and there is now a Covid strategy committee, which the PM also chairs.

The best analogy is that COBRA is there to provide the immediate operational response to an emerging situation, but its job is not really to be a strategic long-term forum.

Bob Stewart: So it is "day to day—COBRA" and "looking to the future—NSC". Is that a good way of putting it?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes, that is a reasonable way of putting it, but of course COBRA will deal with a range of issues that NSC would not. Although COBRA is run by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, it sits in the national security portfolio, so I oversaw it when I was the National Security Adviser full time. It deals with a range of other issues. We convened COBRA after the Grenfell fire, for example, and after the floods, which are clearly not national security issues.

Bob Stewart: That would explain why the NSC took over and concentrated on Covid-19; the operation was started by COBRA and then the NSC came in to look at what to do in future. Could it have been convened earlier, do you think?

Sir Mark Sedwill: It is less about the convening of the committee and more about the nature of the conversation. Of course, Cabinet, which sits above all this, was talking about some of the broader strategic questions, including one or two of the global questions on which we have already touched. The NSC does that in the area for which it is responsible.

After the initial COBRAs, we set up five groups, led by Ministers as the Covid crisis developed and appropriate to that. The Prime Minister chaired a daily Covid strategy group, which essentially was a ministerial committee looking at the progress of the disease. We then had four other ministerial groups—on health and care, international, economic and other public services—chaired by other senior Ministers.

Essentially, the model was the strategic and operational headquarters. In a sense, the Prime Minister's strategy group was the strategic headquarters and the four other ministerial groups were the four operational headquarters. In that strategy group, we looked at the progress of the effort and tried to look ahead to some of the broader questions, but they were also taken to Cabinet, as you would expect.

Bob Stewart: I understand that in the middle of the crisis, but do you think that COBRA was ideally suited to deal with this to start with?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes. As you know, in dealing with a crisis of this kind, government is largely about convening. You are convening across a range of public service institutions that have quite complex governance relationships with each other. We will often have at the COBRA table chief constables, for example, who obviously have independent operational responsibility. We brought together Her Majesty's Government at the UK level with the devolved Administrations, and, where necessary, the metro mayors, such as Sadiq Khan, would attend when we were dealing with them.

The benefit of COBRA is that it is a convening forum where you can just bring everyone together without the finalities of Cabinet committees, collective responsibility and all that, and have a forum in which Ministers can take decisions with all the key voices in the room. It is well-suited to dealing with crises, but as you move on from the acute into a longer campaign you need to evolve into the right strategic and operational clusters of responsibility to proceed with the overall effort.

Q8 **Lord Campbell of Pittenweem:** Sir Mark, you made a passing reference to the devolved Administrations. I wonder whether I might ask you to characterise the nature of the consultation with the devolved Administrations and the co-ordination. As you probably know, the second of these at least has been the subject of some criticism, both north and south of the border.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes. You will forgive me if I try to steer round some of the political issues that you touch on, but I will do my best to address the question. Looking back, in the first phase of this, as we moved into the nationwide lockdown we were able to pursue a completely coherent UK-wide approach where there was very close co-ordination. At an official level, by the way, it has worked completely intimately throughout; the devolved Administration officials are all at the groups I chair.

At the time, there was agreement among the heads of the devolved Administrations, one or two metro mayors and the national Government, led by the Prime Minister, but even though the progress of the disease at that stage was not yet completely consistent around the country—it was hitting certain parts of the country ahead of others—it made sense when we moved into lockdown for the whole of the United Kingdom to move in step. We were looking at how to move in step; for example, a particular issue for the Northern Ireland Executive was how they related to the measures being taken by the Government in Dublin.

Perfectly legitimately, different choices were made by the devolved Administrations and the United Kingdom Government about the pace and nature of the easing of the lockdown as we gradually came out of it. There have been some politics in that, as you indicate, but the underlying evidence on which all those Ministers have been making their decisions has been common. The devolved Administrations have made choices about the nature and pace of the easing of the lockdown, as well as about which capabilities at the national level they wish to draw on and which capabilities they need to use themselves.

If you look at the United States, this has been done state by state. It does not see that as quite such a political point of friction as we do; that is partly due to the nature of our political debate here, perhaps.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: I just want to pick something out of that. Am I to take it that the information available to all the devolved Administrations was exactly the same, that any changes or distinctions that they sought to draw were therefore matters for the individual judgment of the Administrations, and that there no question of any of them being denied the information that was available centrally?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Indeed. Of course, the information that is available centrally is drawn from the ground level. For example, what we know about what is happening in northern Scotland is drawn from information produced by the people in northern Scotland from the data that is available there and which has come through the devolved Administration to the national level.

Obviously, there is a distinction in the policy choices that have been made, which is perfectly legitimate. I would not say that it was identical—there are obviously variations around the country and variations in the way in which health data is collected—but certainly, on the official and expert information, the Chief Medical Officers were talking the entire time and there was really close co-ordination, perhaps more so on the evidence base, rather than the information, on which the different Administrations were making their decisions.

