

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Modernising Defence Programme - 01 05 18, HC 818

Tuesday 1 May 2018

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Leo Docherty; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Mr Mark Francois; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Gavin Robinson; Ruth Smeeth; John Spellar; Phil Wilson.

Questions 147-281

Witness

I: Sir Mark Sedwill KCMG, National Security Adviser.

Written evidence from witness:

Examination of witnesses

Witness: Sir Mark Sedwill KCMG, National Security Adviser.

Chair: Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the latest session on the Modernising Defence programme. It is with exceptional pleasure that we welcome the National Security Adviser, Sir Mark Sedwill. Mark, you are extremely welcome, and we hope that this will be a very positive session, which will shed a great deal of light and hopefully not much heat at all.

Q147 **John Spellar:** Sir Mark, when did you realise that the SDSR 2015 needed revision and, in that context, how early in 2017 did discussions of a new review process begin?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I took over the job in April 2017. My first day actually coincided with the Prime Minister calling the election, so as part of the normal work that we do in preparation for an election, we needed to look at the manifestos and to prepare for a potential shift in Government and Government policy. There was obviously the prospect of a full strategic defence and security review and spending review immediately after the election—that may even have been Labour party policy going into it, but it was a possibility whatever the outcome. So we did some work during the election campaign anyway, partly in order to prepare an incoming Government, essentially on where things had reached on the 2015 reviews.

I did also think, however—I think I said this when I was before the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy—that it was probably time to do a review. Although we would not normally do one only a couple of years after the publication of a full SDSR, there had been some quite significant changes, notably, of course, the referendum result and the potential change in the strategic context, so it felt as though it was the right moment to take another look at it. I wouldn't say, though, that we needed to correct the SDSR; it was essentially about reviewing the 2015 SDSR work and determining what was still appropriate and whether any adjustments needed to be made—more a course correction than a wholesale—

Q148 **John Spellar:** That's right—you mentioned a review, and I think, in another context, it has been described as a refresh, but then it seems to have expanded considerably in scope. How did that happen?

Sir Mark Sedwill: When we took it to the National Security Council, we looked at the 2015 documents, so in terms of the overall strategic context there were obviously some changes, as I set out, but then alongside that there were a series of strategy policy capability reviews—individual ones—that the Government had decided that they needed to pursue anyway, so a refresh, for example, of CONTEST.



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The new CONTEST strategy, or CONTEST 3.0 as it is known, is due to be published by the Home Secretary—obviously, now there will potentially be a delay in that. It was four years, I think, since we had looked properly at serious organised and economic crime—that had changed quite radically—and the cyber-threat had shifted. If you look at that diagram in the capability review—the sort of honeycomb diagram—at the bottom you will see that there is a series of individual pieces of work that needed to be done anyway. Either those could have just been commissioned through Departments, as separate pieces of work, or, as we concluded—this was an NSC decision—it made sense to try and look at them together, not least to ensure that we did not have a series of competing capability recommendations and that we could, as far as possible, align them. As you may have seen, there are some references in the document to threat-agnostic capabilities that can be deployed against a range of different national security threats.

Q149 John Spellar: So do you see that as the template for going forward in our consideration of our defence requirements, commitments and, indeed, funding and resources? Equally, do you think, from the experience of a refresh or review within just a couple of years, that that sort of interval is right? Therefore, will that be a future pattern, or will longer periods be a better prospect?

Sir Mark Sedwill: It needs to be driven by circumstances, I think. In general, one wouldn't want to be trying to conduct exercises of this kind every couple of years. My own view—obviously this is a decision for Ministers and Governments—is that once per Parliament is about right in general terms, but of course if there is a very significant shift in the context, or a potentially significant shift, then it might make sense to look at it. That could be for an individual component of national security. As I mentioned, last year we had a shift in the nature of the terrorist threat, and we therefore concluded that it was right to look overall at our counter-terrorism strategy and capability. It could just be in one area like that, if it changed again, or it could be across the spectrum. Generally, my view is that we should do SDSRs, aligned with spending reviews and an overall national security strategy, probably about once a Parliament.

