

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: North Korea, HC 327

Tuesday 19 Dec 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 19 Dec 2017.

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Leo Docherty; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Mr Mark Francois; Graham P. Jones; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar; and Phil Wilson.

Questions 48-105

Witnesses

Vice Admiral (Rtd) Sir Jeremy Blackham KCB, former Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Capability); Professor Malcolm Chalmers, Deputy Director-General, Royal United Services Institute; and Nigel Inkster CMG, Special Adviser, International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, Professor Malcolm Chalmers and Nigel Inkster.

Q48 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this session of the North Korea inquiry being held by the Defence Select Committee. We have three highly qualified experts to give us the benefit of their knowledge and wisdom. I would like to begin by asking each of you to say a few words about yourself by way of introduction. Malcolm, we will start with you, please.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I am Malcolm Chalmers, deputy director-general of the Royal United Services Institute. I wrote a little paper entitled "Preparing for War in Korea" in September of this year.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: I am Jeremy Blackham. I spent 40 years in the Navy. By the end, I was really specialising in acquisition—not something I would say too often in public, perhaps. Since then, I have been doing a variety of things, but I am acting as a consultant now and I am a speaker and writer on defence issues.

Nigel Inkster: I am Nigel Inkster. I am now a senior adviser at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, focusing primarily on China and cyber matters. I have been working full time for the IISS for the past 10 years, and prior to that I had a full career in the British Secret Intelligence Service.

Chair: Thank you all very much for coming today. Our questioning will start off by concentrating on cyber, so I'm afraid, Nigel, the bulk of the first section will be for you, but I say to our other two witnesses: by all means chip in as and when you wish; please just indicate. Then we will get on to the much wider issues in relation to a broader possibility of conflict. John Spellar will start us off.

Q49 **John Spellar:** What is your assessment of the current cyber threat from North Korea to the UK and our allies?

Nigel Inkster: It is quite serious, less perhaps because of the inherent technical sophistication of North Korea than because of the focus and intensity of its efforts. It is important to bear in mind that we are dealing with a situation of great asymmetry of vulnerabilities. North Korea is an inherently non-networked society. There are very few things in North Korea that are absolutely dependent on the internet and networking capabilities, in contrast to major western nations—the United States, the United Kingdom and others—which are increasingly network-dependent and hence very vulnerable. No matter what they do to us in the cyber domain, we have very little scope to retaliate within the cyber domain. Any retaliation we undertake has to be cross-domain and focused in areas such as economic sanctions, where we are getting to the point that we are running out of road.



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I don't know if it would be helpful if I gave a quick background explanation as to how a country that essentially has no internet has developed such capabilities, but perhaps it is worth mentioning. The relationship with China is also quite important in that context, because North Korea does not have its own international internet exchange point. It is reliant—until very recently it was totally reliant—on China's network of fibre-optic cables linking Pyongyang with Dandong on the opposite side of the border. Just this year it got a link to Russia, which increases its flexibility.

For North Korea, as for quite a lot of countries, Desert Storm was a wake-up call in understanding what information warfare in the modern era might look like. Since then, the North Korean military has invested in increasing capabilities. At the end of the 1990s we saw the emergence of Unit 121, the principal cyber unit of the Korean military intelligence service, the Reconnaissance General Bureau. That unit now operates with many avatars; the best known is the Lazarus group, the perpetrator of the recent "Wannacry" ransomware attack, but there are others as well.

The North Koreans have been garnering their brightest and best students, putting them through training courses at about 250 secondary schools and then either putting them into elite North Korean universities or sending them overseas to China, Russia or India—there are quite a lot of North Korean cyber students in India—to acquire the skills they are now putting into effect. I would characterise North Korea as an archetypal garrison state, by which I mean a state where the maintenance of military capabilities is the state's principal *raison d'être*. The cyber capabilities that are being deployed now are part of that.

Initially, the North Korean cyber-attacks were primarily focused on South Korea and were about disruption and deterrence. They were relatively unsophisticated: mainly distributed denial of service attacks, but also some hacking. They have become more proficient at that, but they have also expanded in the last two to three years into the use of cyber capabilities to acquire money—illicit revenue. It has been calculated that as much as 10% of North Korea's entire income is generated by various forms of criminal activity—forgeries of US treasury notes, narcotics smuggling, illicit alcohol sales by North Korean diplomatic missions and so on. We are now seeing the North Koreans doing more of that. Interestingly, a lot of the revenue that has enabled them to get going was derived from involvement in the South Korean internet gaming business, where they would play these internet games, collect points and then sell them. By doing that they raised a significant amount of revenue that helps to fund the capabilities they have.

Q50 John Spellar: Given what you were saying about the involvement of Russia and China, how dependent is North Korea on them for its cyber capability? Incidentally, how do its capabilities compare with theirs?

Nigel Inkster: I will start with China, because until recently North Korea was totally dependent on it for international internet access points, and still is to a significant degree. A lot of the attacks that end up being attributed to North Korea still have a Chinese IP address. Unit 121 actually



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has an operational base in the Chilbosan Hotel in Shenyang, China, which features on TripAdvisor—you can book a room there; I wouldn't necessarily advise it, but you can. Those activities have to be known to the Chinese intelligence services. After all, we are talking about a country in which a disobliging tweet about Xi Jinping is taken down within one minute of issue. I think the kind of exploits that we are seeing from Unit 121, which involve significant amounts of bandwidth, must be apparent to the Chinese.

- Q51 **Chair:** So when social media companies say that they cannot react quickly enough to prevent harmful material remaining up, they should perhaps take some advice from the Chinese.

Nigel Inkster: If you assemble an army of online censors as big as the one that China has, which is 2 million at a conservative estimate, then obviously you can. Like a lot of these things, it is about bandwidth or the human equivalent thereof. If you are prepared to put the resources into it, you can do a surprising amount.

Chair: It is brute force, really.

Nigel Inkster: Absolutely.

- Q52 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Nigel, you talked about the issues around gambling and the gaming industry and getting cash from that, which makes me think of the issues around crypto-currencies. The North Koreans are known for being into bitcoin and for how they utilise bitcoin to a substantial amount of bitcoin's value. There is dubious discussion about bitcoin, but it is underscored by blockchain technology. How are they getting around blockchain? That goes right to the core of that trust element of blockchain.

Nigel Inkster: I don't think that they get around blockchain per se. They are getting into the bitcoin exchanges, extracting data about the customer base and then using that as ransomware.

- Q53 **John Spellar:** You have given us a very helpful description of North Korea's current capability. Where do you expect them to be in three or five years' time?

Nigel Inkster: It is very hard to say, but in most cases of this kind, the expectation is that they will become better and more sophisticated. This is one of those areas where you learn best by doing. They are very active and they are working very hard to keep pace with the most up-to-date, cutting-edge techniques.

Their tradecraft is getting better as well. For example, if you look at the 2016 Bangladesh bank heist, where they tried to subvert the SWIFT system to steal as much as \$2 billion from the Bangladesh central bank, the tradecraft of that was actually quite sophisticated. They had spent quite a lot of time watching the system, understanding how it worked, and making sure that they understood the mechanics of SWIFT transfers. But for one or two small mistakes of English orthography—basic spelling



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mistakes, which were picked up on—they would have probably pulled that heist off. I think that was an example of relative sophistication.