Q9 **Lord Harris of Haringey:** Baroness Lane-Fox has already referred to the briefing we had last week on the national security risk assessment. Can you take us through the role of you, as National Security Adviser, and the National Security Council in translating the results of those risk assessments into practical action, such as identifying resources, making sure that the relevant capabilities are in place and ensuring that the right levels of testing and exercising are undertaken?

Sir Mark Sedwill: If I may, I will answer in two parts, because there are essentially two sets of choices; it is an important point.

On your second question, the testing and exercising of the key risks that are identified is led out of the centre—out of the secretariat. We do that for classic national security risks, for example by exercising defence and other capabilities against a deliberate overseas threat, having the

deterrent and so on, but we also do it in terms of civil contingencies. A few years ago, Exercise Cygnus, as it was known, was an exercise led by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat to test government response to the impact of a pandemic outbreak. The model for that was pandemic flu, which was the likeliest pandemic that we had identified. That is led by us.

On the broader policy question, the national security risk assessment is taken through the key committees. The most recent iteration has come to the NSCO—National Security Council officials—group that I chair. It then goes to the NSC itself, chaired by the Prime Minister. Each risk has a lead department, so a lead Secretary of State essentially identified against it as responsible for mitigating that risk.

Most of the significant risks of course do not sit in just one department, so it is not a purely single department response, but they are the responsibility of a lead department. The Secretary of State then needs to consider the resource choices and how much contingent capability they might need; all that goes into the review process, including the spending review.

In the end, of course, the really big choices that Governments make are on what resources—whether they are people, tech, systems or whatever—to devote to different priorities. Those decisions are taken through the spending review process. Individual Secretaries of State, whether it is the Health Secretary, the Home Secretary or whoever, have to balance off their pure departmental responsibilities and the national risks for which they are responsible in putting forward their propositions to the Treasury and the Prime Minister in a spending review.

Q10 **Lord Harris of Haringey:** You have had a unique position in overseeing this process. With the benefit of hindsight, do you think that the balance of resource allocation between the different levels of risk—tier 1, tier 2 and tier 3—including those that look at the impact and the likelihood, has been struck correctly? What are the overall mechanisms for looking at the balance of resources between the various levels of risk?

Sir Mark Sedwill: First, on this question, it is still too early to say whether the big strategic decisions were right, coming at it in terms of the capabilities that we have resourced. If you look at the difference between this country and others, as I indicated earlier there are choices between contingent capability in the health and care system and current priorities. That is within a resource envelope, of course; you can always argue for more. I expect that will be one area that we will want to examine as we look back on this through whatever mechanism. We must remember that those are still choices, and choices that Governments have to make about resource and risk.

To give you an example, when I was at the Home Office I constantly highlighted the risk to our citizens of serious organised crime. It is one of the less well-known pure national security risks, if you like, but it kills more people than terrorism or any of the classic defence-type threats that the country faces. Most people in law enforcement would say that we

do not resource that as well as we resource other national security risks. As the Home Office Permanent Secretary, I made that case at every spending review.

In the end, you still have to make choices—between mainstream policing, terrorism and other national security risks—and between national security and all the other priorities of government. So the process will always be one of whether risk owners will advocate that they need more capability if they are to provide a higher level of assurance, but the overall judgments must be made across government as a whole. Of course, that is what the comprehensive spending review, supported by the national security integrated review, will have to address.

As I said, one of the big questions here is the degree to which we have contingent versus current capability, particularly in health and care.

Lord Harris of Haringey: So essentially the choice is whether we build enough just-in-case capability as opposed to operating on a just-in-time basis.

Sir Mark Sedwill: That is a very good way of putting it, if I may say so.

Lord Harris of Haringey: My impression is that we gave a lower priority to pandemic risks than we did to other risks. You were responsible for terrorism—there were issues to do with armed conflicts and so on—which leads to far fewer casualties; compare the number of people who have died from terrorist incidents in this country to the number of people who have died from Covid. Does this suggest to you that we should review our approach to all the top-tier, serious risks to make sure that they are in the right place and that we are allocating the right level of resources?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I think that we should always review those and bring those choices forward to Ministers. If I could use terrorism as an example, essentially we have sought to provide a much higher level of assurance against deaths from terrorism since 9/11 than was required of us during the Northern Ireland Troubles. The number of casualties that we faced during the Troubles—on the mainland, but particularly in Northern Ireland—was significantly greater over those 30 years than the number of deaths and incidents since 9/11, but the political judgment was made to resource to a higher level of assurance against terrorism.

We should always keep these things under review, because resources are, by definition, always constrained. Therefore, particularly in dealing with risk we should always ask what capabilities we need, what level of assurance we can get, what the marginal pound or person buys for us and how that relates to other risks, government priorities, manifesto commitments and so on.

