

Defence Sub-Committee

Oral evidence: Defence in the Arctic, HC 388

Wednesday 31 January 2018

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Members present: Mrs Madeleine Moon (Chair); Martin Docherty-Hughes; Mr Mark Francois; Gavin Robinson; Phil Wilson.

Questions 45-141

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Mark Lancaster TD VR MP, Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Nick Gurr, Director of International Security Policy, Ministry of Defence, Major General Charles Stickland OBE RM, Commandant General Royal Marines, and Jane Rumble, Head of the Polar Regions Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Mark Lancaster MP, Nick Gurr, Major General Charles Stickland and Jane Rumble.

Q45 **Chair:** I welcome our witnesses. Could you formally identify yourselves and your positions for the record? Before you do that, may I congratulate, on behalf of the Committee, Major General Stickland on his recent appointment? We are very pleased to see you here today.

Major General Stickland: Thank you.

Chair: Let's begin with you, Ms Rumble.

Jane Rumble: I am Jane Rumble, Head of Polar Regions Department in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Major General Stickland: Major General Charlie Stickland, the Commandant General of the Royal Marines.

Mark Lancaster: Mark Lancaster, Minister for the Armed Forces.

Nick Gurr: Nick Gurr, Director of International Security Policy in the Ministry of Defence.

Chair: Thank you.

Q46 **Mr Francois:** Good morning. Minister, what do you think about the changing security situation in the Arctic and the High North?

Mark Lancaster: The UK Government's position dates back to the 2013 Arctic Policy Framework. If I may, I will give a short quote that summarises our view on where we would like to go, and then I will comment on the changing situation. The quote is, "We will seek to support the continued peace and stability of the region while maintaining fair and equitable access to UK business and citizens and promoting the correct balance between environmental challenges and sustainable development."

That remains our position. While that policy is being updated and we are not quite ready to publish it, the one thing that has become clear is that there is a rate of change, which is probably faster than we anticipated, both for environmental reasons and others that we can discuss over the next 90 minutes.

I am pleased to say that, from a military point of view, the Arctic maintains a position where we have good co-operation. There is low tension. That co-operation really has meant that we have not seen some of the issues that perhaps we face elsewhere in the world.

In my opening comments, I would like to say that it is an area that we do have a genuine interest in. I am sure we will be exploring some of our capabilities in operating there, but we do keep a very close eye on it. When it comes to UK interests, obviously we were one of the original

signatories to the Svalbard treaty back in 1920, and we take a role where we support, either through NATO or bilaterally, the members of the Arctic Council, which we are an observer on. I simply want to underline that we are definitely interested in this area and follow it very carefully.

Q47 **Mr Francois:** Thank you. What is Russia doing?

Mark Lancaster: Because we have seen the ice begin to retreat, that is exposing more of the Russian coastline. It is worth remembering that nearly 30% of geographical Russia is within the Arctic Circle. We are seeing a build-up along that coastline, but we assess that it is nothing more than what would be deemed a reasonable defensive posture by Russia. Equally, while, as the Committee knows, we will not go into detail on underwater activities, it is fair to say that we are seeing a level of activity by the Russians that we probably have not seen since the end of the Cold War. They are building up their capabilities. That has been well documented recently in speeches by both the Chief of the General Staff and the Chief of the Defence Staff.

Q48 **Mr Francois:** Is the region being militarised by them or anyone else?

Mark Lancaster: As I have just referred to, there is certainly military activity in the Arctic. All the Arctic nations, with the exception of Iceland, which has a treaty with the US, maintain a military capability. We perceive that at the moment to be defensive in nature compared with other areas, but we are monitoring it very carefully.

Q49 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Jane, how is the UK's Arctic policy co-ordinated?

Jane Rumble: The Foreign Office co-ordinates the policy across Whitehall. Because the Arctic does not have a regional treaty—it has the Arctic Council, at which we represent our interests—most of the policies that pertain to the Arctic will have a global context, so shipping is done by the Department for Transport, climate change is done by BEIS and environmental protection is done by DEFRA. The Foreign Office's role is to co-ordinate all the different governmental interests in the Arctic, so that we have a coherent Arctic policy framework to present to the Arctic States, to Parliament and to others. It is very much a co-ordinating and representational role. We represent the UK at the Arctic Council.

Q50 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** When will the revised Arctic framework be published?

Jane Rumble: It should be published in the Spring. We are expecting that to be an evolution as opposed to a revolution. The Minister has set out the headline objective, which is unlikely to change, but we want to demonstrate all the activity the UK has been doing since the original version in 2013.

Q51 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** As to my first question, take the fact that 60% of the UK's maritime exclusive economic zone sits within the coastline of Scotland. In your first answer, you mentioned a range of issues in critical areas such as the environment, cross-departmental



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discussions, and how you inform the Arctic policy and the revised—or evolving, as you called it—view. Have you had any communication with the devolved Administrations, specifically the Scottish Government?

Jane Rumble: Yes. Our expectation as the Foreign Office when dealing with foreign policy is that we are representing the UK in our policy making, but a lot of the ingredients you mentioned have a specific devolution dimension, so we would expect the domestic Departments to be engaging with the devolved Administrations in the normal way to come up with the UK policy to feed into the framework. That said, I went to meet Scottish Government officials last year, and some of my colleagues have been again this year, because they have an increasing interest in the Arctic region. We have been increasing the dialogue to understand what their specific interests are.

Q52 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Thank you. Will defence and security issues feature more prominently in this evolving framework?

Jane Rumble: They will probably be at a similar level. To recognise the comments the Minister has just made, it will have some references to them, but I do not think we will be majoring on them in the same way that we want to have a balanced picture of our Arctic engagement across the piece.

Q53 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I suppose the reason I ask is that in the last SDSR—forgive me if I am wrong, Chair—there was very little mention of the Arctic, and there is a perception that there is going to be no mention of the Arctic in the review that is ongoing at the moment. In this evolutionary process, one would assume there would be a more robust approach to military and strategic issues in relation to the Arctic.

Jane Rumble: We will set out the position that the Minister has just described in the document.

Q54 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Okay. Finally, which gives you more work, the Arctic or the Antarctic?

Jane Rumble: For me personally, the Antarctic, because the Polar Regions Department is responsible for absolutely everything in the Antarctic context. We maintain territorial claim to the British Antarctic Territory, we look after South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, we run primary law on implementing the Antarctic treaty, and we cover everything from environmental protection to fisheries and worrying about the Patagonian toothfish. We do not lead on specific Arctic policies in the same way; they are led by other Government Departments and we co-ordinate the Arctic angle. We have more of a co-ordinating and representational role for the Arctic. For the Polar Regions Department, the Antarctic is more work, but we are really the only people who do the Antarctic, whereas somebody does the Arctic in a large number of Government Departments.

Q55 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** It is not that I am concerned that the Department is informed about Patagonian toothfish or penguins, but given the issues that have been raised in various meetings of this Sub-



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Committee, such as the Russian Federation's enhancement of its bastion theory, there is concern that there is not a broader scope on the Arctic in Government policy.

Jane Rumble: If I may make the comparison again, in the Antarctic, because there is a regional treaty—the UK was the first to sign it, and in fact we maintain a sovereign claim, which is suspended by the treaty—we need to deliver a permanent presence and fulfil our obligations under the Antarctic treaty. The UK is not, of course, an Arctic state, but a near neighbour, so we do not have the same drivers to be present in the same way. We are not trying to fulfil obligations under a similar treaty regime, so we engage in the Arctic differently. It is much more bilateral with those different states, or it takes place through multilateral arrangements such as the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, the United Nations framework convention or the International Maritime Organisation. They all have particular Arctic angles, while looking at a global context.