On the other hand, if one looks at the “Wannacry” exploit, although that was certainly very effective in terms of doing damage and causing confusion and chaos, the amount of actual revenue that the North Korean state appears to have derived from that exploit was not that great—a few million dollars at best. I would not put them in the same league as China and Russia in terms of either firepower, so to speak, or technical sophistication, but they are moving up the chain rapidly. I think it is a moot point whether they merit inclusion in the premier league, or whether they are still teetering on the brink of first division/premier league, but they are definitely up around that area.

- Q54 **Chair:** Before I move on to Phil Wilson, does either of our other witnesses want to add anything on this? I appreciate that it is not in your specific areas.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: No.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: No.

- Q55 **Phil Wilson:** Nigel, do you think the UK’s cyber defence efforts are up to the threat, and if any improvement is needed, where would it be? What kind of investment should there be, and what are the areas where we may have some gaps?

Nigel Inkster: Given the nature of the technology, there will always be vulnerabilities. Given the extent to which this country is network-dependent, there will always be network-dependent vulnerabilities that do not become evident until somebody finds and exploits them. That is simply the reality of the internet, and is likely to be so for the foreseeable future. We cannot eliminate those vulnerabilities.

I think it is more about proactive situational awareness—maintaining the best possible visibility of what the North Koreans are doing, and the sort of capabilities that they have and techniques that they are deploying. In that context, GCHQ capabilities and the leverage that we get from membership of the “Five Eyes” puts us in a reasonably good situation in terms of anticipating and having situational awareness.

Defensively, relative to many developed western economies we are in a good situation. I think the establishment of the National Cyber Security Centre is a major advance in getting the country in a good state to deal with the kind of threats that we might be subject to. We need to keep things in context. North Korea has a hierarchy of targets: they are most worried about South Korea, Japan and the United States, because they are the countries that most immediately impact on their national security.

When we got caught up this year in the “Wannacry” ransomware attack, that was, I think, a function of the serendipitous discovery that our healthcare sector in particular was heavily dependent on operational systems that were no longer supported by the manufacturers. In that



sense the North Koreans struck lucky. One of the most basic measures that this country can take to minimise its vulnerability is to ensure that vital sectors are encouraged, nudged and maybe compelled to do more to update their systems, and ensure that they are as defensible as they can be.

Q56 Phil Wilson: Do you think the MOD is doing enough to help other Government Departments and private companies to defend against cyber-attacks?

Nigel Inkster: I defer to Malcolm a bit on this one. I am not sure that that is something that is primarily for the MOD to do. The majority of our cyber-expertise resides in Cheltenham in GCHQ. The MOD is still pretty dependent on that, by my judgment.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I think that is absolutely right. The National Cyber Security Centre is controlled by GCHQ. It is a very laudable attempt to get out there and be more proactive in dealing with the private sector and corporates more generally, including the public sector, in spreading best practice. I agree with Nigel that the UK is doing more. We are ahead of the field, compared with most of our European neighbours—not necessarily all. A fast-moving range of threats is faced, and we need to keep investing more and be very proactive. That is no guarantee of success; there will continue to be the sorts of things we see here. I am not sure there is a specific North Korea threat—the sort of things you need to defend more generally are going to be applicable to North Korea, particularly the economic-oriented threats, which Nigel was talking about.

Nigel Inkster: If we have reasonable defences to deal with the Chinas and the Russias, we should be able to handle North Korea.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: May I add one point on the military side of it? I think Nigel is absolutely right to say that North Korea's internet infrastructure is much less developed than in western countries, but that is starting to change. The number of North Koreans who have smartphones is in the millions, but they have separated out their internet from the global internet, so one can imagine that there will be vulnerabilities as a result of the fact that they are becoming more interconnected domestically.

Chair: That leads us very nicely into offensive cyber and our last round of questions on this whole cyber area, from Madeleine.

Q57 Mrs Moon: Before I look at that, I just wondered about your earlier comments, Nigel, about the rounding up of young people to almost force-feed them the skills that were needed for the garrison. There is a recent report saying that one of the UK's weaknesses is our very poor maths capability. In terms of a long-term defence strategy, do we need to improve our maths teaching?

Certainly when I go into schools now, in my primary schools, I say, "Wow!" They are really taking their maths very seriously. As part of STEM Week, I have seen children actually doing defence work and looking at



cyber security. Is that something we need to have a longer-term strategy for putting through schools and teaching our young people about?

Nigel Inkster: It is clear that countries such as China, Russia and North Korea, by association, have inherited a very strong Soviet-era tradition in maths and hard sciences. That has always been an area of strength for those countries. There is no doubt that in today's world one cannot put too much emphasis on these skills. We really urgently need them, but again, we need to get things in proportion.

We look at the maths skills demonstrated by children in élite schools in Shanghai, for example, and tend to forget that 75% of all Chinese children are in the countryside and most of them will not graduate from junior high school. I do not think that we should be too panicked. We should keep things in proportion. But as a country, do we need to continue to invest heavily in mathematics and hard science skills? Yes, absolutely.

Q58 **Mrs Moon:** There have been reports this weekend about the vulnerability of our internet cables. Is there any suggestion that North Korea is developing any capability to attack underwater internet cables? Is that a threat at all to us?

Nigel Inkster: I am not a great expert on the North Korean navy. They have a submarine fleet and they are improving it, but I seriously question whether they have the sort of skills that a navy such as the Russian one is now developing, which would enable that kind of attack to take place—certainly not in relation to any cables that would directly affect us. I cannot see the North Korean navy operating in the Atlantic, for example. That is way beyond their capabilities.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: I absolutely agree with that.

Q59 **Mrs Moon:** I am wondering about cyber defences. One thing is to talk about the population having a greater use of cellphones, but in Iran, it was cyber defences around the development of nuclear capability. How vulnerable would North Korea be in that area? Is that something that they would have the defensive capabilities really heavily structured around? Have you any insight on that?

Nigel Inkster: It is difficult to give an authoritative answer to that question, because we are dealing with a programme that is, by definition, very classified and well protected. A lot of nuclear weapons systems are still pretty heavily analogue. The missile is pretty much an entirely analogue system if I am not mistaken, at least in terms of the actual workings of the missiles.

In the case of North Korea, I suspect that there is bound to be some reliance on cyber capabilities in terms of putting these programmes together. Remember that they are still in an intensive phase of testing both the ballistic missiles and nuclear warheads, so I imagine that a lot of the measurements and tests that would take place around that will be pretty heavily computerised at the very least, and networked to some degree, but certainly within a very protected intranet. Could we get into



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that intranet and subvert it? In principle, yes; but I suspect that to do so, we would need a few mark 1 human beings to go and insert something into the systems.

- Q60 **Mrs Moon:** You talked about Cheltenham and membership of Five Eyes. Is that a deterrent from North Korea targeting us? Does it mean that we are less on their hierarchy of countries that they might seek to attack?

Nigel Inkster: As I said, I do not think that we are right at the forefront of their list of priorities, at least not compared with South Korea, Japan and the United States. Obviously, as a member of the P5, and given our historic engagement in the Korean peninsula during the Korean war, I imagine that puts us a little bit higher up their preoccupations.

Five Eyes and GCHQ are effective deterrents against most of the cyber powers that might wish us ill. It is certainly the case that until relatively recently, I was involved with the UK Foreign Office in undertaking Track 1.5 cybersecurity diplomacy with China, and, to a lesser extent, on a Track 2 basis with Russia. Really, the only reason why these countries give us the time of day is that they know that we have significant cyber capabilities that they cannot afford to ignore—so I suppose that, by extension, that applies to some extent to North Korea. However, we have to bear in mind that North Korea is a country whose calculus of risk is inherently different from these other, more established and mature powers.