These are very political decisions. As the head of the professionals, if you like, my job and that of my successors is to bring those choices explicitly to Ministers and enable them to make informed decisions.

Q11 **Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:** Returning to the level of deaths, NHS

England's 2016 report on Exercise Cygnus, which you mentioned, concluded that the UK's preparedness and response in terms of its plans, policies and capability was not sufficient to cope with the extreme demands of a severe pandemic. What action was taken to put that right, and what role did the NSC have in that?

Sir Mark Sedwill: That is a good summary of it. That was exactly what we acted on at the time. For example, there were four key outcomes from it. We prepared legislation, which was the basis of the Covid legislation. We asked departments to assess and improve the resilience of their sectors in operating in a pandemic, so all departments have their own business continuity plans, enabling them to continue to operate with 20% of their staff out at any one time. The DWP had almost 40% of its staff out at one point at the beginning of this, at the same time as an enormous spike in demand because of the economic consequences of the lockdown. We were able to surge resources into DWP to keep it operating. All that arose out of these earlier exercises.

We also decided that we needed groups of experts on the ethical and faith considerations and on dealing with excess deaths. We developed a resilience standard for the LRFs, which we then took into the Yellowhammer planning. We looked at the plans of the health and care sectors to flex their systems. So they were able to respond, for example reprioritising hospital beds and so on, to ensure that they had sufficient capacity to deal with Covid.

It is also worth keeping in mind that different pandemics would have required different responses, even in the health sector. This particular pandemic required us to ensure that we had sufficient ventilator capacity. You will recall that there was a huge effort to develop that in the early stages of this, because we did not want to see in this country what we had seen in other countries, including European ones: people needing ventilation but not having access to it and dying on trolleys in hospital corridors. We surged effort into that and were able to ensure that that was not the case; everyone who needed ventilation had it. If it had been pandemic flu or Zika, the requirement would have been different.

You cannot resource against every potential requirement of different pandemics. Clearly there will be lessons from this one, but we have to try to ensure that we have the agility in our systems to respond to the requirements of a particular kind of pandemic.

Q12 **Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:** Do you think there is a case for preparing generic draft legislation for other types of emergency? We were able to bring forward that legislation very quickly because of the previous legislation, but what do you think would be the way forward on this?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Of course, we have the Civil Contingencies Act. If we did not have time to produce bespoke legislation for a particular crisis, whether a pandemic or something else, we can always rest on that Act. However, that is the break-glass option and is to be used only if there is

no time to do so. We look at the kind of legislation that we might need to bring forward, and we did so in these circumstances, as you said.

My own view is that, given the kind of powers that we are taking—for example, to enforce a lockdown, whether a local or a national one—it is right that Parliament has the chance to scrutinise that and, as we did with this legislation, issue a requirement to renew the measures every 21 days.

Whether 21 days or 28 days, or whatever, is the right number is a matter for Parliament, but that review mechanism was something that Parliament wanted to see because we were taking quite extensive and intrusive powers to require people to observe the lockdown.

A different kind of pandemic would not have required a lockdown in quite the same way. It might have required a different kind of lockdown or other intrusive and coercive measures. I think it is right that Parliament has a chance to scrutinise those powers in the light of the circumstances that prevail at the time. Clearly, you are right that we should prepare as much as we can and be ready to go, and we were reasonably well prepared in the legislative area for this pandemic.

Q13 **Lord Harris of Haringey:** Sir Mark, the last time you gave evidence to us a year or so back, I asked you about the uneven standards in local resilience forums and how well they were working. Can you tell us whether the exercises that you have talked about regarding Brexit and pandemic flu were effective in driving up capability and what improvements resulted from that? If I may add to that, a couple of months back Michael Gove told the public administration committee in the Commons that, after the pandemic, "one of the things we will all want to do is look at the architecture of local resilience forums to make sure that we have things right". Have you drawn any tentative lessons on the local resilience forums and the current pandemic? So my questions are: what improvements took place and what are the lessons going forward?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Thank you. It would not be unfair to characterise the LRFs as having been quite uneven a few years ago. Some were well constituted. They ran local exercises and the relationships between the different individuals and bodies that they represented were strong. In other places, they barely ever met. People did not know each other and they did not have those relationships of trust and confidence, which are so important—a little like a point that I might have made in response to Bob Stewart earlier. They are so important in a crisis where you essentially convene people with lots of different responsibilities and you just need unity of purpose and effort.

The LRFs are essentially local COBRAs in that sense and they were really uneven. However, partly as a result of Cygnus and other exercises—which involved a lot of effort, including a lot of training, by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, which of course is part of the national security apparatus—the LRFs were already improving over several years.

The thing that really put them to the test was the contingency planning for a no-deal Brexit, Operation Yellowhammer. We put them through their paces countrywide. I went to see a lot of them over that period, and it was striking that it was no longer the case that LRFs in what you might regard as quieter or more outlying parts of the country had less capability than those in the big metropolitan areas. They were convened and had good relationships, and they understood their local environment really well.