- Q56 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I appreciate the treaty obligations we have in the Antarctic, but does the Foreign and Commonwealth Office understand that, for many on this Sub-Committee and those interested in these affairs, the continued expansion of the Russian Federation's defensive position and the economic interests of the People's Republic of China—large investments and free trade agreements with Iceland—gives us not necessarily concern, but a feeling that there should be more focus on and investment in the High North?

Jane Rumble: That is an understood position. From the Foreign Office's perspective—I am here from the Polar Regions Department—the recent Chinese White Paper on the Belt and Road Initiative, which talks about the Polar Silk Road, has been analysed very thoroughly by our Chinese desks. The Russia desk obviously keeps a very close eye on the new assertive foreign policy coming out of Russia, and engages with the MoD.

On the question you might ask about whether we should have a single Arctic issue, we maintain a balance. Because the interests we have are so broad—virtually every aspect of the UK has some connection to the High North; it is an interconnected region—funnelling it into just the Arctic may make it less broad and less comprehensive than having a whole-of-Government approach.

- Q57 **Gavin Robinson:** I think you were getting close to answering what I am going to ask. You talked about the UK representing our interests at the Arctic Council. You then went on in later answers to refer to the Arctic as being a near neighbour to us. We are not a member of the council, but we have observer status. Would we benefit from being a member of the council?

Jane Rumble: The Arctic Council is not a legal body. It is held under ministerial declaration. Its terms of reference are very clear: its members are the Arctic States only, so there is no opening for a non-Arctic member to join.

- Q58 **Gavin Robinson:** Sure, but in terms of representation, we are able to



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feed in, but are we able to augment the decisions adopted by the council or influence them in any effective way?

Jane Rumble: We hope we have quite a bit of influence. The Arctic Council is formed by the eight Arctic States and representations from six of the Permanent Participants of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Near-Arctic States and others with an interest are observers. As an Observer State, we are entitled to attend all the senior arctic Official's meetings and Ministerial meetings. The Arctic States actively seek UK expertise on the working groups.

On the issues we are particularly focused on, such as marine protection, pollution, access, environmental issues and various other issues, we have a pretty good record of having influence. Many of the Arctic states are extremely close allies of the UK and are interested in our positioning. We are in the neighbourhood, so if we are not in agreement you can't have a fixed boundary. We co-operate very closely.

Q59 **Gavin Robinson:** Sure. There has been a growing call for an ambassador for the Arctic. Is that something that is being thoughtfully considered by the Foreign Office, or has it been largely dismissed?

Jane Rumble: We have considered it formally many times. Recently, there was a Westminster Hall debate, which the Minister for the Polar Regions, Sir Alan Duncan, responded to. I think this probably refers back to the previous answer about how we best represent our interests. It is something that we look at very closely. There is a balance. Some of the new, emerging Arctic Council members¹ have been very prominently putting their eggs into the basket of an ambassador, who has been going around the region. It is slightly different for the UK, because we have been involved in these Arctic issues for an extremely long time. We were one of the first peoples to go and explore the Arctic, so we do not need to have an overarching new charm offensive. We want to thicken and broaden our relationships, and the question is how best to do that. Having one person doing environmental, climate issues, policy issues, science issues and trade issues may actually weaken the overarching relationships that we have across the piece.

Q60 **Gavin Robinson:** That sounds like a transferable criticism of ambassadors anywhere in the world. They are engaging in all those issues. But is it under consideration?

Jane Rumble: If you are an ambassador anywhere in the world, you are an ambassador to that state. We have an ambassador in each of the Arctic States.

Gavin Robinson: But on that range of issues?

Jane Rumble: Exactly. They cover all those issues, but not for the entire region.

Q61 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** We have mentioned the Arctic Council, but

¹ In the context Arctic Council members refers to Arctic Council Observer States



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there is also the Arctic Circle organisation, which is a more inclusive organisation that met in Edinburgh not so long ago in 2017. Was the UK represented at that meeting?

Jane Rumble: Yes, my colleague from the Polar Regions Department was in attendance.

Q62 **Phil Wilson:** What areas of tension in the Arctic give you cause for concern?

Jane Rumble: I don't think there are any significant areas of tension, as the Minister mentioned at the beginning. There are potential areas of tension, of course. The overarching UK policy framework towards the Arctic is for it to be stable and well governed, so we very much support the efforts of the Arctic Council and the co-operation that all the Arctic States continue to demonstrate in engaging in it.

There are issues that the Arctic Council is not necessarily looking at, but the evidence so far is that issues are being looked at in a very orderly way under existing international frameworks. For example, there are unnegotiated maritime boundaries in the Arctic, but all states have committed to resolving those under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea. The Arctic States have just engaged with the European Union and four other significant fishing nations to negotiate a central agreement for fisheries stocks in the high Arctic.

The tension areas that we could see would be on emerging issues that were not being addressed and resolved, but we do not particularly see that. The rhetoric tension that the Minister alluded to regarding Russia is probably the biggest concern at this stage.

Q63 **Phil Wilson:** As a non-Arctic State, do you think it is difficult for the UK to influence leadership in the area?

Jane Rumble: That hasn't been our experience. In terms of the significant issues relating to the Arctic, I have already mentioned that our voices have been heard. We are not an Arctic State, and we have to always remember that, but we have been able to articulate our interests.

Q64 **Phil Wilson:** What do you think China is up to in the region?

Jane Rumble: China has just published a White Paper that talks about the development of the Polar Silk Road, which is a new trade route going over the northern sea route that has been discussed with Russia—there are very significant economic drivers. In the White Paper, they talk a lot about scientific interests and potential access, so it is about the desire to have an economic footprint across the Arctic. The Chinese have said that they want to increase their influence and assertiveness in the region. As I mentioned, they are relatively new actors in the Arctic realm, whereas we have been there for an extremely long time, so I was not particularly surprised by the content of that White Paper.

Q65 **Gavin Robinson:** Does Mr Gurr have anything to add to that question—what is China doing?



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Nick Gurr: No, I have nothing to add to what Jane has said. Most of the activity appears to be economically motivated.

Q66 **Gavin Robinson:** Minister, where does responsibility for monitoring the Arctic and the High North sit in your Department?

Mark Lancaster: As in the named official? I will ask Nick that question.

Gavin Robinson: We will take that answer, but in your ministerial—

Mark Lancaster: From a ministerial perspective, I am sitting before you. Forgive me, I thought that you were asking which particular official, and you slightly threw me on the basis that Nick is sitting next to me.

Gavin Robinson: Apologies. It is within your ministerial portfolio.

Mark Lancaster: Yes.

Q67 **Gavin Robinson:** We can take the answer on officialdom, too. What about the prominence of the issue? Is it something that regularly features in your ministerial box?

Mark Lancaster: Oh, absolutely. It has certainly been featuring quite regularly recently, in anticipation of this appearance; I can assure you of that much. I suppose that is one of the great joys of having the Defence Select Committee—it does focus the mind.

From an MoD perspective, this goes back to the earlier comments. We are not an Arctic nation. We don't anticipate acting unilaterally in the Arctic. It would be either as part of our wider NATO alliance or in support of one of our bilateral relationships. But many of the capabilities that we would potentially use in the Arctic—of course, we will come to General Stickland shortly—are capabilities that we use elsewhere, or potentially can use elsewhere.

The Arctic is of growing interest, for the reasons that we talked about at the start. With the shrinking of the ice and by definition the greater use, potentially, of the northern seaways of trade routes that will have an impact on the UK economy, the Arctic is moving up the agenda. We are quite happy, within the NATO context, when it comes to the 360° approach that NATO takes, that the Arctic should remain high up the agenda. I think where we are nervous is in the fact that, as we look through that 360° lens, while we would be happy for the Arctic to occupy a larger proportion of our time, for reasons we have already talked about, we have to be very careful about where that resource would come from. It's finding that constant balance within the 360° approach that NATO takes.