- Q61 **Mrs Moon:** That is helpful. So would the types of attack that the UK is using against Daesh be effective against North Korea?

Nigel Inkster: I am not sure how effective they have been against Daesh. I just read a paper by Ash Carter, President Obama's last Defence Secretary, on the whole campaign against Daesh, and he was very critical of the lack of impact that the cyber aspect of the campaign had, in terms of counter-messaging and taking down Daesh's capabilities.

- Q62 **Mrs Moon:** Lots of concern has been expressed about Russia's disinformation cyber campaign affecting perceptions of British politics, British politicians and critical decisions that Britain has had to make. Do you see any indication that North Korea is going down that track?

Nigel Inkster: Not here, no. I think we could expect that in South Korea, and possibly in Japan, where they have a degree of cultural affinity that might make that sort of messaging realistic, but I have seen no evidence that they are doing it here. I would be very surprised if they had either the will or the capability to do so effectively.

- Q63 **Chair:** We are now going to broaden out the discussion. Nigel, by all means contribute to this as well, but I think we need to give you a little bit of a breather. I will start by asking a general question about what other military capabilities North Korea is developing or already possesses that should worry us. There is a big nuclear one right at the head of the list, I would have thought. Who would like to begin on that?



Professor Malcolm Chalmers: Clearly, their long-range ballistic missile capabilities and the nuclear warhead to go with that are the central concern and the reason why we are in an acute crisis in relation to North Korea today. In terms of responding to that, from the point of view of the United States and South Korea in particular, their conventional capabilities are key, particularly their ability to inflict large-scale damage using conventional weapons—a large stockpile of chemical weapons, and possibly also biological weapons—before overwhelming American and South Korean forces can overrun their conventional capabilities. The combination of the nuclear and other capabilities is creating a dilemma we face today.

Q64 **Chair:** Let's try to imagine a scenario. Here we have got North Korea, which is capable of posing a vast conventional threat to its neighbour South Korea and is also developing the ability to strike at countries with nuclear weapons on intercontinental ballistic missiles.

There are a number of possible scenarios here. One is to say that they are simply doing what the west, China and Russia did before them, which is acquiring a force of this sort because they want to be safe and do not want anybody to blackmail them with nuclear or other weapons. Another possibility is that they intend to use them aggressively, which would obviously lead to all sorts of retaliation. A third possibility is that other countries, principally the United States, might view the possibility that they might use them aggressively as enough reason to initiate military action, which could then lead to retaliation by North Korea—not necessarily against the United States directly, but against South Korea.

Those are all pretty dreadful scenarios. Can we start the discussion by asking you to look at those in turn and give me your overall impressions? In particular, I would like to put one little thought in your mind because this is a fundamental question of this inquiry. Is North Korea deterrable?

We have our views about the nature of its regime and its leader, but we have been there before when Mao Zedong's China, for example, was acquiring nuclear weapons in 1964. People said at the time: "They are not a very stable or rational country." Yet, in fact, the nuclear balance seemed to work in that case, just as it had worked between Russia and the west. That is a number of distinct hypotheses. Who would like to get to grips with them?

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: To take your last point first, Chair, it seems to me that in principle almost any country is deterrable. Non-state actors are, of course, another matter altogether—the difficulty being to understand the logic of their own position and realise that their rationality is based on a different set of factors from our own.

That seems one of the most important things to try to understand—what it is that North Korea wants out of this. You hinted at some possibility yourself. Without understanding that, it is extremely difficult to know what we might ourselves want. I found myself quite recently having a discussion about this in a separate conference, with people making the



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point that we have demonstrated ourselves that deterrence is generally speaking best and most balanced when it is mutual.

There is no reason why that should not be the case in North Korea, provided we can understand what is their centre of gravity, as it were, and what might make them feel threatened by us. The mere fact that we do not see ourselves as a threat does not, of course, mean that other people do not see us as such.

Q65 **Chair:** So, even though they indulge in aggressive rhetoric, suggesting that they might use these weapons first, in reality, you think that they are primarily acquiring them in order that others will not threaten them.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: I would certainly like to think so. What I am saying is that we need to try to understand whether that is in fact what they think. They are, after all, not the only people indulging in such rhetoric.

We need to understand what it is they think. It would be quite remarkable to me if they did not have concerns about the impact of a nuclear attack on themselves, which would be almost inevitable. It is important to understand that they would be worried about whatever it is that they are trying to stop and deter, before we actually launched other things ourselves.

I do not think it is actually possible—I do not have any intelligence briefing on the matter—to disarm them in a nuclear fashion completely by conventional means, because of the siting of many of their nuclear weapons. The thought must be in their minds, listening to the rhetoric that comes from the west, that a nuclear pre-emptive attack is a possibility.

In other words, we have got to try to construct some new paradigm of deterrence, such as we eventually did with the Soviet Union, if we are to achieve what I take to be the main aims: first, to avoid nuclear war; secondly, to maintain a degree of stability; and thirdly, but perhaps least likely, to prevent further proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: May I add to that? Perhaps I could start with the China analogy because I think there are elements in that that are appropriate and elements that are not.

At the time shortly before China first tested a nuclear weapon in 1964, there was an intensive discussion within the US Administration as to whether to launch a preventive attack on China. I think that was ruled out partly—and here it is different from North Korea—because China is such a massive country that effectively you would be talking about air attacks only and not occupation, and therefore it would only set back the programme, it would not halt it.

Then the Soviet Union, again, seriously considered preventive attacks on China because of its nuclear programmes in 1968 or 1969 and actually asked the Americans what they thought of such attacks. That happened in

the 1960s during the period of the Cultural Revolution and Chinese radicalism.

Before the Chinese got to a stage of acquiring a credible ICBM capability, with nuclear warheads and RVs designed for such a capability, we had Nixon going to China. China was recruited as an ally against the Soviet Union, so most of the period in which China was developing as a global ICBM power was one in which it was not in a particularly antagonistic relationship with the United States.

Now, in the case of North Korea, the decision the American administration is considering in relation to that capability today is in an environment where the rhetoric of the North Korean regime is very antagonistic towards the United States and that is not going to change any time soon. My view is that the circumstances at which North Korea is going to launch a first strike out of the blue on the United States are very remote indeed, because it is not a suicidal state. Its primary objective is regime survival. The problem is its secondary objective.

Q66 **Chair:** Do you have—and this is a key point—any actual evidence that its prime objective is regime survival or are you just assuming that it is only rational that its prime objective is that?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: It is based on an interpretation of their action up to date and the reasons they give for acquiring their nuclear capability.

Q67 **Chair:** But why don't they then just say, "We are acquiring this so we cannot be attacked"? Why do they keep—

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: They do. They do precisely.

Q68 **Chair:** We get the impression that they are cloaking it in terms of using the weapons aggressively, but that is a mistaken impression.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: That is a misreading of what they are saying.

Q69 **Chair:** This is important, thank you.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: What they are saying to the United States is by showing all those pictures of nuclear warheads coming down from the sky on American military sites—

Q70 **Chair:** They are saying if you attack us, this is what will happen to you.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: We have you in our—

Q71 **Chair:** Not "We are going to do this to you."

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: No. And indeed, they draw parallels with the fate of Colonel Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein, who both had nuclear weapons programmes and abandoned them, and subsequently ended up with their regimes overthrown, their leaders being killed by the US or its allies. So, they will use that historic parallel.