For example, I went to the north of Scotland, where they deal with a highly dispersed population. They were thinking about the Brexit challenges concurrent with a major weather event. The sophistication of that apparatus improved a great deal, and the no-deal planning, Operation Yellowhammer, was probably the forcing mechanism for that.

Generally, I think that they have worked pretty well but, again, as Michael Gove said—and he is absolutely right—of course we must ask ourselves whether there are lessons that we can learn or comparisons that we can draw between those that have performed particularly well and those that have not. Are there resource consequences? Did LRFs chaired by chief constables perform differently from those chaired by local council leaders or whatever? There is a mixed economy here and, as we have put the system through the kind of pressure that it has faced with Covid, we must obviously ensure that we learn best practice. If there are structural lessons, we should learn and apply those too.

Lord Harris of Haringey: What do you think needs to change?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I do not know yet. Throughout my time in these jobs, the thing that I have been most impressed by is when all these different organisations are brought together, whether it is standing units such as multiagency safeguarding hubs that wrap an entire system around some of our most vulnerable individuals or whether it is the LRFs. We do that in a crisis but all the old silos and slightly turfy behaviours can reassert themselves quite quickly when the crisis is over. That is one big thing that needs to change, but the really big question is: how do we ensure that the unity of effort and purpose that we achieve in a crisis—the willingness by everyone to go the extra mile and to figure out ways around any of the barriers and silos, or tunnel through them if necessary—is achieved also in the way that we operate normally? That could be quite transformative.

Q14 **Mr Tobias Ellwood:** Sir Mark, it is good to see you. Thank you very much for joining us today. Can I ask you to explain briefly the lessons you have learned from the biosecurity strategy produced in July 2018?

Sir Mark Sedwill: There is a pretty extensive answer to that. I think that we are about to give some written evidence to this Committee's inquiry into this. Probably the big lesson is that we need to treat hazards in the same way as we treat threats. As one of your colleagues indicated earlier, government, particularly in the national security area, naturally organises itself around threats, whether they are classic state-based threats,

terrorist threats or whatever. From that, we have learned that hazards, as we have already touched on, can have more severe consequences than any of the classic national security threats. In some ways, that is probably the key lesson—that there are ways of structuring ourselves and so on.

We can probably organise ourselves better and have more effect if we apply the basic tenets of the kind of national security strategy that have been applied to some of the issues that you and I have dealt with over the years: improve resilience, reduce the threat and identify opportunities, and everything that goes with that. We have the list of four Ps in counterterrorism and so on, and essentially that involves applying the same framework. However, we can probably have more effect if we apply those tenets also to hazards, including biosecurity hazards, which of course can be a deliberate threat as well as a public health hazard.

Mr Tobias Ellwood: Thank you, but my concern, which has been raised already, is that this or any pandemic is seen as a level 5 national security risk. The *UK Biological Security Strategy* says: "The UK is globally renowned for the quality of our preparedness planning, and we have world-leading capabilities to address significant biological risks." The difference between this and flooding or a terrorist attack is that COBRA comes together, as you implied earlier, and then there is an immediate response. The briefing also mentions that this is an enduring emergency—a new normal. You have been asked what lessons are to be learned, but the fact is that we will not come out of this until there is a vaccine.

My concern is that this Government, and indeed many Governments across the world, are not treating the pandemic in the way they should be doing. It has been compared too much to any other emergency and has not been treated separately, as it should be because of its enduring feature. There are too many unknowns here. It is not like a terrorist attack, whereby COBRA comes together, we respond and then get back to normal. You went through the structures of Cabinet and the four sub-committees, and then you explained to Bob Stewart the differences between operations and policy. To put this in a positive way, what I would like to see more is this Government learning quickly that they need to adapt more to an enduring war footing. We still have policymakers making operational decisions and doing delivery.

As we move forward and learn that this is the new normal, should we not be far swifter of foot in adapting by having the capabilities to respond far faster? These four Cabinet sub-groups are, by nature, very siloed. Government itself—our UK construct—is very tried and tested, but it is risk averse. That means, I am afraid, that much as the right decisions have been made, in retrospect I think that many of the systems that have come into being as a response to Covid-19 through the wider picture have been brought into being far slower than we would have liked.

Sir Mark Sedwill: There is quite a lot in that. To use the example of the ministerial groups, they bring departments together. Departments are, by their nature, vertical. They organise themselves around key priorities and capabilities, and their networks and systems respond to that. There are overlaps between them but that is fundamentally the way in which our Government and pretty much every other Government are organised.

As you know, one of my personal obsessions in all this, as in the fusion doctrine, is how we can create horizontal structures—the weft to the warp, if you like—that are as strong as and can work across those vertical departmental structures. Ministerial groups and all the things that sit below them—the COBRA groups, multiagency organisations and so on—are designed to achieve that. You are right that we need clear levels of decision-making between the strategic, the operational and the tactical, to use the military approach. We do that in response to many crises with gold, silver and bronze; then, of course, you have the political level above that, which is essentially the same kind of thing.