Q150 Chair: But this particular review, or refresh of a review, is not taking place in the context of a look at past spending priorities. Isn't that a fundamental problem?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I don't think it is a fundamental problem, Dr Lewis. That is clearly a very valid question. Essentially, the Government—I am going to sound slightly Sir Humphrey-ish here—could have presented three options. The first was not to have any kind of cross-cutting review, and just to look at the individual pieces of work separately and see how they came together. There was the option of a full SDR without a spending review. For the reason you set out, that probably wouldn't have made sense. Obviously, those big resource decisions have to be taken in the context of the Government's overall fiscal position and spending priorities. This option was essentially between the two. We thought it was



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right to look at capabilities and do a cross-cutting review, but not a full SDSR.

Let me make one other point on spending. As you know—you have been a student of these things for quite some time, and several colleagues around the table have been involved in them—if there is additional money on the table, it becomes the focus of the review, and we do not ask, “Are we spending and deploying the existing resources in the most efficient and effective way possible?” There is something to be said for looking at what you have every now and again and asking, “Are we using those resources as effectively as we can?” Otherwise, the political focus will inevitably switch. If there are more resources available, there will essentially be a competition for them.

Q151 Chair: Isn’t there a third way of looking at things, which is to say, “Let’s look, uncosted, at what is strategically desirable, and then decide how far we can go in meeting as many of these desirable objectives as we can, either out of an existing budget or arguing the case for the budget to get larger”?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I agree. That’s the way I see the cycle of doing a combined national security strategy and SDSR on a five-year, once-a-Parliament cycle, aligned with the spending review, so you are proceeding in exactly the way you suggest. You look at the strategic context and at what capabilities we need to deal with the strategic context—opportunities, challenges and threats—and then those priorities are determined against other Government priorities.

Q152 Chair: I don’t want to pre-empt later questions on spending. I just want to ask you about one other point. Isn’t it a fact that this supposedly limited review, which falls short of a full-scale review, has nevertheless taken longer than the previous full-scale reviews?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Not quite. The formal process to the publication of the unclassified document has taken about nine months. Unlike for the previous SDSR, we didn’t work straight to an unclassified document. I think you put that question to my predecessor at a previous hearing—I remember looking at it. We actually worked to a classified version of the review, which we took to the NSC in January, and they agreed we should produce a published version. It was also partly about events. We had a change of International Development Secretary and a change of Defence Secretary in the autumn, and quite rightly they wanted to brief themselves in and give themselves some time to understand the various questions that were being put. I don’t think it was inherent in the process; it was more a fact of the circumstances that led to the timelines we had.

Q153 Mr Francois: Sir Mark, in evidence to us a couple of months ago the Defence Secretary told us that state-based threats are now the top priority. Once you make that assumption, it has very important ramifications for resources, but also for force mix and readiness. It is a fundamental shift. How can the conclusions of SDSR 2015 still be broadly correct if we have fundamentally altered the degree of the threat?



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Sir Mark Sedwill: The 2015 review does talk about state-based threats, and talks about the growing state-based threat—in particular, of course, the aggressive behaviour of Russia, but also Iran, North Korea and so on. The Defence Secretary is right, and I think that is particularly right for defence. Of the national security capabilities, defence has an important role to play, as it has, in dealing with non-state threats, but the fundamentals of defence are about a state-based threat—the deterrent, the big strategic conventional capabilities, the carriers, the air group and so on.

I do not think it is a fundamental shift since the 2015 review. As the Defence Secretary said, and as several of us have said in other forums, there has been an intensification of several of the threats, but the state-based threat was always absolutely core to the 2015 and, indeed, the 2010 reviews. It is important to make a distinction about their prominence for defence versus their prominence for other parts of the national security community, which obviously varies somewhat.

Q154 **Mr Francois:** But in 2010 the national security strategy said that there was no existential threat to the United Kingdom.