Q68 **Gavin Robinson:** Sure, and on that point, I have been in Parliament for three years; I was briefed on the SDSR in 2015. As Mr Docherty-Hughes rightly said, there was no reference in it to the High North at all. Is that something you envisage changing, given the renewed attention or greater focus that there is now on the High North?



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Mark Lancaster: Well, it may not have been referenced directly in that document, but of course some of the capabilities that were referenced—for example, the P-8, which was identified as one of the shortfalls, is a capability that is relevant to the Arctic. Once again, it's about that blend. There are very few specific capabilities required for the Arctic that potentially could not be used elsewhere.

Q69 **Gavin Robinson:** Okay. There was deference to you, Mr Gurr, on the departmental management of this issue—could you elaborate on it?

Nick Gurr: Thank you very much. I will also pick up on a point that Mr Docherty-Hughes made earlier. I spend a significant amount of my time dealing with issues that are related to NATO, Russia, our bilateral relations with northern European countries and structures that we are responsible for either contributing to or leading, such as the Joint Expeditionary Force or the Northern Group; and a strand running through all these things is the Arctic. Also, if you look at the strategic defence and security review from 2015, while it may not have said much specifically about the High North, it said quite a bit about all those things.

Q70 **Gavin Robinson:** To explore that a little further, what role can our relationships with non-NATO groups, including the Joint Expeditionary Force, the Northern Group and so on, play in increasing our influence?

Mark Lancaster: I will chip in on the basis that both Nick and I went to the Northern Group quite recently. The Northern Group is an interesting body. Its members are not all members of the EU and not all members of NATO. Some are members of both, some are members of one or the other, and some are currently members of both and soon will be just members of one. But as a group, it does on occasion talk about Arctic issues. As it happened, when I went to Helsinki, it was not on the agenda, but the Northern Group is an appropriate forum where these matters are discussed. Equally, with the JEF, which off the top of my head is the three Baltic states, the Scandinavian states, the Netherlands and the UK, we are talking once again about like-minded partners that have an interest in the Arctic and potentially could be used in that context, but not exclusively so.

Q71 **Gavin Robinson:** With groups like that, is there a lot of industry behind the scenes? You will obviously have set-piece engagements whereby there will be formalised meetings and discussions, but departmentally, is there continual engagement and work through those fora?

Mark Lancaster: Very much so. The JEF is probably a good example. I think that last year Finland joined, so it is a growing organisation. While the set pieces occur regularly, my first experience of attending a Northern Group meeting was a very positive one. There is a formal session, but there is also the opportunity to interact with some of my international colleagues, which was very valuable. Those are just the sorts of issues that are discussed. From a departmental point of view, I am sure Nick can respond.

Nick Gurr: Thank you, Minister. If I can just add to that, Arctic, High North and north Atlantic issues are regular subjects of discussion across



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the Northern Group and meetings of the Joint Expeditionary Force forums as well. As the Minister said, we expanded the Joint Expeditionary Force last June to encompass Sweden and Finland, two of the Arctic nations. We do not specifically talk about the Arctic all the time, but we talk about the sort of issues I mentioned before, which have an Arctic dimension to them.

- Q72 **Gavin Robinson:** When you share your reflections on what has been happening over the last number of years, is that simply a sharing of information? Is there a secretariat or administration that says, "Actually, we need to upscale, and each individual member country needs to upscale its individual involvement," whether through increased spending or increased deployments? Is that how it works? Do you get tasks at the end of it all, and requests for assistance and upscaling of resource?

Nick Gurr: It differs, obviously, from forum to forum. The way NATO works is different from the way that the Northern Group works. Consistently, across all of those forums and the discussions we have had with the countries that are members of them, there is a view that the Arctic is an area of increasing importance, not least because of its reinforcement importance for NATO—the north Atlantic, rather than the Arctic itself. There is a view that we need to keep a very close eye on Russian activity in the High North, just as we need to keep a very close eye on Russian activity elsewhere, and that at the moment this is not an area of tension or conflict. But it could be, so we need to continue to watch it carefully. Those are the consistent themes across all those countries and discussions.

- Q73 **Gavin Robinson:** Can I ask you specifically about the function, format and output of the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable?

Nick Gurr: The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, of which we are a member, is an opportunity for the defence establishments from a number of countries in the High North and the Arctic to meet to exchange information, de-conflict activities and talk about the challenges we respectively face.

Mark Lancaster: Can I just add a general comment about threat? People often talk about threat, and it is worth remembering that threat is a combination of capability and intent. Capabilities can take a long time to build up and can also be run down over a long time, while intent can change quite quickly. That is always firmly at the back of my mind when we talk about threat and as I watch a growing Russian capability.

- Q74 **Gavin Robinson:** I suppose you have opened the door for me, Minister, but last week we had useful evidence from John Olsen, who is the defence attaché from Norway to the United Kingdom. He stressed the importance of our relationship, but throughout the course of the discussion we talked about capability and intent—watching very closely, recognising increased capability, but still questioning the intent. The overall thrust of his evidence was one of hope and aspiration that the intent would never get to the level where we would see an actual threat,



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but it did not seem much stronger than hope. Can I ask your reflections on that, and whether you see a danger in the increased capability and therefore question the purpose of it?

Mark Lancaster: Our assessment, as I mentioned at the start, is that the increase in Russian activity in the Arctic circle is as much a result of the retreat of the ice and the exposure of their northern coast. Let's not underestimate just what an enormous area that is. They are clearly feeling relatively exposed compared to how they were previously, because of the relative protection that the ice gave them. We look carefully at what they are doing, and we feel it is probably proportionate for a defensive posture, but that is not to say that we do not monitor it carefully or watch it carefully, for the very reasons that you state.

Q75 **Gavin Robinson:** So is hope a low bar? Do you think there is actually more rationale or reason to believe that the intent is not there?

Mark Lancaster: We don't see any evidence of intent to do more but, as I say, we can but watch. We need to be careful that we don't become paranoid about it, but equally there are other reasons why you would potentially want to have some level of military force in that area.

If we are going to see an increase in global shipping going through those passages, it is probably natural, as we have seen elsewhere in the world where there are risks to shipping, that we should have a presence—first, if anything goes wrong, and secondly, because nations are responsible for search and rescue and everything else. However, at the moment, watching carefully, we feel it is proportionate to a defensive posture.

Gavin Robinson: Okay. Thank you, Minister. Apologies for going on too long, Chair.

Q76 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** On your last statement about responsibilities, if for instance there is an accident, there has been reduction in the number of vessels patrolling off the northern shores of Scotland—Orkney and Shetland and so on. I believe that Germany, with its limited coastline, has eight patrol craft. We only have one.

How does resource fit the expanding opportunities that we are looking at in the High North if we see more traffic—whether that be tourists, military or freight—when we have limited infrastructure capability to deal with accidents? The safe ports would predominantly be in Fraserburgh, Shetland or Lerwick. It is limited at the moment, so do you see a discussion about how we need to reinforce investment and deal with some of those possibilities?

Mark Lancaster: This is in the context of the Arctic, and we are not an Arctic nation. It is effectively the closest nation that is responsible for that support. If you are now drifting the conversation much further south to our own territorial waters, that is a different matter.

We have an extensive search and rescue network in the United Kingdom. However, when it comes to wider aspiration for our Royal Naval vessels, you will be only too aware from other conversations about the appetite for

our new Type 26 and Type 31, and indeed increased numbers of offshore patrol vessels. There is a drift towards having an increased number of platforms, as opposed to a decrease.