We are developing the joint biosecurity centre, which attempts to do exactly what you suggest, Mr Ellwood, so that we will not need Ministers sitting in Whitehall making judgments about imposing a local lockdown in a town where there is a local outbreak; those decisions should be made faster and at the local level, as you say. We will have to provide the powers for that so that they can be made faster and at the local level. There is already a great deal of delegation in government.

So, yes, we are on that kind of campaign footing. We have made organisational changes as we have gone through this, partly because the nature of the crisis has shifted. It is important that we remember that we had a public health crisis and we have an economic one as well because of the lockdown. We are now trying to identify our way through that. Government structures need to adapt. I do not think that I have seen evidence of government decisions being slow as a result. There will be questions about whether decisions were taken at the right time but they were explicitly taken on the basis of the evidence that was available. The decisions were not slow but there will obviously be questions about whether the right ones were taken at the right time.

Mr Tobias Ellwood: Let me give you an example; I then want to move quickly on to another question. You will be familiar with Bournemouth beach. It is a wonderful part of the country. We absolutely welcome visitors there now, but we were not ready before because nothing else was open. On a beautiful day, everybody headed that way. We still had South Western Railway pumping extra trains down to Bournemouth, even though the local authorities had declared a major incident. This is where a situation room, not a biosecurity centre, would help to co-ordinate all those assets and make sure that we can respond swiftly to events that take place.

Let me move on to the wider picture of biosecurity. I know that you take the UK's security very seriously. We still need to consider what will happen over the hill with other bio-challenges that we might face. In

1979, there was an anthrax leak in a Soviet weapons factory, which made anthrax that would sit on top of intercontinental ballistic missiles. The leak affected a brick factory opposite. A hundred people died and they blamed it on a bad batch of meat. It was not until the Cold War that was over that this all came to light.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology has come under a lot of scrutiny. Nobody has been allowed in there. It has been proved by many independent studies that this virus has an animal, not a man-made, genetic make-up but we still cannot rule out that an accident involving testing on animals may have happened because we simply cannot get in there. Would you encourage more openness from China in allowing international independent experts to understand what happened at ground zero—and, indeed, establish who patient zero was—so that we can rule out any wrongdoing here, as has been mooted in the media?

The Chair: Sir Mark, I will not prevent you answering that question; I will simply say that we as a Committee are concentrating on the NSC aspect of this issue. If you want to say something briefly in response to Mr Ellwood, that is up to you.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Thank you. I will be brief. On your first point, in the modern era, situation rooms do not have to be in rooms, particularly when we are trying to socially distance. We can do a lot of it with technology; essentially, we have been able to bring people and all the different capabilities and assets together. It is a different mode now to where it was even 10 years ago.

On your second point, you are absolutely right. We need transparency from China; the Prime Minister himself has spoken about this. This is not about finger-pointing. It is about understanding exactly what happened, how quickly the disease was transmitted, its genetic make-up and how it moved from bat to pangolin to human, if indeed it did. It is also about understanding whether we can learn lessons for the future. We do need transparency from China on those things; we and other countries have been clear about that. That should be a priority for the WHO.

Mr Tobias Ellwood: Thank you for that and thank you, Chair, for your latitude.

Q15 **Baroness Henig:** Sir Mark, perhaps we can change the focus now. I want to turn to our departure from the EU at the end of the year. In particular, what possible risks for law enforcement do you see arising if we do not secure an agreement with the EU? I am obviously thinking of the loss of our participation in Europol and the European arrest warrant scheme. I appreciate that you, as a former Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, will have had extensive experience of British participation in those schemes. You will probably be well aware of what the increased risks might be as we come out of them.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes, indeed. As you will recall, this was an important pillar of all the contingency planning that we have done in the past couple of years for a no-deal Brexit, before we left the EU and as part of

Operation Yellowhammer. We are talking to the EU about this, of course; it is part of the negotiations. Although most of the public scrutiny tends to be on the free trade negotiations, let me assure you that this work is ongoing and the negotiating teams are focusing on it. There is a strong desire on both sides to ensure that there is no disruption to the co-operation between the UK and the EU on law enforcement, border security and so on as we come to the end of the transition period. We have looked at whether there are areas where it will simply not be possible to continue the current arrangements exactly and what mitigating mechanisms we need to put in place, preferably by agreement with the EU. Of course, all that was worked through in Operation Yellowhammer and the no-deal contingency planning work that we have done over the past couple of years.

Data is absolutely crucial. Of course, data is crucial to an awful lot of our relationship with the EU; mutual recognition of each other's law enforcement systems and so on is part of it as well. There is a strong will on both sides to secure agreement in this area but, of course, we have contingency plans in place, just as we have had in the past couple of years in case it is not possible to secure an agreement. It is also about how we ensure standstill arrangements and so on to mitigate any potential threats to security or public safety.