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I think there is a prestige element in it as well. I was in Pyongyang about four years ago and I was very struck, as well as the security argument, by the argument that: "If India can acquire nuclear weapons and subsequently be rehabilitated not that long after its nuclear tests, then we may have to go through a tough period of sanctions and so on, but in the end you will accept us, just as you do India and Pakistan." I thought that was quite interesting.

The second reason why I think the China parallel isn't quite appropriate and is very important in analysing—

Q72 **Chair:** Did you say "is" or "isn't"?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: It is not appropriate, because of the nature of the North Korean state. It is an artificial state; it has an aspiration to unification, just as people in the south of Korea do. Therefore, although its primary objective is state preservation, it does have a secondary objective, an aspiration—but I think it is a bit more than an aspiration—of unification, if that is possible. The fear, and we cannot test it because we are not in that situation yet, is that North Korea may believe that its possession of nuclear weapons, in a scenario where the south and Japan do not have nuclear weapons, may encourage it to pursue that objective more aggressively than it has in the past. Some of the quite well-founded fears are that US-extended deterrents over South Korea might be less credible in a situation in which the US is held at risk. So it is not simply the bipolar US-North Korea relationship that is most problematic. It is more whether in those circumstances people in South Korea either would feel they have to acquire a nuclear deterrent of their own or on the other hand they feel that they have to be more willing to bow to North Korean political demands as to the relationship with the United States, whatever it might be. That is the area in which I think there is a lot of uncertainty.

Q73 **Mr Francois:** You talked about whether they could hold the United States at risk. To all three of you, how advanced do you think the North Korean nuclear weapon programme is? Do you think they could reach the United States now with a deliverable war head; that they are pretty close to it and could do that within the next few years; or that they are much further away than we have anticipated?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I think most experts in this area have been surprised by their progress over the last couple of years. All answers to such questions have to be hedged with the probability assumptions, but I think at the moment—

Q74 **Mr Francois:** But you are a panel worth asking this.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: Absolutely. It seems highly improbable that they have the capability of attacking the United States with ICBMs or nuclear warheads now. Given the rate of progress they have made recently, that rate of progress continues and applies to those elements of the programme which they have not yet fully mastered, as far as we know, such as re-entry vehicle technology, and if they continue to produce



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fissile material at the rate which we believe they are and produce missiles—once they have perfected the missiles, they still have to produce them, so that takes time.

Q75 **Chair:** Are they doing all this by themselves, and if not, who is helping them?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: If I may complete the answer: I think the probability that they will have that deliverable nuclear ICBM capability is rising sharply and over the next two years, rather than the next five years. At the moment, it feels like within two years there is quite a significant possibility that they have such a capability. We are getting to a stage at which we would have to take a deliberate North Korean decision not to pursue the programme full kilter for them not to acquire that capability probably within the next three or four years.

Q76 **Chair:** Are they doing all this by themselves, and if not, who is helping them?

Nigel Inkster: May I come in on this one? If we look at the whole programme, at all major points in both the missile and the nuclear programme, there has clearly been significant external assistance, starting with Egypt's decision to provide Korea with Scud-Bs in the 1980s, which gave rise to the Nodong and moved them on. My colleague at IISS Mike Elleman has raised a lot of eyebrows by suggesting that the North Koreans have probably acquired an old Russian RD-250 engine from Ukraine—and it has recently tested Hwasong-12 missile, which is estimated to have a range of 4,000 to 4,500 kilometres. This is a contentious point, but I have faith—I would say this, wouldn't I?—in Mike's judgments.

Q77 **Chair:** And then what—reverse-engineered it or something?

Nigel Inkster: Exactly. If we look, for example, at the nuclear programme, it is clear that North Korea benefited a lot from Pakistani assistance. The AQ Khan network probably gave them a workable though probably not adequately miniaturised nuclear warhead design. Yes, they have had assistance at various points. Russia and China both refused to assist North Korea to develop a nuclear weapons programme, but Russia did provide a civil nuclear assistance at Yeonpyeong, which kind of got them started back in the 1960s. It is quite clear that, when North Korea revealed to the world a perfectly functioning, highly-enriched uranium centrifuge cascade, they did not develop that indigenously but got assistance.

Q78 **Chair:** Who do we think is helping them now?

Nigel Inkster: In terms of states, I think probably people are being rather more circumspect, but there is a lot of purchasing going on in international black markets for various components, rather than particular programmes.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: My impression is that there is still a degree of official scepticism in relation to the purchases from Ukraine—the Ukraine link—not least because it would certainly be in Russia's interests



to suggest that Ukraine was responsible for this and therefore might be subject to some form of sanctions. That was my first point. My second point is that even if there were much tighter sanctions in this specific area, I think most analysts would think that the horse has bolted and the programme is now at a stage where its degree of self-sufficiency is such that they can achieve this capability without further external assistance.

Q79 **Chair:** I am keen to move on, but the point I am trying to get at is: what do we think the attitude of first Russia and secondly China is now to North Korea acquiring nuclear weapons? This is obviously very important, because there is constantly the question of whether we can co-operate with either or both of those countries in this rather critical matter.

Nigel Inkster: On China, the formal position is that they do not want to see a nuclear Korean peninsula. In practice, many Chinese policy makers and senior military people will point out that China has got quite used to being surrounded by nuclear-armed neighbours. One more is not actually going to make a whole lot of difference to them.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I think China would prefer for North Korea to denuclearise or, as that is not very practical, for its programme to be capped, but China is still torn. It is a live debate in China—there is not one single Chinese view, but I think they still give a high priority to preventing the collapse of the North Korean state and reunification under South Korean leadership. They are torn. The US-China diplomatic relationship is absolutely key in this regard, and I think China does not want a war on the Korean peninsula or in its neighbourhood. That is giving it an incentive to put more pressure on North Korea than it has. The dilemma is that Chinese influence on the leadership in Pyongyang and certainly on the Supreme Leader—particularly this leader—is very limited.

Nigel Inkster: If I can supplement that, there was an interesting article in last week's edition of *Foreign Affairs* by a young American scholar, Oriana Skylar Mastro, that argues convincingly that China's approach to North Korea has shifted markedly in recent times. While it remains the case that their priority objective is to ensure a continuation of at least the status quo, in the event of serious hostilities breaking out we could expect to see a very proactive Chinese military intervention. That would not be to come to North Korea's aid or to counter the United States, but to secure China's own interests, which would probably include securing the nuclear weapons facilities.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I think Russia, as in many parts of the world, would love to make things more difficult for the United States and its allies, especially if it could do so at relatively limited cost to itself, but Russia will also be careful not to do something that would damage its own relationship with China. If Russia was to move into a situation where it was seen to be acting against Chinese leadership on this issue and disrupting China, that could have serious consequences for a Russia that is pretty isolated anyway. Russia is more likely to view this through a Chinese lens than an American lens, I suspect, although it will still look for opportunities to be disruptive.



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Martin Docherty-Hughes: I have two quick questions. Nigel, you mentioned the engine from Ukraine, and Malcolm caveated that. That concerned me. I think they are more likely to come from occupied Ukraine than the rest of the Ukrainian state. Malcolm, a few moments ago you mentioned Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein, and I had it written right in front of me before you said it, because the regime's maintaining itself and the quest for nuclear weapons are not technically about going against anybody else, in their mind, but about their right to exist.