- Q77 Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I appreciate that, but while we are talking about not being an Arctic nation, some parts of the UK are closer to the Arctic than to London. That is a geographical reality. There are consequences for parts of the UK if there is an expansion into the Arctic and the High North, which is relevant to the Sub-Committee, whether through military activity or environmental damage and degradation. I am just hoping that those things are considered in the mix.

Mark Lancaster: It is a perfectly reasonable point in the wider context. We have three specific vessels that can operate: Protector, Echo and Scott. Echo and Scott are survey vessels to a lesser extent, but still have a limited capability to operate up in the High North. Those assets are routinely used in that context.

- Q78 Chair:** Just following on from that, are there close links between the MoD and the Scotland Office to make sure that there is co-ordination and understanding of responsibilities in that region?

Mark Lancaster: There are, for example—I hope I get this right—in areas of fishery protection. Fishery protection in Scotland is a delegated issue. While the Royal Navy is effectively contracted within the rest of the United Kingdom, Scotland follows a different approach. That is clearly one area where there has to be very close co-ordination in those activities.

- Q79 Chair:** Thank you. On NATO, what is its role in the Arctic and the High North?

Mark Lancaster: Within the 360° approach that NATO takes, the Arctic is clearly important. A number of NATO countries have the capability to operate in that area. As I said at the start, it is anticipated that NATO countries will operate collaboratively in support of each other in that area. It is an area that is being looked at very carefully.

For example, we are looking within NATO at a review of the command and control structure. There is a NATO Ministers meeting next month—we are on the last day of January, are we not?—when we will look at making decisions over creating a new Atlantic command. That is just one example of how, as a result of an increased interest in the northern Atlantic and indeed the Arctic, NATO is attempting to respond to those increased challenges.

- Q80 Chair:** Should it play a more active role?

Mark Lancaster: I think I touched on this earlier. Potentially, we should play a more active role, but we must be very careful, given that there is only a finite resource, about where that resource would come from. As NATO continues to face challenges all the way from north to south, that is

a constant decision about using what is ultimately a finite military resource.

Q81 Chair: Are there tensions within the Alliance about how much emphasis should be placed on the north?

Mark Lancaster: I don't think there is significant tension, because it goes back to the point that has been made repeatedly that the Arctic is not assessed as being one of the highest-risk areas for NATO. It is a relatively peaceful low-tension area. There are other priorities elsewhere, but that is not to say it is ignored and not constantly reassessed.

Q82 Chair: Has the UK played any role in suggesting that there should be greater attention paid to the High North?

Mark Lancaster: I would refer back to the answer I gave a few moments ago, which was about NATO looking again at the command and control structures. We are particularly keen that we should have a new Atlantic command because, clearly, as an island nation with much of our international trade through the Atlantic, we feel it is an area that probably has been neglected by NATO, which has been very air and land-centric, and there is a natural extension from that into the High North and the Arctic.

Q83 Chair: So how is the UK discharging its long-standing commitment to the defence of the northern flank?

Mark Lancaster: We do that in a number of ways. I am sure we will get on to the capability of the Royal Marines shortly—

Chair: We will. Definitely.

Mark Lancaster: So I don't need to go into all of that detail. I will leave that for General Stickland. SDSR '15 was a good example of where we recognised that there was a gap, which is why we are purchasing P-8s. We work very closely with the Norwegians and the Americans over interoperability for that platform. As we look more to our naval assets and procurements with Type 26 and Type 31, and as we begin to move towards hopefully increasing the number of platforms rather than having fewer highly specialist platforms, the Type 31, as we all know and as has been discussed elsewhere, is aimed at providing a greater footprint. If anything, we are seeing an uptick in our activity, not a downtick.

Q84 Chair: There is now quite an emphasis on the Baltics. Are there enough plans to respond quickly should there be a call for reinforcements, say, from Norway? Do we have those in place?

Mark Lancaster: When it comes to specific response plans, two nations are leading on this at the moment, which Nick will talk about.

Nick Gurr: There is a NATO response plan for the reinforcement of Norway. As with all of NATO's defensive plans, these are reviewed on a regular basis. May I pick up on one of the earlier points?

Chair: Yes.



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Nick Gurr: In terms of the NATO role, it is primarily about deterrence first of all and then about defence. There is no tension at all within NATO. Indeed, there is universal agreement across NATO about the importance of reinforcement capability being able to get across to Europe from the United States and the important role that the north Atlantic in particular plays in that. As the Minister said, this is something we have been very supportive of. The UK, together with Norway, has been one of the leading nations within NATO calling for greater attention on the north Atlantic as part of the overall 360° response that the Minister described.

Q85 Martin Docherty-Hughes: I want to ask Mark and Nick about elements of the Chair's questions. The terminology when talking about NATO's involvement in the Arctic gives me cause for concern because, from what I have seen previously, members such as Canada have rejected that type of approach. There has been no mention of the Arctic in the 2010 strategic concept for NATO, the 2010 Lisbon summit declaration, the 2012 Chicago declaration or the Welsh one in 2014. In the last Warsaw declaration, there was only about a paragraph about peripheral activity. Given that the Canadians have been quite open about not wanting to see NATO expand into the Arctic, is it more about our terminology—linking to what the Chair said about ceilings of communication and our ability to reinforce through the north Atlantic—rather than, as the Canadians see it, provocation to Moscow about Arctic activity?

Mark Lancaster: I do not think there is any intent to provoke, but this goes back to the running strand of this whole inquiry, which is that historically there has not been much interest in the Arctic, but because of physical factors that we all understand, there is now a growing interest in the Arctic. Going from having no reference to it in previous communiqués to a paragraph represents that growing interest.

We would like to think that, from a collective NATO approach, we are ahead of the game. It is fundamentally a deterrence posture, but we are seeing Russia increase what it is doing, for the reasons we have described and that we think are perfectly reasonable. If anything, the Committee should be reassured that clearly we are keeping a weather eye on it.

Q86 Mr Francois: Mr Gurr, NATO is talking about re-establishing an Atlantic command. Would that be similar conceptually to the old SACLANT?

Nick Gurr: I don't think NATO has decided that yet. I will explain where NATO has got to on this. There has been a review of the whole NATO command structure, so not just focused on the North Atlantic but 360° around NATO. Recommendations have been made by the military commanders in NATO for improvements across the board. Some of that is about making sure that NATO is able to respond around the clock wherever it may be challenged.

One of the recommendations is that there should be greater attention paid to the North Atlantic and a responsible authority should be established for managing that. There are a number of ways of doing that: one of them will be to establish a new command; another will be to give that



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responsibility to an existing command in one of the nations. Those are decisions that NATO still has to make.

The command would be similar to SACLANT inasmuch as it would be responsible for the north Atlantic area and the provision of reinforcement, but we feel—and NATO allies feel—that the world has changed so much since the days of SACLANT. It is not just not about managing a conventional Russian threat; there are all the other things that we would have to deal with. We should not be pulling SACLANT out of the cupboard and saying, “That’s the answer”. We need an answer that is fit for purpose today.

- Q87 **Mr Francois:** In the days of the Cold War, there was a specific command for the north, which was the old AFNORTH. Has there been any discussion about re-establishing a command of that type?

Nick Gurr: The work that has been done by the NATO authorities, which has not yet been endorsed by Ministers, will have considered that, but I do not think there was a recommendation along those lines.

- Q88 **Mr Francois:** You also talked about there being well-established plans to reinforce Norway if the situation demanded it. Do those plans incorporate amphibious reinforcement by the United Kingdom?

Nick Gurr: I don’t think I could talk about what those plans would encompass. We could probably do that outside this session.

- Q89 **Mr Francois:** You are not prepared to go into that in open session?

Nick Gurr: If we went into it, it would need to be done separately.