Baroness Henig: These are obviously crucial areas. Clearly there may not be fall-back positions in all these schemes, as you say. What national capacity do you think we could be building up in the eventuality that we perhaps do not have access to some of these partnerships?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Of course, some of this is about national capacity, particularly at the border. More resources are going into border security and we are trying to ensure that we have the right kind of arrangements with Interpol, so that pipe is bigger than it was before, if you like. Our data sharing with the EU is up to the level that we want. It is worth keeping in mind that a lot of these capabilities between us and the EU were developed in only the past few years, so it is not that we will lose everything we have always had. We have had some of these things that might be disrupted for only a relatively short period.

However, we have to try to ensure that we have arrangements in place—particularly on data, criminal records and so on—that enable us to protect ourselves, whether at the border or on the streets. The European arrest warrant is an obvious example where, legally, we will have to move to extradition arrangements. The question is not whether it is the European arrest warrant or extradition; the question is, can we make extradition as efficient or nearly as efficient, fast and smooth as the European arrest warrant? That is the kind of thing that we are working through, but it relies on co-operation on both sides. Most of this, of course, is about co-operation rather than purely national capability to compensate. Some of it is, but it is about co-operation.

Baroness Henig: Are you worried about the kinds of restrictions there might be on the sharing of justice and home affairs data with the UK

security and intelligence agencies?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Not for the security and intelligence agencies. Essentially, that is handled on a separate basis. There is obviously the platform of our legal relationship with the EU, but that data is handled separately and there has been no indication that there will be any disruption to it. Therefore, we are working through not less important but more routine data—more bulk law enforcement, border security and other data—which will be more relevant to territorial police forces and the border agencies.

Q16 **Lord King of Bridgwater:** Sir Mark, first, I thank you very much for a most interesting and impressive series of evidence. I am very struck by the fact that during these very difficult times you have acquired a huge amount of experience and know the problems. Perhaps I may say without embarrassing you that I hope you will still be closely available to your successors and the Prime Minister. These are extraordinary times and continuity is one of the crucial factors in this situation.

I simply want to reinforce what I think you have said. In these trade negotiations there is give and take and people are arguing their corner, but there is a mutual benefit in the European arrest warrant and other issues. I might be wrong—you know better than I do—but I think that Europe gets more out of the European arrest warrant than we do. We have an absolutely identical and mutual benefit in tackling organised crime and all the issues surrounding that, and I hope that that will not get caught up in no-deal arguments. I think you have covered that, but I wanted to reinforce that point.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Thank you, Lord King. I agree with that 100%. Essentially these negotiations are all being overseen by David Frost as the negotiator and Sherpa, but there are separate channels. So far I have seen no sign—at least, none that I am aware of, although I am not in the tunnel myself—of any desire to trade these issues off against each other. Everyone wants to find the best possible arrangements to keep all our citizens safe and secure, and they want to find a way through to the right result.

Thank you for your earlier comment. In the end, like all of us, I remain a public servant, even if I am no longer in government service, and I will always be available to support my successors and the Government of the day if I can, as so many of you do.

Q17 **Lord Powell of Bayswater:** I certainly echo Tom King's words very strongly. The present review of foreign policy, defence and development has a different title from those of the reviews held in 2010, 2015 and the smaller one in 2018. It is called an integrated review. Even though the titles are different, will the results be very different?

Sir Mark Sedwill: That is a great question, Lord Powell. Essentially, it covers the same territory. It is looking at defence, diplomacy and development in all our relationships—domestic, foreign, global security, domestic security and so on. I think we came up with the title "integrated

review", as otherwise it would just have been a long list, with "and", "and", "and" in it. Fundamentally, it is trying to look at the entire national security landscape and to reach the right conclusions.

Of course, there will be differences, because this review will reflect the policy and global priorities of a different Government—one that has navigated the country through Brexit. So this is very much a post-Brexit review and it will need to reflect that context. Clearly, it will need to reflect the impact of Covid. So far, as we have already discussed, we have seen the public health impact and the economic consequences but we have not yet seen the geopolitical consequences. We are seeing some signs of those—the sharpening rivalry between the US and China being one—but we do not yet know what the other geopolitical consequences will be. Certainly, economic shocks of this scale in the past have caused disruptions somewhere in the world. We must assume that in the next few years there will be disruptions as a result of this too, and we will need to be ready to respond to them.

In terms of the outcome, there will clearly be a different stance, because we will have gone through Brexit and will be in a post-Covid world. The key questions—I guess this Committee will be very interested in those—will be about the resources. Are we going to reprioritise our defence, intelligence and development resources in other areas, whether as a result of Brexit, deliberate policy choices or Covid? It is exactly that set of issues that the review will bring to Ministers to enable them to choose. How different will it be? I think that we will have to wait and see.