You talked about the idea that we might just need to accept that at some point North Korea will have nuclear weapons. Correct me if I am wrong, but the Chinese might prefer North Korea to have nuclear weapons and to be intact, rather than to be a collapsed state where a small nuclear conflict might have happened, with all the social, political and economic consequences for the entire south-east of Asia, if not the entire Pacific rim. Clearly, that would also be against China's best interests. I know the question is about Russia and its influence, and whether the Government of the Russian Federation wants to create mayhem, but China does not. China requires stability for its economic revival and its new road infrastructure coming out into the west. Would you agree that the Chinese would prefer a nuclear North Korea to a collapsed one, and that they require stability at any cost?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: They clearly want a denuclearised and stable North Korea.

Q80 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** But if they cannot get that?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: It is a matter of risk management for them. Their relationship with South Korea is important here, because the current South Korean Government are not in the same place as the Trump Administration on this—understandably, since they would bear most of the costs of the war. They are very reluctant to contemplate preventive military options, and their position is, in some respects, closer to China's than to that of some elements in the United States, because they would bear the cost. China would not bear the cost quite so directly.

Another element in all this is that at the moment, North Korea has the capability to attack South Korea with nuclear weapons. It probably has that capability against Japan and against China.

Q81 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** And they have previously been to war against China and won.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: If China were to take a position that was seen to be moving beyond UN sanctions and becoming more aggressive toward North Korea, politically or in other ways, it would have to factor in the risk of North Korea beginning to see its deterrent as aimed against China. That is a risk for the Chinese as well.

Q82 **Mrs Moon:** There are historic conflicts between China, South Korea and Japan that have been almost sidestepped in response to the huge amounts of economic growth that the region has experienced in the last 50 years. They have moved quite dramatically. How much instability will



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North Korea bring to that economic growth pattern and those relationships? I am thinking of the economic sanctions that China imposed on South Korea when the THAAD missiles were put in, particularly the limits on the Lotte Group and the fines imposed there. Tourism and spend from China in South Korea also dropped quite dramatically, literally almost overnight. Is there a greater instability in the region, with wider implications, that we are not addressing?

Nigel Inkster: I will have a go at that. For most of the 1980s and 1990s, and indeed until probably 2008, China effectively decided not to have a foreign policy. It was little more than a border management policy and doing just enough to ensure that the region was secure enough to enable China to concentrate on economic development. That was what it was really all about.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, we have seen China emerging as a more extrovert and forceful presence on the international stage. It is becoming increasingly clear that—notwithstanding what is actually said about China's peaceful, win-win, blah blah, foreign policy—what they are really about is making sure that, first, they control what they regard as their historic sphere of influence and, secondly, get the Americans out of there. In that context, what we are going to see is a kind of modern-day application of what one might call a quasi-Confucian foreign policy, in which neighbouring countries are expected to internalise and respect China's interests as the regional hegemon and accommodate themselves to that; in the event that they fail to do so, they can expect to be punished, probably through economic sanctions. I don't think that is going to change. I don't think North Korea in and of itself is a particular factor in that.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I agree with what Nigel has said. Clearly, the broader correlates of power in east Asia are moving towards China, and recent American actions, particularly in relation to trade policy, have accelerated that trend. You can see that in a number of south-east Asian countries.

In relation to South Korea, after those sanctions, which you referred to, there was a détente between China and South Korea and the sanctions were lifted. I think we are in a position in which China is trying to achieve a much more dominant position in its region. It is able to do that in large measure because of its growing economic and trading power. It remains uncertain how they will do that. China is using a wide range of instruments to achieve that objective and to return to its historic position as the dominant power in the region. It is not seeking to do that through annexation or invasion; it is seeking to do that by making countries respect its interests more than they have done in the past, and by reducing and perhaps eventually ending the American presence in the region. Every country in the whole region, from Australia to Japan to Indonesia, is thinking how to calibrate and balance their economic security and their American and Chinese relationships.



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In north-east Asia, one of the most important features is that, while South Korea and Japan have bilateral security relationships with the United States, they don't have a strong relationship with each other. They make attempts and then it winds down, and that is in large measure rooted in the history of antagonism and Japanese occupation of Korea and all that. I think that is going to be very difficult to overcome.

Specifically in relation to the North Korean crisis, one of the key variables is the attitude of the South Korean Government and people. If a war was to start on the Korean peninsula—if a war was to be started by the United States—without the express agreement of South Korea, even if that were to end, as I think it probably would, with the reunification of Korea under Seoul's control, the damage that would do to American-Korean relations would be such that in the end, ironically, it could quite possibly be a Chinese strategic gain. It is hard to believe that a unified Korea, in those circumstances, with all the damage that it would involve, would not be prepared to say to China, "In return for you agreeing to a reunified Korea, we will no longer have an alliance with the United States", because its objective has been met.

That is only one scenario and lots of other scenarios are possible. People often say that China has a very strong interest in retaining a divided Korea, but I think that is only the case on the assumption that a unified Korea would be an American ally.

Mrs Moon: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much. Graham.

Q83 **Graham P. Jones:** If things were to deteriorate, might the UK's engagement with South Korea and Japan lead us to having to take military action in the event of a conflict on the North Korean peninsula? What do you think might happen?

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: In terms of what the UK might do?

Q84 **Graham P. Jones:** Yes. Do you think our relationships with Japan and South Korea will lead us into a conflict?

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: In a sense, that is a question better addressed to Parliament than to me. It is complicated by a number of factors, is it not? First, we have to accept that were a conflict to start, the United Kingdom could not provide any capability that would have a determined effect on the outcome. We can make contributions, but we are not likely to have any kind of determining effect on the outcome. To some extent, it depends how it starts and what the reasons for that are—whether those reasons are consistent with our national interest—but we are not likely, in my view, to have much influence on that either.

It is complicated by the distance. We need to be clear that were we to try to move significant forces to that part of the world, we are talking in terms of weeks, not days. Even a nuclear submarine going at full pelt might take three weeks or so to get there, so we are talking about a considerable



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period of time. We are also talking about reducing our commitment to a number of other current commitments and asking ourselves whether we actually have the resources to deploy a significant number of forces—I am now talking about not just the hardware but the manpower, arsenals, maintenance and support for a significant period of time. There is clearly no point setting off to go somewhere and it taking three or four weeks to get there, only to find that the war has ended before we get to Gibraltar—or wherever it is we are going.

There are a large number of complicating factors in our taking part. It will depend very much on whether it is a gradual build-up, in which we decide for political and diplomatic reasons that it is worth while our making a contribution, or whether it is a sudden outbreak of war caused by either party, in which case our contribution, whatever we wish to do, is likely to be very small because of the difficulty in getting sufficient units there on any sensible timescale. Almost irrespective of our relations and wishes about South Korea and Japan, the practicalities suggest to me that small contributions are something we could do fairly rapidly—for example, I am thinking of special forces; a quick-fire infantry battalion or two could probably be sent there—but serious capability would be very difficult to produce in the time that we are talking about, and given the proportion of our forces that are at a sufficiently operational level to be committed in any event. I find it quite hard, although I can think of a lot of things that we could do, to see how it might easily come into play.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I agree with Jeremy that it is hard to imagine a scenario in which UK military contributions would be determinative, but clearly the decision as to whether and in what way to provide UK military forces would have an important political impact, the UK being a member of the UN Security Council and so on.

In terms of a decision on whether or not to deploy, one of the key factors would be an analysis of how a conflict started and who was calling for assistance. If a conflict started as a result of what seemed to be North Korean aggression, and South Korea and Japan asked for our help, as they are entitled to do under the UN Charter, I would have thought that that would be more likely to elicit a sympathetic response from the UK and a wide range of other states—than one of which, the United States, initiated action without the agreement of the South Korean and Japanese Governments.