Mark Lancaster: I think that we are nervous about going into great detail about reinforcement plans, for obvious reasons. That is not to suggest to the Sub-Committee that we would not be prepared to give more detail, but perhaps some of our allies might not thank us for going into that detail in this forum.

- Q90 **Mr Francois:** Is it something that you could write to us about?

Mark Lancaster: Yes, I am sure that we can write to you in some form, and I will seek advice about how much detail we can give the Committee.

Mr Francois: Fine, thank you.

- Q91 **Gavin Robinson:** Minister, what is the future of cold weather warfare training led by the Royal Marines?

Mark Lancaster: The Committee will be aware that we have taken a one-off reduction this year in some of our cold weather training. That was a financial saving of around £2.5 million. That said, as we speak, we have about 450 Royal Marines training in Norway in two locations. I hope to be visiting shortly. I am confident that that was a one-off in-year saving. As things stand, we anticipate that training will return to normal levels next year.



Q92 **Gavin Robinson:** Is that a guarantee?

Mark Lancaster: I could have sat here in 1982 and guaranteed that Royal Marines would be going training in Norway a few months later—within three months they were all serving in the Falklands. How can I guarantee events in the future? It is certainly the intention to return to normal training next year.

Q93 **Gavin Robinson:** Sure, so there will be a budget line irrespective of whether deployment requirements take them away?

Mark Lancaster: I absolutely anticipate that Royal Marines cold weather training will happen next year, as it is this year, albeit at a reduced level.

Q94 **Gavin Robinson:** So under a different guise and in a reduced form. Does this year's cohort include Reserves and Regulars, or just Regulars?

Mark Lancaster: I don't know.

Major General Stickland: It is just Regulars. With the situation that the Minister describes, we have had to focus on the core deliverables that we require for 2018. They sit with the Mountain Leader cadre and with ensuring that we have sufficient instructors and enablers—people who can drive over-snow vehicles and things of that nature—so that we always have that capacity to build on into the sequence in '19.

The other important things that we have maintained this year are aviation capabilities and our relationships with the Norwegians and the US Marine Corps. In fact, this year we have taken a step forward. You will be aware that in the past, we have sometimes trained in Norway, rather than with the Norwegians. This time, we are actually in Bardufoss with the Norwegian army and we are stepping up our integration with the Norwegian armed forces.

Again, through focusing the resource that we have had this year, we have managed to maintain our commitment to train the US Marine Corps in mountain and cold weather warfare, as we have done for the last three years. For me, the next step, as the Minister says, is maintaining that progressive build-up of capability into 2019 and on to a focused NATO exercise Cold Response in 2020.

Q95 **Gavin Robinson:** Thank you, that is very helpful. It is important to say that we should be incredibly proud of the capability that we have in the cold weather theatre. It came across very much last week from the Norwegian defence attaché how much they recognise our capability and willingness to engage with other nations. I put that on record.

Major General, could you outline the exact purpose of the training? Is it environmental acclimatisation, or is it a visual or strategic deterrent?

Major General Stickland: There are four strands; the Arctic training that we do has multiple deliverables for the UK. First, there is the very nature of soldiering and fighting in the Arctic. The model that we use is "survive, move, fight". Fundamentally, it is an extreme weather environment and we have to ensure that people are capable of surviving and dealing with it.



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“Move, fight” is how you operate an interface as you go through. That is the core deliverable from an Arctic perspective, and I will come on to how that leads into allies and NATO.

Secondly, operating in the Arctic hones the capabilities of a commando force. You need people who are resilient, agile and capable of operating in that area, so by the very nature of the harsh terrain training that it delivers, the Arctic gives me a commando force that can operate where others cannot—there is a significant by-product to the commando force from it.

Thirdly, with regard to strategic activity, it has lots of interfaces with our allies. I have already touched on our relationship with the Norwegians, and it is worth mentioning that we are training some Norwegians in Arctic capability with our Mountain Leaders this year and next year. I have mentioned the US Marine Corps. There is also a strong Dutch dimension, and the UKNL is worth highlighting. Again, on our routine training cycles, a Dutch marine combat group joins us through the winter deployment and we seek synergies as part of a well worked-up activity.

The final piece of the jigsaw with allies is interesting in that our capabilities have allowed us to train the British Army for their operations in Estonia and ensure that they have sufficient resilience for cold weather operations. Again, our capabilities have a pan-defence view.

The final piece of the jigsaw, to bring us to the strategic piece, is that all our activity sits within the ability to deter and reassure as part of the NATO graduated response plans, which you have already heard mentioned by Mr Gurr. Our ability to deploy and operate is a fundamental part of the UK's components of those deployment plans.

- Q96 **Gavin Robinson:** Is there an awareness of those four key components among the officers and men deployed? Are they fully aware of those four specific strands and the purpose when they are deployed on training?

Major General Stickland: It depends. If you have the conversation with somebody in a tent sheet who has had an extremely hard day and is very cold, he will tell you that he is trying to survive and he is trying to hone his skills as a commando, and that will be a very honest answer. You could then talk to the command groups that are involved—quite a lot of the time the training bridges into a NATO exercise. NATO does not exercise in things it is not interested in. It is interested in this, and it is a way of rehearsing and particularly of integrating our forces. At the command level, people will be very aware that they are a component of a capability that reinforces under a NATO conplan.

- Q97 **Gavin Robinson:** Is the recurring requirement to get year-on-year resource for training a source of frustration? Would it be better, given the increased interest in this, for Royal Marines cold weather training to be funded on a multi-year scheme so that you do not have to ask, profile and make sure that that budget line is in place year-on-year?



Major General Stickland: The nature of how the short-term budget runs is how Defence does its business. It is my job to make sure that people understand that there is a requirement. The crucial thing to say is that we have had a progressive build-up of this capability since 2013. We have been working to build back our core skills as we go through. As the Minister says, there has been a shortfall this year, but my target is to make sure that I justify the requirement for 2019, building to the large-scale exercise that we are targeting in 2020 with our coalition and NATO partners.

- Q98 **Gavin Robinson:** Sure, but in procurement terms there is obviously an ability to profile spend over a long period of time. You know there is that recurring requirement and that budget line will be inserted. Is that the way you would like to see training profiled in the future, rather than facing a situation, perhaps in two, three or four years' time, where the resource required for training is just not available?

Major General Stickland: Fundamentally, it comes down to Government priorities and fiscal priorities. The sensible thing we have done with the kit means that there is now a 10-year profile, which looks to the recapitalisation of our Arctic capability to deliver an opstock in 2021. That is a real step as we go through. Clearly, I would love to have a big bag of money and say, "Absolutely, I can do everything I want to the very best of my ability," but it comes down to the fact that there is a 360° NATO threat, resources are finite and I need to make sure that we, the naval service, justify to Ministers the requirement to deliver the training. The key thing for me is the drumbeat of training. There is huge skill fade because of the complexity and harshness of the environment, so the drumbeat is important to me.

Mark Lancaster: If I may add to that, it is a very reasonable question, but of course the challenges of defence finance in particular are there for us all to see. I suppose that is true of any Government Department's finances, but it is particularly so in Defence, where our budget tends to be split between committed spending and uncommitted spending—committed spending, of course, being the very procurement cycle that you talk about. The impact of currency fluctuations and everything else can at times put greater pressure on the uncommitted spend, which training unfortunately falls into. One of the challenges of my role is trying to automatically prevent pressures on uncommitted spending such as training, as we saw this year. I have to fight very hard to try to prevent that, but there are some things within that blend of committed and uncommitted spending that mean you are constrained in your actions. It is a reasonable point, but that is always the big battle.

- Q99 **Gavin Robinson:** Sure, and I do not ask the question from a position of criticism. There is a recognition among this Committee of the case, and a willingness to assist the Department in securing the resource that is required.