Lord Powell of Bayswater: On that point, there is a lot of loose talk about taking money away from traditional military spending to spend more on cyber, technology and so on. Obviously we do need to spend more on those things, but surely it should not be at the expense of Britain remaining a high-spectrum military power across the board, especially if "global Britain" is to be meaningful in any sense.

Sir Mark Sedwill: If the Chief of the Defence Staff were here, I think he would say yes to both. Being a high-spectrum military power involves investing in cyber, new technology and capabilities that enhance the combat capability of the individual soldier, marine, airman or naval operative. If you think about the development of weaponry over the centuries, essentially that is what has always happened. The combat power of the individual, whether it is the platform or individual military personnel, has been enhanced by technology. We would expect to see that happen again, and hopefully over the next 10 years we would also expect to see a reduced risk to the individual military operator.

If it were possible through drone technology, swarm technology or other innovative technologies to have more impact with a lower risk of casualty for our military, I guess you would find that most of the generals, admirals and so on would want to pursue that. That is the kind of thing that we are looking at—agile forces making the best use of modern military technology in a fused way that enables them to achieve the results that they want.

It is not just about combat; it is about all the other things that we do—projecting influence and so on—but in the end the military needs to be able to fight and win our wars. That is where its influence and impact, and indeed its professionalism and pride, arise.

Q18 **Lord Campbell of Pittenweem:** I am afraid that I take a rather less benign view of the integrated review, but ultimately it will be about the allocation of resources. You have foreign affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the three armed services, the three security services and now, as part of it, international development. Surely we are likely to get a lot more loose talk as the various entrants involved seek to influence the financial outcome as much as the strategic one.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I cannot think of anywhere, under whatever title—a strategic defence review, a strategic defence and security review or whatever it is called—where there has not been quite a lot of loose talk, often from groups, some retired, representing particular interests within the national security community. That is bound to be the case. There will be people arguing for more cyber, more intelligence, a bigger Army, a different Army, more capabilities and all the rest of it. Of course they will, and I am afraid that that is just a feature of this.

With this review, we are asking what capabilities we will need, what impact we want to be able to achieve, how we do that with our allies and how we ensure that our high-end capabilities are allied by design, and then the resource choices are made accordingly. There will of course be some tough choices—there always are in these reviews—and we have to try to balance those different requirements. However, I am very keen to ensure that it is capability led rather than, if I may put it this way, inventory led, and that we are not just committing to numbers of certain things; we are committing to the capability and impact that we will achieve.

Q19 **Baroness Hodgson of Abinger:** I want to ask about the impact which the FCO-DfID merger will have for a national security viewpoint. Given the context not only of Brexit but of the pandemic, why was it necessary to announce a merger now rather than after the integrated review had been completed? There is a feeling of slightly throwing all the cards in the air.

Sir Mark Sedwill: The reason for the timing now was that the Prime Minister had concluded that this was the right machinery-of-government change to make and wanted the new department—it is important to think of it that way, and I will come back to that point—to be in place to implement the results of the integrated review rather than the reorganisation itself being an outcome. We want to have that integrated diplomatic and development capability in place to be able to implement whatever conclusions the integrated review reaches.

As you know, the big result from the 2017-18 review that Lord Powell referred to earlier—at least, I felt that it was big—was the new Fusion Doctrine. Essentially, that took the concepts that we had often had in the

past of working more effectively across all the capabilities and bringing all those capabilities to bear on all our interests in a more coherent and effective way. If we get the reorganisation of the new department—the FCDO—right, it will exemplify that, because it will enable us to bring together the best of two cultures and the best of our diplomatic and development capabilities, and to improve our impact overseas.

That is certainly the objective: to create something genuinely new that draws on the legacy of both but achieves a greater impact so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, if I can put it that way. That is very much in line with the whole Fusion approach, which I have always championed since I have been in this job, and indeed beforehand.

Baroness Hodgson of Abinger: Given the 0.7% commitment on ODA spending, what is the risk that the budget squeezes on the new department will end up curtailing some of the other activities such as consular activities and diplomatic work?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Those are funded separately, because of course there is a certain allowance for administration but it is administration to enable the deployment of international development. In a sense, there is no difference between that and where we are now; we resource consular work and diplomatic work separately from the development programmes that count towards the 0.7%. So there should not really be an effect. They will be within a single department, but they are different kinds of budget and expenditure.

Q20 **Tom Tugendhat:** It is quite clear that the Government have recently been reading the Foreign Affairs Committee reports of the past two years. We have had a few pretty good successes: the BNOs issue has been covered, the Magnitsky Act has come in, foreign ownership has come in, and now we have the merger of the two departments. So I am delighted that you are reading our reports.

As far as the strategy is going, is one of our extra recommendations on the Foreign Agents Registration Act likely to come in in order to secure the national security strategy?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I was just wondering which one of your reports we have not implemented, so I could see the question coming.