In terms of the objectives that we might want to pursue in relation to military action, the one we talk about a lot relates to taking part in the most intense part of the campaign, but I think the others are at least worth noting. If there is a serious conflict in the Korean peninsula, there may well be requirements for a non-combatant evacuation operation. The latest estimates I saw were that 8,000 UK citizens are permanently based there, and 100,000 tourists or other business people visit South Korea from the UK every year.

If we had a capability for an NEO, we might also want to take some responsibility for evacuation of other EU or Commonwealth citizens. So

there is the NEO dimension, even if we did not want to take part in a kinetic operation.

At the other end, if we ended up with some sort of stabilisation in North Korea, there may also be an international role for international agencies. One specific element I would mention in particular there is ensuring security and gathering intelligence in relation to North Korea's nuclear programme, where we would have a strong interest in answering some of the questions that you asked us before in terms of foreign links. Only a limited number of countries would have the capability or the legitimacy under the NPT to take control of those stocks—that is, the nuclear weapon states. There is a possible role for the UK there.

In terms of that central high-intensity element of the scenarios, Sir Jeremy mentioned special forces and attack submarines. There is also a possibility, given time, if the fleet flagship, whoever that might be, were in the region to deploy amphibious capability. It might also be used for NEO options perhaps. We have agreed to deploy HMS Argyll and HMS Sutherland to the region in a joint exercise with Japan and Australia, possibly part of the RIMPAC exercises.

Just a year ago, I was in Tokyo as part of a UK-Japan bilateral defence discussion to coincide with the deployment of four Typhoon aircraft and a range of other support aircraft to South Korea and Japan—a first, I think, certainly for several decades.

There is actually quite a wide range of potential bits and pieces we could put together, none of which would be deterrentive but some of which are some pretty serious hardware.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: Obviously, those things that can be done by air can be done quite quickly. An NEO could be done, even producing an amphibious force, assuming that the ships were based in the United Kingdom. We are talking in terms of a number of weeks to get such a force into theatre.

Q85 Graham P. Jones: On the question of what would lead up to military action, what obligations does the United Kingdom have to countries around it and to our allies? What circumstances and what obligations do we have that would draw us into a conflict?

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: The United Nations Charter, I guess.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I think the primary one is the United Nations Charter, just as when Iraq invaded Kuwait. There had been historical links with Kuwait for the UK but it was in relation to an act of unprovoked aggression. Similarly, if North Korea were to invade South Korea or launch an attack on the United States, under the UN Charter we would have that obligation.

Are there other obligations? This is outside the NATO area—unless the continental United States is attacked, which of course it could be. If you are talking about Guam, and I think Hawaii, it probably does lie outside the NATO treaty as well. So, NATO would not be relevant there. Of course,



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if the United States were attacked, whatever the NATO treaty says it would be a very strong obligation there.

In relation to the declaration in 1953 at the end of the Korean war, my understanding is that the UK Government has made it clear that that does not generate an obligation to come to South Korea's aid in those circumstances. It is the UN Charter that is key here.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: The only other agreement that I am aware of in that part of the world is the five power defence agreement. That would fall outside this.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: That's not something for here.

- Q86 **Graham P. Jones:** If the United States acted in an almost unilateral way—maybe with reason or not—in what set of circumstances could you see the United Kingdom being involved?

Chair: In other words, if President Trump has a sudden rush of blood to the head and starts a conflict, what would happen then?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: Of course, it would not be a sudden rush of blood because he has been talking about it almost ever since he was elected. This is not a black swan. This is something that a lot of people around the world are doing a lot of preparation for, not only in the United States but in all the countries concerned. It would certainly not be that.

- Q87 **Chair:** Just for the avoidance of doubt, when you say a lot of people are doing a lot of preparation for it, you mean—

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: In South Korea, in North Korea, in Japan and in China.

Chair: That is defensive preparation, rather than anything else?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: Yes. It is thinking about a contingency that may arise that is not under their control. That would be the case for the United Kingdom. If the United States was to launch such an attack without meaningful consultation with South Korea, Japan or the United Kingdom, then even if the United Kingdom was asked for assistance, I suspect—although I am not a politician—that people in this country would want to hesitate, at the very least, and understand all the facts before deciding whether to respond positively to such a request.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: It would depend largely on what then happened after that attack, wouldn't it?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: It would.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: It is much easier to start a war than to stop one.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: One obvious American request that would perhaps be less difficult for the UK to respond to would be a backfilling request. If the United States was to surge forces into the Korean peninsula



from the Middle East and the Indian Ocean, for example, and came to us and said, "Can you accelerate your deployment of particular assets into that region to backfill?" that is the sort of thing that we can begin to see the UK would be more likely to go along with, rather than something more kinetic.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: That, I agree, is something that could be done quite quickly, but sooner or later it would start to create serious gaps, because we simply do not have the ability to rouse significant forces over any long period of time. We have surrendered that.

Nigel Inkster: We might also be asked by the USA to cover intelligence gaps if it surged intelligence capabilities into the Korean peninsula, which we would be able to do relatively easily and cheaply.

Q88 **Graham P. Jones:** Are we currently providing any military support to the region? What is the UK doing militarily in the region at the moment? I presume that intelligence would be one thing.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: I am not aware of anything beyond that.

Nigel Inkster: There is not a huge amount. The UK has announced that it intends to move back east of Suez, and we are seeing some minimal deployment in the area, into places like Singapore, but it is minimal.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: Single units.

Nigel Inkster: Yes, exactly. Beyond that, of course, there is a network of intelligence relationships, though one has to say that some of them, notably South Korea, are not the easiest intelligence partners one could readily imagine. Those things are already there and would no doubt play out, depending on the circumstances we would be talking about.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I think the trend is toward more defence engagement in the region. The Type 23 deployments next year and the Typhoon deployment last year are indications of a direction of travel. There is some discussion of an enhanced role for Singapore as a logistics base and the role of Oman and Bahrain. There is a lot of talk in the Royal Navy about basing ships permanently in the region and rotating crews, which would be much more effective for being able to respond at shorter notice. The trend is in that direction, but right now our military presence—apart from the Gurkhas in Brunei—is pretty episodic.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: I imagine that, in a conflict, such units would have to be integrated into United States forces, although that would not create any particular problem. It would be quite easy to do. Single national units or very small ones by themselves are obviously a considerable hostage to fortune.

Q89 **Mr Francois:** Sir Jeremy, you have made the point that even an attack submarine, flat out, might take three weeks to get there from UK home waters. Malcolm has mentioned the Typhoon deployment of a year ago.



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Presumably, if we made a commitment, the fastest route would be to deploy assets by air.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: Yes, but of course deployments by air of significant fighting units take a great deal longer than you might think, and cannot deploy some of the heavier support equipment they require. You can deploy infantry quite easily, but there is huge back-up support required as well. We have a rather smaller transport fleet than we used to have. Once again, it is not a matter of a day or two. You can get people there very quickly, but getting the supporting back up and whatever is necessary to sustain a deployment, or indeed to engage in combat, takes considerably longer, even by air, and is limited by weight.

Q90 **Mr Francois:** With the forces that we currently have available in the Navy's order of battle, could we make an amphibious deployment to the area if we needed to?

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: We could with the forces that we currently have, by which you mean Ocean, the LPDs and the Royal Marine Commando. Yes, we could, and it would not be difficult to integrate it with the United States, either. Of course, we have done previous landings in the South Korean peninsula before now. It would not be difficult to do that but, again, you have considerable passage time to take into account, so I think that you are talking about a month or so.

Q91 **Mr Francois:** Okay. How long would the UK be able to sustain a deployment like that?