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Mark Lancaster: But I think, to be fair, if you asked anybody whether they would like their funds to be hypothecated, of course they would. It just does not quite work like that.

Q100 **Gavin Robinson:** This is to the Major General or the Minister. There is a written statement today on defence equipment plans. Can I invite you to suggest whether we should see the Arctic and the kit required featuring in it?

Mark Lancaster: Forgive me, I am not the Minister for Defence Procurement, and given my eagerness to prepare for this debate I am not entirely up to speed with exactly what it says, but I am happy to come back to the Committee on that.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you. Major General?

Major General Stickland: Again, I am not aware of that. All I can do is touch on where we are with the equipment plans, in terms of money in the line from last year and the 10-year profile to reshape a number of contracts to deliver our capability and a progressive build of the individual equipment and collective capability we require. The target within the 10-year profile is to have operational stocks for 2021. Currently, we have what we call loan pool stores, which we draw and then give back. This is about putting that capability on a firmer footing and having it as an opstock to 2021. That is the idea of that 10-year profile of money.

Q101 **Chair:** Can I just reiterate some of Gavin's comments about the quality of the training we saw when we were in Norway? We were particularly pleased to see the new integrated force with the Norwegians. That is something the Norwegians were seeking to establish, and it is good that it is in place. The US Marines were also absolutely glowing about the quality of the training and the expertise that was being passed on to them by the Royal Marines. It makes us extremely nervous about losing that expertise, because it is rare, and the Americans have greatly lamented having lost it. You talked about the exercise with Estonia. Are we also exercising with the Poles?

Major General Stickland: I was not talking about exercising. This was the deployment of the—

Chair: The joint training.

Major General Stickland: The joint training. This is the enhanced forward presence commitment into Poland and Estonia. This is not an exercise commitment from a Royal Marines perspective. We provided members of the Mountain Leaders to the 3rd UK Division to make sure the troops that were deployed to Poland and Estonia under the operation there were sufficiently aware of the resilience required for cold weather soldiering. I was providing, essentially, a cadre of expertise to ensure people can soldier safely in those difficult conditions.

Q102 **Chair:** So we are not actually doing training with the Estonians.



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Major General Stickland: The Royal Marines are not, no. I will hand over to Nick to talk about what that means from an MoD perspective, but there is activity going on in the enhanced forward presence, which is outwith my purview.

Nick Gurr: The battle group that we have under NATO, leading a multinational framework with the Danes and the Icelanders—it was the French last year—is situated in Estonia as part of NATO's enhanced forward presence, and is certainly training with the Estonian forces. The squadron we have under US command in Poland, under the same NATO activity, is training with the Poles.

Mark Lancaster: I am not sure the Committee has had the opportunity to visit our troops taking part in the enhanced forward presence, both in Estonia and in Poland. If it has not, I would certainly encourage you to consider going to do so, for a number of reasons—not just because of the training opportunities our soldiers have in working with their NATO allies, but crucially because of the environment. Estonia and Poland are not the Arctic circle or the High North, but the conditions that the troops are dealing with there are conditions they are not used to in the UK, so the training value is immense. There is not a direct comparison with working in the Arctic, but it is still a very interesting place to operate. The opportunities we get through training with our NATO allies in those environments is absolutely tremendous, which is why we have committed to continuing to do that on an enduring basis.

Q103 **Chair:** Are we aware of what their cold weather training involves?

Mark Lancaster: I think if you were to go to visit the Royal Welsh in Estonia right now, they are well aware of what training in cold weather is all about.

Q104 **Chair:** I mean the Estonian and the Polish cold weather training. Are we aware of what that involves?

Mark Lancaster: As General Stickland said, we have used that Royal Marine experience of training in cold weather and passed that on to our Army colleagues in preparation for their deployment.

Q105 **Chair:** I suppose I am asking about it the other way round. Do we have a full understanding of the cold weather training of the Poles and Estonians?

Mark Lancaster: That is the value of working together in joint battle groups. That is the whole purpose of going.

Q106 **Chair:** Is that a yes?

Mark Lancaster: I suppose it is, yes.

Q107 **Chair:** Thank you.

Mark Lancaster: But it is early days, isn't it? We have yet to get the feedback.

Q108 **Chair:** When you get the feedback, could you share it with the Committee? That would be helpful.

Mark Lancaster: I would be delighted.

Q109 **Chair:** Thank you. One concern for the Committee has been the reduced numbers undergoing the cold weather training. General Stickland, are there tactical consequences of training at a company level now, rather than the way the Royal Marines used to train as a whole brigade in Norway? What are the difficulties that that is imposing on you?

Major General Stickland: Of course there are tactical consequences because it is a matter of scale but the crucial piece of the jigsaw for me is that we are seeking to build, as we did in 2016 on Cold Response with 45 Commando, a progressive build-up from company to company to Commando level. In 2016, on completion of the winter deployment training, 45 Commando then embarked on Exercise Cold Response. They embarked on Dutch shipping and then conducted their role at Commando level in a NATO exercise as part of a collective NATO force.

From my perspective, the most important thing is to ensure that we have sufficient deep expertise to ensure that people can survive, move then fight, and then to build the building blocks of a capability. Some years it will be focused at company level and then progressively targeting NATO exercises to build to a Commando level. The next progression is building to Cold Response 2020 and seeking to operate at Commando level at that stage.

The key thing is also understanding the nature of what we will do as a Commando force in the Arctic. We will never deliver mass but we will deliver Commando skills, which actually play a part within the NATO force response plans. Our business is to put doubt in the enemy's mind. Our business is to get to places where an enemy cannot. Our business is to enable mass, whether that is US Marine Corps—big brother with little brother—or integrating with the Norwegian forces or a larger NATO force.

It is key to understand what the nature of the Commando force does for us in this construct and, therefore, the ability to survive, move and fight is where we have targeted and Cold Response is the next building block.

Q110 **Chair:** So you feel that, although we have reduced numbers, the expertise remains.

Major General Stickland: I do. As the Minister said, we would all like to have more resource and do everything all of the time. But I believe, with the focus that we have given to our specialists in terms of instructors, enablers, Mountain Leaders and such like, it gives us that core that we can build upon to deliver a coherent Commando force. But it must be a constant drumbeat of activity to maintain those skills.

Q111 **Chair:** There have been suggestions that the number of Royal Marines



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would be reduced. If that were to happen, what would be the impact on the cold weather training?

Major General Stickland: I can't really answer that question, because there have been suggestions but at the moment I am working on the principle from current policy that the Royal Marines will get on with delivering the harsh weather training and capability that the nation desires. Clearly, if you cut capability, you will lose capability and that's a reality. At the moment, I am working on the principle that I've got what I've got and I will get on with it.

Q112 **Chair:** Well, you have the total support of this Committee in hoping to maintain your capacity to do exactly that. I will go back to the issue of equipment. You suggested that there was going to be additional money for equipment. The equipment that we saw was highly rated and seen as particularly good, but getting old and definitely showing signs of wear and tear. When are you going to review that equipment, and are there sufficient supplies of personal equipment?

Major General Stickland: I think this comes down to the point that I made to Mr Robinson. To date, the equipment that we have used in the Arctic is a loan pool item, so you use it and then, very sensibly, you hand it back; it's refurbished and then you use it again. Therefore it does appear sometimes a bit tired. The crucial thing was recognising this and looking to the future. This profile of money, over a 10-year programme, is essentially to address that position. There are areas where we are investing in a new scheme ability or capability, but it's also about trying to make sure that the contracts are in place for the correct maintenance of that equipment and then building to the op stock. I think if I had been sitting here two years ago, I would have given you a different answer to this question, but we have money in the line, and a profile that focuses on getting that equipment to where it should be, which is an op stock, by 2021.