You will forgive me, but I will leave decisions and announcements of that kind to Parliament to be made by Ministers. It is a really good point. Like all your reports, it is under active consideration, but if you will forgive me I will not trump a ministerial response.

Tom Tugendhat: May I ask a bit more then specifically about strategic risk? I am very strongly in favour of the department, but what about the strategic risk of the department, and what does that mean for the ethos of the new PUS? What skills are you looking for as Cabinet Secretary as you begin the appointment for this extremely important position?

Sir Mark Sedwill: The ethos of the new department, as with all departments, should be about impact. What are we trying to deliver against priorities set by Ministers but in a complex and fluid global environment which you know very well? What am I looking for? They have to be a great leader, someone who can lead a departmental transformation, draw on the best of the cultures of two predecessor departments, create something new, be credible with the two different sets of constituencies. Any merger creates lots of frictions and tensions, particularly among staff who are unsure about their futures and so on.

So we need a great leader who can set a vision in support of the Secretary of State and brings those cultures together. They have to know how to transform; we want somebody who has overseen transformation programmes in the past, because this is a very ambitious goal and we want to do it at pace. They also have to have credibility internationally; the PUS at this department will be the senior official internationally, particularly now that we have a political appointee as National Security Adviser, and they will need to be able to deal with their counterparts and have impact in support of Ministers, too. So we are looking for quite a blend of skills and a really high-quality operator.

Tom Tugendhat: I assume that the Treasury is also looking for somebody who can run a very large budget.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Indeed, and to ensure that they have all the right professional support in place to run that budget efficiently, effectively and so on.

Q21 **Alicia Kearns:** Sir Mark, when we talk about the threats, it feels as though we often get distracted by the actors rather than the tools, the techniques and the weapons systems that they are deploying, as well as arming ourselves defensively and offensively against them. Equally, I am concerned that, when we talk about hybrid warfare, we shortcut to cyber as a threat to information operations [*Inaudible*].

So my question to you is twofold: what do you assess to be the biggest national security challenges that we will face in the next five years that we are least well equipped to tackle; and how do we make sure that the integrated review really looks at full-spectrum offensive and defensive hybridity, and is not just based in the MoD?

Sir Mark Sedwill: You were breaking up a bit there, Miss Kearns, but I think I got the gist of it, at least on my system. There is such a wide range of kinds of national security threats that it is really hard to say, "This is the top one and this is the next one.", not least because these things change.

As I have already indicated, the issue that we are talking about three or five years from now may be one that we have not yet predicted, perhaps because of some geopolitical impact of the Covid economic crisis—or, more likely, the health crisis—that we did not expect. We did not predict the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9/11, the financial crisis or the Arab spring—no one did, certainly on the timing—so we have to be ready for some highly

disruptive event, whether economic or political, and be equipped to deal with it.

Probably the biggest challenge that any review or national security community faces is how we ensure that we deal with the threats that we know we face. You referred to hybrid warfare and manoeuvring in what is already a very contested world in that gap between peace and armed conflict; we know that we are under cyberattack and that there are efforts to subvert our systems. How we deal with the sharpening Thucydides question of the US-China relationship will set the context for the global environment.

In the longer term, I know that the Chair is passionately committed to climate security, including from her time as Foreign Secretary. That will have national security consequences as well. If the Sahara spreads south, a young population will start moving north; we will then have a whole series of migration and population movement issues as well.

We have to be able to address all these things. That is the point of a comprehensive strategy. It is not about saying that we are more worried about the acute threat from Russia or the strategic threat from here or whatever; it is about ensuring that we have the capabilities to respond to all of them and that we can do so as allies. The biggest challenge that we face is always that we cannot be a pocket superpower. That is not what we are seeking to do. We need to be able to respond effectively as an American ally and with our NATO allies to whatever comes at us, including things that we do not yet know about, and configure our military and other capabilities accordingly.

The other thing that the Covid crisis has reminded us is that we have taken up a broader definition of national security in the past 10 years. The 2015 review defined national security in terms of classic security and safety—such as defence of the realm and safety of the citizen—and protecting our prosperity and projecting our influence. We have now learned that we have to think not only about economic security, such as in supply chains, markets and so on, but about the differential impact of global security issues on our communities; as we know, that has had a very differential impact here. Well-being is also an issue. We have to deal with the security of our democratic processes and political systems because they are also under threat. Then there is climate security, broader environmental security and so on.

We have to think about all these things through a security lens. The challenge for the National Security Committee is this: what contribution can we make to that broader set of security issues without trying to suggest that they are all national security questions somehow?

The Chair: That is perhaps a good note to finish on, because Miss Kearns asked about which issues we are least equipped to tackle. Of course, that is a matter of our vulnerabilities, which are very much a matter for your successor.

I thank you very much indeed for the evidence you have given today. As always, it has been excellent and the session has been very good. As far as this Committee is concerned, you have always been very forthcoming and co-operative. We appreciate that. I hope that it is not wrong or improper of me to say that this Committee is sorry to see you go.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.