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: That is a very difficult question. It depends, obviously, on how much you are prepared to strip away any other commitments that you have. For example, if you wanted to route nuclear submarines, in a way they are the least difficult because their deployment is determined by people rather than by their own endurance and equipment. If you were prepared to strip away such things as some of the protection for our deterrent force, you could probably keep it going for a considerable period of time. If you are talking about more conventional units, my own guess—and it is a guess—is that you are talking about a year or something like that. Not much longer.

Mr Francois: About a year.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: I think that we would simply run out of units at that point. We cannot actually man a complete destroyer and frigate force now.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I struggle to think of a scenario in which conflict in the Korean peninsula lasts for more than a year.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: Indeed.

Q92 **Mr Francois:** What support, if any, would the United Kingdom need from its allies in order to deploy troops?



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Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: It would need basing facilities in theatre, presumably in places like Japan, which of course provided bases during the last Korean war. It would need logistic support: fuel, food and that kind of thing. Quite possibly, I guess, some airlift would be helpful if we could get it, for the topping up of stores and armaments. We might want support with ammunition if we could get it. Of course, primarily we are talking about missiles and relatively limited numbers, and relatively limited other sources. The major one would be bases and logistic support.

- Q93 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Malcolm and Sir Jeremy, earlier we talked about evacuation of UK citizens. If the UK did not intervene in a conflict, would we be able to deploy enough aircraft and ships to evacuate our civilians quickly? I think you have probably already answered that because I think that the answer is probably no but yes—we would get there but it would take weeks, and by that time it might all be over.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: The biggest problem would be that in a scenario of all-out war, in which the United States was seeking to deploy very large volumes of military materiel and people into the south as quickly as possible because it had not fully mobilised in advance and it was preparing for an invasion of North Korea, I suspect that the port and airport infrastructure would give priority to military people coming in. There would be enormous pressure for evacuation from the 1 million Chinese in South Korea and the 150,000 Americans, as well as the 8,000 Brits and all the other Europeans and everything else. It would be a very crowded space, on top of that. The issue of our time to get there is important, and indeed relevant, but it is only one of many considerations.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: Assuming there was parliamentary support, you could take direction of British-owned and British-flagged ships. If there had to be any in that area, there is rather a shortage of British flagged ships—there are quite a lot of British-owned ones—and to the same extent you could do that with aircraft as well. You might find you have more assets available, providing you took powers of direction.

- Q94 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** So you would take in the merchant fleet?

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: Yes.

- Q95 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** How might the UK respond to further escalation of the crisis and what influence do we have with our allies in the region?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I think the UK does have a role in discussing with China and urging the Chinese to take some of the messages they are getting from the United States seriously. We are still seen as a country that understands the United States better than most.

The Chinese, in my view, should be very worried about the rhetoric coming from the United States, because I think there is a real possibility the balance of the debate within the Administration is moving towards preventive military action and an important role we can play is making that clear to China and others in the region. What the UK should also be



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doing is talking directly to the Governments in South Korea and Japan to ensure that, as far as possible, we are on the same page in these issues.

In the end, if there were to be a conflict, even if we weren't initially involved, it would be the defining conflict for several years, the defining conflict in terms of the future of Asian security. It would be very important that we were sufficiently sighted and know the key actors. I think perhaps we haven't done enough, particularly in relation to South Korea, in that regard. It would be very important, diplomatically, to do that.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: There is, of course, another ally we have on the edges of that area, which is looking increasingly in that direction and also understands Americans, which is Australia.

- Q96 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Finally, Malcolm, you added China to that mix of allies and partners. I was reading Etzioni's "Avoiding War with China", where he talks about MAR, mutually assured restraint. The Chinese seem to be up for it, but as you seem to have said, the Americans are going in a different direction from a mutually assured restraint in the region. Do you agree with Etzioni that mutually assured restraint is a positive step forward for both the United States and China in relation to North Korea or anybody else?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: The US is having a debate about preventive military action. They have not decided they are going to do it. The costs are so enormous that it is entirely possible that, in the end, they will step back. It is also possible, by the way, that North Korea, as it has done recently, declares: "We have achieved our objective; we don't need to do anything more." This would substantially reduce the chances of American military action. If the North Koreans believe they have the capability and the Americans believe they don't, maybe there is a precarious stability there.

One of the more probable scenarios is one in which, in the end, the Americans step back from the brink, the North Koreans acquire an ICBM capability and there, I think, at least initially, you will probably move into what I would call enhanced containment. A situation in which there are more military deployments in the region—partly to reassure South Korea and Japan—more missile defences, more sanctions, maybe more covert action. While that would avoid conflict in the short term, it would heighten the risk of conflict for a significant period of time, perhaps at a time when North Korean nuclear capabilities are much greater than they are now. So there aren't many easy ways out of this situation.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: And it might, to some extent, appear to give a signal about our views on nuclear proliferation as well.

- Q97 **Gavin Robinson:** Sir Jeremy, can I take you back a notch to the questions you had with Mr Francois about amphibiosity and capability? You immediately responded with HMS Ocean and, of course, we lose HMS Ocean next year; it is set for scrapping. How is that going to augment the capability and operability of the Albion class if they don't have HMS



Ocean sitting behind?

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: Amphibious operations are among the most complex that there are. There are not very many people, I am sorry to say, either in the Navy today or in the Royal Marines for that matter, with much experience of conducting them. But they need quite a lot of specific facilities. The importance of HMS Ocean is that she is designed specifically to carry and disembark not just a Marine Commando, but the vehicles and other heavy items that go with it, which cannot be disembarked from a ship by helicopter. To that extent, any suggestion that the Queen Elizabeth could replace the amphibious capability of Ocean is simply pie in the sky—she can't. The same is true of Albion and Bulwark. They also have the ability to land heavy vehicles and even tanks from the ship directly onto the beach. If Ocean disappears—as you rightly say, she is due to be decommissioned in March next year—and there is any threat either to the future or the availability of Albion and Bulwark, then a true amphibious capability would effectively, in my view, disappear.

- Q98 **Gavin Robinson:** Sorry for the diversion, Chair. There has been a lot of public commentary around the Albion class, but very little focus on its interoperability with Ocean and the decommissioning, so I felt that it was an important question to ask. I think that the panel, at least Professor Chalmers, have fairly answered my next question in the exchange with Mr Docherty-Hughes, but is conflict inevitable?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I do not think it is inevitable at all. I gave a presentation in Washington last month where I tried to cite some probabilities as to where we would be in two years' time. In that—I think this is still broadly right; it is at least a heuristic device—I said that I think there is a one in four chance of a major war over the next couple of years in the Korean peninsula, which is horrifying if you think about what that would involve. There is probably a similar chance—maybe a bit more; maybe a 30% chance—of what I mentioned earlier: enhanced containment. It is possible that we may be just about where we are now, and that North Korea does not advance as rapidly as some of the more pessimistic prognoses suggest. Perhaps that is partly because they are restraining themselves, because they want to avoid the red line that they believe might be in Americans' minds if they actually launch a nuclear-armed ballistic missile in a test or somewhere near Guam. So that is maybe another 20% or 25%.

It is possible that there may be some diplomatic solution of some sort. That does not feel very likely, but it certainly cannot be excluded, not least because many people would characterise the regime in North Korea—authoritarian regimes always look very strong until they are not—as a medieval regime, rather than a one-person regime. There are powerful barons with powerful economic and other interests who are the power base for his authority. What they all share is a strong interest in preserving the regime, and their wealth and power. If they think that this man is leading them to destruction, they can overthrow him, perhaps with a little bit of assistance from Beijing. That is a possible scenario as well.