Q113 **Chair:** Good. Gloves were a particular issue. That has remained in my head. There were great concerns about gloves, because in cold weather, hands and feet are a particular—

Major General Stickland: Absolutely. As you know, and as the gang will have briefed you when you were in Norway, we pay particular attention to making sure that the buddy-buddy system—it comes down to the resilience of the individual; it's down to them to recognise when there is a problem and to have the intelligence to react appropriately. But we must make sure the correct equipment is also provided.

Q114 **Chair:** Very much so. There was great pride, when we were there, in the number of injuries that the Royal Marines had, which was zero cold weather injuries, compared with particularly the Americans. They felt that was down to the rigour of their training and the quality of their expertise, which we would not want to lose.

Major General Stickland: Good. I am extremely glad to hear it, Madam Chairman.



Q115 **Phil Wilson:** Do you think that the leader cadre is sufficiently manned and equipped to sustain and support the cold weather warfare specialism across UK defence?

Major General Stickland: I cannot give you much detail, as you know, about the Mountain Leader cadre, but fundamentally it is an organisation in demand. From a numbers perspective, it is fully manned to the cadre level we require, from other ranks' to officers' perspective. We absolutely do find that it is earning its pay on behalf of Defence, partly from an Arctic perspective—the structure of the training that I have described very much sits across those experts. And as the Minister said, there are 50 people operating in Porsangmoen—that is the cadre—making sure they are appropriately trained. But also, they are incredibly valuable from this perspective: if we are doing short-term training teams around the world that require mountain and cold weather expertise or mountain expertise, Defence will also sometimes tap into that. So the answer is yes. There is a recognition that they are a high-quality resource and a highly demanded resource, and we just have to manage their employment appropriately.

Q116 **Phil Wilson:** What kind of feedback do you get from the US Marines about the quality of the training that the cadre provides?

Major General Stickland: Pleasingly, mine is the same as the Chair's. I was with the Commandant of the US Marine Corps three years ago when he asked one of my predecessors to initiate this training—the Royal Marines training the US Marine Corps—with a recognition that with some of the other activity that the US Marines had been doing, they had lost some of this capability. So absolutely it's a key part of our business. It also comes to the issue of the US Marine Corps providing significant mass and significant capability. But where our commando force can act alongside them and enable them, that is a key contribution to some of these response plans. The key thing for us is that this is a very strong relationship with the US Marine Corps. We are, in many other areas, seeking to look at where we can interoperate with them, so that our skills can enhance theirs.

Q117 **Phil Wilson:** May I ask a question about pay? The Armed Forces Pay Review Body has noted that changes to the backdating of recruitment and retention payments to Mountain Leader Arctic warfare specialists may have an impact on the numbers seeking this specialism in the Royal Marines. Have you any views on that? Were you aware of it?

Major General Stickland: Yes. There is a recruitment and retention pay band—a two-tier pay band—for the Mountain Leader gang, and it has absolutely been very helpful in encouraging talented men into and holding men in that specialisation. If that is reviewed, it would be through the normal pay review processes, and the naval service would have to put forward our justification for why we believe it needs to be maintained.

Q118 **Phil Wilson:** Finally, how do the cold weather and amphibious specialisms of the Royal Marines interact?



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Major General Stickland: The nature of how we do our business is essentially that we come from the sea. Our operating in Norway is a good example. If amphibious shipping is unavailable, we will always make sure—as we did in 2017 and plan to in 2019—that we have a boat group operating with offshore-ready craft and hovercraft, which are very useful in the fjords.

They will work up as a capability, just as the helicopters will work up as a capability. As that training progresses, you then integrate them together into a combined force. There is a very strong linkage between the amphibious side and the cold weather warfare part of the jigsaw.

From my perspective, as part of the response plans, the ability to project power, command and manoeuvre from the sea are all part of our contribution to those response plans. Again, as Nick says, that is really as far as I can go, in terms of the detail.

Q119 **Phil Wilson:** In that case, you might not be able to answer this question, but would it be possible to reinforce Norway in the numbers that might be required without the Albion-class landing platform docks?

Major General Stickland: As the Minister says, the key part of the jigsaw is that we now have a national capability that exists to deliver our NATO contributions into those graduated response plans. At the moment, those amphibious assets remain and are part of that capability, and are planned through to operate in NATO response forces in 2019 and 2020.

From my perspective, I have what I have. They are part of the NATO construct, and we will continue to operate with our allies and deliver appropriately.

Q120 **Phil Wilson:** But what if the Albion-class LPDs weren't there anymore?

Major General Stickland: That absolutely has an implication to how we would reinforce and how we would do our business.

Q121 **Phil Wilson:** It would make it more difficult?

Major General Stickland: Absolutely.

Q122 **Chair:** Minister, may I come back to you? The Secretary of State recently told the House that developing and sustaining the forces necessary to ensure movement within the north Atlantic is a priority. What specific threats to the security of the north Atlantic are now being identified?

Mark Lancaster: A number have been identified recently. It refers back to some of the commentary made earlier and why NATO is looking at the whole command and control over the protection of the shipping lanes. I referred earlier to a level of Russian subsea activity and activity in the north Atlantic that we probably hadn't seen since the height of the Cold War.

The Chief of the Defence Staff made reference to some of our underwater infrastructure in a speech he made recently. Please do not ask me to go into detail about that because I can't, for reasons that you will understand.



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Suffice it to say, I am confident that we have, through working with industry, the capability to both protect and monitor that.

Those are just some of the areas. It goes back, perhaps to the start of the session, to where we are recognising a potential increase in the level of activity.

Q123 Chair: Are there particular problems with being able to protect the undersea cables?

Mark Lancaster: As I say, that is an area that I am simply not prepared to go into in this open forum. I can only repeat what I have just said: we work very closely with industry to both monitor and offer protection for that subsea infrastructure.

Q124 Chair: Where you are able to go, can you help us to understand what specific capabilities need to be sustained and what needs to be developed?

Mark Lancaster: It's an area I simply do not want to go into. I apologise. Once again, because I try to be helpful to the Committee if I can, I am quite happy, away from this open session—

Q125 Chair: Could you write to us, Minister?

Mark Lancaster: I will find out what I can write to you on within the constraints that I operate under, so that the Committee is as best informed as it possibly can be, if that is reasonable.

Q126 Chair: Then within those constraints, that would be helpful. Thank you. Do you agree that the security of the north Atlantic has been neglected in recent years, and are you pleased that we are back looking at it?

Mark Lancaster: With limited resource, we have to respond to the threats. Post-Cold War, the north Atlantic threat reduced. It is now on the rise. We recognise that, and our posture needs to react accordingly.

Q127 Gavin Robinson: What role is the UK currently playing in the new Atlantic command structures that are being discussed at NATO?

Mark Lancaster: We are playing a leading role. It is certainly one that we support; we touched on that earlier in the session. There is a meeting of NATO Ministers in a couple of weeks' time. It will be discussed there and the UK will be promoting it.

Q128 Gavin Robinson: In playing that leading role, are we pressing for the new command to be based here in the United Kingdom?

Mark Lancaster: That sounds like an excellent idea.

Q129 Mr Francois: You already mentioned, Minister, that Russian activity in the north Atlantic is now back at Cold War levels. Can you provide us any reassurance that our anti-submarine warfare capability is up to the task of keeping track of that?



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Mark Lancaster: Yes, I can. It is an area that has occupied much of my time. We are in a difficult position, as the Committee will understand. I simply cannot go into our submarine operations, nor would the Committee expect me to, but it is fair to say that a significant part of my time is spent looking at the increased threat we are seeing in that north Atlantic area. I hope already in this session we have outlined some of the measures. Indeed, it is a threat that NATO recognises, and that is why we are looking at changing that command and control.

We are continuing to invest in our assets. We work very hard to make sure that our Type 23s have the maximum availability that they can. They are crucial in this area, and we are seeing them being deployed in the north Atlantic at a level. We have two variants, the general purpose one and the one for towed array. Equally, when it comes to our subsurface operations, I can offer you reassurance that we are doing everything we can to counter that.

Q130 **Mr Francois:** Within the constraints, which I think we understand, can you reassure us that we are maintaining our concurrency in under-ice operations?

Mark Lancaster: Yes, I can.

Q131 **Mr Francois:** Thank you. What level of risk did the UK assume when it disposed of the maritime patrol aircraft several years ago?

Mark Lancaster: I wasn't part of the 2010 review. I think the crucial point here is that the 2015 review recognised that that was a gap, which is why I am so positive about the fact that we will be purchasing nine P-8s. They come online, I think, within two years.

Nick Gurr: 2019.

Mark Lancaster: 2019, yes, so within two years.

Q132 **Mr Francois:** In the interim, it is widely known that we have had to rely on allies to provide that capability for us. Back in the days of the Cold War we had about 40 Nimrods to provide the MPA capability that we needed. Are you satisfied that nine P-8s will be enough?

Mark Lancaster: I think our contribution of nine to the wider NATO force is a very reasonable one, yes. We are working closely with both our Norwegian and US allies, and I think collectively the NATO force is sufficient.

Q133 **Mr Francois:** If you will allow me, Chair, as you are responsible for armed forces recruitment and training, Minister, and while we have you in front of the Committee this morning—

Mark Lancaster: It sounds like a Radio 4 moment.

Q134 **Mr Francois:** You are probably already aware that Capita, who have the Army's recruiting contracts, issued a profits warning this morning. It is one of several they have issued in the last couple of years. I understand their share price fell by about 30% on the markets as a result. Given



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what happened to Carillion, can you reassure us that you are working up a plan B in case Capita falls over?

Mark Lancaster: We are looking very carefully at the whole recruitment process. I will not simply rehearse the lines we have already heard in public about there being an uptick in the recruitment process. My personal feeling, to be candid with you, is that we need to find a balance in how we do this. The days of having role models front and centre to young people coming through the door have much to appeal; equally, I think there are various backroom functions that do not need to be done by the military.

We have, relatively recently, had a surge in recruiting activity by regimental commanders. We are looking very carefully to make sure that whatever happens we can maintain that process so that we can continue to recruit into our armed forces.

Q135 **Mr Francois:** My understanding is the uptick has been in the number of applications but not necessarily in the number of enlistments, which is the actual hard currency in this, isn't it?

Mark Lancaster: Because of the time of flight it takes from the application to actually getting someone into phase 1 training, there is a time lag, so we have yet to see the benefit of the uptick of applications feed its way into the system. There are challenges. There is no doubt that there are challenges, because of the make-up of society at the moment. We have got a relative reduction of young people of the right recruiting age. Equally, our traditional recruiting grounds in the north-east and north-west make up a smaller percentage of the population today than they would have done 20 years ago, which is precisely why we are looking, and working so hard, to try to widen our recruiting base, and why we have set ourselves targets of 15% women within the armed forces and 10% from the BAME community. It is particularly important to me that our armed forces represent the modern make-up of society, something that we have not always done before. Equally, while this is, again, not a silver bullet, opening up all roles in the military to women is a very positive step.

Q136 **Mr Francois:** I agree, but I think what the Committee wants to hear is that work is under way actively on a plan B, in case Capita goes bust. Can you reassure us that it is?

Mark Lancaster: I can absolutely reassure you that an awful lot of effort is going in to make sure that the recruiting process will continue, whatever happens.

Q137 **Chair:** Can I just bring you back to one of the major concerns of the Committee and, indeed, the basis of this whole inquiry? Perhaps the question is for General Stickland and you, Minister. There are suggestions that Russia is trying to achieve complete dominance in the Arctic, thereby preventing NATO forces from attacking Russian forces, but also to leave them free to project force, particularly into the Atlantic, and that in doing so it is actually building up a force that is much more powerful than it would appear from the lack of threat emanating from the Arctic. What would your view be on that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mark Lancaster: That is not our assessment. I think if we take other factors there is growing interest in the Arctic. One piece of evidence to demonstrate the growing international interest in the Arctic is the number of companies that have applied to have observer status on the Arctic Council in recent years. One of the principal reasons why so many nations are now interested in the Arctic is because of the potential trade routes that that opens up. I think it would be counterproductive for Russia to effectively seek to close down those trade routes, so we do not sense that that is the case. I can only repeat what we have said earlier—that, at the moment, we see the increase in military forces along a now-exposed Russian coastline, which was not exposed before, purely as being defensive in nature; but crucially what I would say to the Committee is that we are not complacent about this. I think you have heard many examples today about how there is growing interest both from NATO and other nations that we have bilateral relationships with, and we will continue to monitor this very closely.

Q138 **Mr Francois:** Minister, the Committee has asked Sir Mark Sedwill to appear before us and to give evidence, and so far the answer has been no. We will not bore you with all the to-ing and fro-ing that there has been over that, but our position on it has not changed. Now that the defence element of the NSCR has been broken out into the modernising defence programme, we are fortunate to have you here with us this morning. We are hoping to have the Secretary of State next month, but for the moment it is Minister for the Armed Forces on point. You and your team have made it very clear to us this morning that the level of threat in the north Atlantic has gone up again. You also mentioned that Russian activity in some areas is close to Cold War levels. In that context, would it not be absolutely potty to get rid of 1,000 of the best maritime infantry in the world?

Mark Lancaster: Once again, we are getting into the world of speculation based on reports in the press. This has been a fairly well ploughed field, in parliamentary terms, over the last few weeks. I don't think I have anything new to add, so I fear I will disappoint the Committee by simply repeating the line that we are now entering the defence modernisation programme and that that work will continue. However, I hope the Committee has taken some reassurance from the vigour with which the Secretary of State and—I hope—myself have sought to argue the case for funding defence and maintaining our capabilities. May I also thank the Committee and other Members of Parliament from across the House for their support?

Mr Francois: I suspect that you continue to enjoy it in that sense. Thank you, Minister.

Q139 **Chair:** May I go back to the build-up of Russian activity in the Arctic? Given the increased presence in the Arctic, particularly of their submarines, is it fair to assume that that is also where the increased activity that we are having to notice and prepare to respond to in the north Atlantic is also coming from? Is that also an area of concern?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mark Lancaster: Mrs Moon, you are beginning to attempt to draw me down a line that I don't really want to go down. I am going to resist commenting because I can sense what the follow-up questions will be. I fear that I am going to disappoint you by going back to saying that if you would like to write to me about these issues, which I fear begin to drift into areas that I would rather not discuss in a public forum, I would be happy to come back to you.

Q140 **Chair:** In that case, we will write to you. Thank you, Minister. Before we conclude, may I ask each witness in turn whether there is anything that you were expecting to be asked today, that you are burning to tell the Committee or that we have failed to raise with you, that you would like to put on the record to assist us with our inquiry?

Jane Rumble: Not for me.

Major General Stickland: Not for me, thank you very much.

Q141 **Chair:** I can't believe you have anything to tell us, Minister, but is there anything from you?

Mark Lancaster: No, thank you.

Nick Gurr: No, thank you, Chair.

Chair: In that case, we will wait to see what additional information you give us. I thank our witnesses for appearing before us to give evidence today, and for the offer to provide additional information in written form. We are very grateful to all four of you for the work you do in an area that we see as being of increasing concern. We know that your attention is focused there.