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Nigel Inkster: It is worth mentioning in that context that there were two attempts at a coup d'état that we know of against Kim Jong-il, neither of which were successful, and the assassination of Kim Jong-un's half-brother, which took place in Macau, was driven by a fear that he was the stalking horse for another attempt.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: Supported by China.

Nigel Inkster: Supported by China, yes.

- Q99 **Phil Wilson:** Just one more question on cyber. You said that they are improving their capabilities all the time. But you also said in your answer on Daesh that you have read a paper that basically said that what we did there was not very effective. If it is not effective against Daesh, how confident are we that it is going to be effective against North Korea, let alone China and Russia?

Nigel Inkster: It depends what we are talking about, but if we are talking about offensive operations against North Korea, what kind of offensive cyber-operations? Disabling North Korea and kicking it off the net is an option. It seems probable that following the 2014 Sony attack, the United States did do that for a few days, just to make the point that they could. So, it depends if we are talking about disabling North Korea's cyber capabilities—something more like that—or going after some of their operations in third countries, putting diplomatic pressure on the Governments there to close those down, and that sort of thing.

In terms of information operations against North Korea, we in the UK are not at all well positioned to do that. South Korea, on the face of it, ought to be significantly better placed in terms of understanding the cultural resonances that would make the requisite impact. Of course, they are doing this sort of thing all the time, even with crude devices like propaganda balloons being floated across the DMZ. So that is a possibility if you can actually get the messages, and we know—I think it is well attested—that many North Koreans are now watching South Korean soap operas and so on, and sometimes picking up social media from China if they are close to the border. A significant campaign to intensify that might make a difference.

Malcolm described North Korea as a medieval society. They have this thing called the songbun system, under which the entire population is divided into three broad categories: those who are loyal to the regime; those who are broadly indifferent; and those who are seen as actively opposed to the regime. You end up with about 50-plus sub-categories. My point is that the people at the top of the tree—the people who are allowed to live in the fleshpots of Pyongyang and enjoy a privileged existence—feel they have a lot to lose. Those are the people who are going to make the difference in terms of what happens to this regime, not the lumpen people down at the bottom of the heap.

- Q100 **Chair:** May I take you through a few short, sharp questions to finish off with? Do you all agree that North Korea has shown that it is determined



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to acquire nuclear weapons, and if so, do you think that traditional policies of deterrents and containment, referred to by Malcolm already, are likely to work with this sort of regime?

Nigel Inkster: Yes to the first.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: Yes to the first, certainly.

Q101 **Chair:** So you don't think there is any prospect of preventing them from proceeding to acquire nuclear weapons, given how far they have gone?

Nigel Inkster: No.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: No.

Nigel Inkster: They already have.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: They have nuclear devices now, and almost certainly nuclear warheads.

Q102 **Chair:** So they are not going to stop now.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: As I said earlier, I think it is unlikely. We should never rule out all possibility, but it is unlikely that they will stop now, short of a significant political change in Pyongyang.

I think deterrents and containment can play a really important role in responding to this risk, but like any policy instrument, they are imperfect and they do involve risks. We will have to decide whether those risks outweigh the risks of preventive military action.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: But then there is no risk-free policy.

Q103 **Chair:** So deterrents and containment get your vote? What advice would you give to the UK and US Governments in the face of the fact that North Korea is determined to continue acquiring and keeping nuclear weapons?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: In relation to the US Government, I think preventive military action without the support of South Korea would be ill advised, and that option should not be pursued.

Q104 **Chair:** And even in the unlikely event of South Korea being in favour?

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: If South Korea is in favour, I think the calculus is pretty different, because in the end, from my perspective, the main argument against preventive military action is the very high degree of damage that would probably result. Nobody knows, but the damage that would probably result as a consequence of the initial conventional chemical retaliation against South Korea. Because of that, the views of the South Korean Government are absolutely critical.

If South Korea felt that the risks of a nuclear North Korea were much greater to it and it was prepared to take that risk, that would have to be weighed very seriously in the calculus. On the other hand, for the United States to take preventive military action without the consent of the South



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Korean Government, who up to now have made it clear they would oppose such action, would be a very clear and bad illustration of an “American first” perspective, in which the United States was putting the interests of its own citizens against those of its allies. That would be bound to have global reputational consequences that certainly nobody in Europe would want to see. I think that is very clear.

We have all been saying that the UK is not a central player in this, but as we have a very strong defence and security political relationship with the United States, and membership of the UN Security Council, we could not avoid taking a view. If South Korea was to come under attack and called for assistance from the international community, the UK should do its bit—even if it is not an awful lot—initially, along with others. But if the United States was to start a war, then I think we should take our time and make it very clear publicly that if we had not been consulted, we saw no obligation to take part in such action.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: I agree with everything Malcolm has just said.

Nigel Inkster: Yes.

Q105 **Chair:** I feel we should not close without giving each of you a final opportunity to put on the record how you view the prospect of the United States initiating military action in Korea.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: I think if the US were to go down this road—that has support not only from President Trump, but from a significant number of leading national security figures, as well as opposition from many others—I fear it would have very substantial consequences for the United States’ role in east Asia, Asia Pacific and globally.

Much would clearly depend on how it all played out, but I find it hard to believe that you wouldn’t end up with a situation in which China’s position in Asia Pacific was strengthened at the expense of the United States. More broadly, I think other countries around the world would have real questions about the value of extended deterrence and US alliance commitments, which would be very unfortunate, but I think those issues would be raised.

I hope the United States does not go down this path. As a British citizen, if I imagine what the debate in our Parliament and among our public would be the day after the United States started such a war, there would be significant political damage in this country to the value that we should place on the American relationship.

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham: I absolutely agree with that. I think it would have a dramatic impact on the public’s perception of the American relationship, particularly, as a matter of fact, among the younger section of the electorate. I am sure I do not need to try and explain to you what the implications might be in political and electoral terms, but it seems to



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me that the impact here would be a dramatic change in the nation's view of the United States and our relationship with them.

Nigel Inkster: I agree with what Malcolm said. I think the key issue here is the impact of any conflict in the Korean peninsula on Sino-US relations and the balance of power in the Asia Pacific region. I would counsel any US Administration contemplating unilateral action on the Korean peninsula to think very, very carefully about whether they would end up better or, more likely—I agree with Malcolm—worse off as a consequence.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers: Can I come in with a couple of dimensions that perhaps need to be taken into account? First of all, I think there could be significant economic implications of war in the Korean peninsula. South Korea in particular is a major economic power, but also there would be quite a bit of disruption to transport in north-east Asia for some time. It might not trigger global recession by itself, but it might contribute to some downturn in some regards.

Secondly, although it is hard to imagine a scenario in which, in the end, South Korea and the United States did not conquer North Korea within months rather than years because of the very substantial conventional superiority they have, which is quite different from 1950, it is also possible, because of the significant segment of the North Korean population that does have an interest in this regime, that you could have a significant period of insurgency after a South Korean occupation of the North.

The idea that everybody in North Korea would welcome the South Koreans with open arms is not correct. There would be so many scores to be settled, so many people would lose their positions of power and be put on trial, and so on, that even once the main war was over, as we have seen on a number of occasions in the recent past, you could end up with some form of civil war, or at least lower-level insurgency, to cope with, which would itself be a source of instability for a longer period.

Chair: On that gloomy note, thank you all very much indeed for a most comprehensive and informative session.