Sir Mark Sedwill: In strict terms, of course, there was, because you still had a Russian strategic nuclear capability that presents an existential threat, and has ever since they developed it decades ago. I did not author the 2010 or, indeed, the 2015 reviews. You are quite right: essentially, at the most basic level, there is an existential threat, presented in particular by the Russian nuclear capability.

What has changed is not necessarily the nature of that component of the threat. What we have seen is more aggressive Russian behaviour, the development of hybrid warfare, and an upgrade to their conventional military capabilities, some of them designed to threaten our own deterrent. That quite rightly means that we are shifting the focus of defence in particular, but other components of the national security capability as well, to focus on that.

In 2010, and to some extent still in 2015, the expeditionary operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were still dominant, and dominant for defence as well. Once those wound down, it became right to refocus on those strategic national threats.

Q155 **Mr Francois:** Do you agree with the Defence Secretary's assessment?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes, I do. As I say, I think it is particularly important for defence. Defence has a role to play in dealing with all the non-state threats, and always has done and will do, but defence is the core of our ability to deal with those strategic state-based threats. MI5 and other elements of national security capability have a role to play, but it is a supporting role. They are more focused on some of the non-state threats, so it is a blend across the national security strategy and capability community as a whole, and we have to deal with all the threats.



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The threat that kills more British citizens every year than any of those that we might spend the morning focused on is serious and organised crime. Whether you want to call it part of national security or part of a Government response, in the end the Government have to respond to that threat and deploy capabilities to do so, including, potentially, defence capabilities where appropriate. We have to deal with all of them, and different elements of the national security infrastructure are more focused on different threats, depending on their own priorities and capabilities.

Q156 Mr Francois: But do you agree that Russia is now the primary threat to the national security of the United Kingdom?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I would describe Russia as the primary strategic threat to the United Kingdom, but we must not forget that, not least because of the deterrent and our capabilities with our allies in deterring Russia, there is quite a lot of hybrid warfare that I am sure we will come on to. That direct military threat to the United Kingdom is of course the primary strategic threat to the United Kingdom, but we have people who are at threat day to day from terrorism and serious and organised crime as well. Those are threats too.

There is the security of the country, and there is the safety of our citizens. Russia mostly does not affect the safety of our citizens day to day; it clearly affects the security of our country. A national security strategy needs to be able to encompass and deal with both in a coherent way.

Q157 Mr Francois: The Russians are upgrading their submarine forces considerably. Putin's father was a submariner. They are upgrading their ground forces. They are certainly upgrading their nuclear forces. They are introducing new combat aircraft. Do you agree that, to deter that threat, we will need to spend more on defence?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I think I would agree that NATO needs to spend more on defence. It is very important, when we think about Russia, that we do not think about it in an entirely bilateral way. It is not just the UK up against Russia; NATO is the linchpin of our defence against Russia. Of course, we need to make our contribution. We are spending more on defence year on year. I know there are different views about how much more should be spent, but we are spending more year on year—half a per cent. above inflation every year, or about £1 billion extra a year.

The capability gaps are more about NATO. We are one of a handful of countries that not only meet but exceed the 2% target for investment in defence—20% on equipment with NATO. If all the other NATO countries achieved that 2% target, it would be the equivalent of about an additional \$100 billion a year devoted to defence by the alliance. That is more than the total UK defence budget, almost by a factor of two. You are absolutely right, but it is a challenge for NATO as a whole to upgrade its capabilities, improve its interoperability and modernise the way it works. Of course, we need to make our contribution to that, as the second biggest contributor.

Q158 Mr Francois: Realistically, we have been urging our NATO partners to spend more on defence for years. They are not all suddenly going to



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spend 2% overnight and generate an extra \$100 billion—would that they did.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I agree.

Q159 **Mr Francois:** In the real world, that is not going to happen, is it? Will the national security risk assessment be updated?

Sir Mark Sedwill: It is being updated this year.

Q160 **Mr Francois:** When do you think that work will be complete?

Sir Mark Sedwill: It is being done this calendar year. It is done independently of me, because it is largely an intelligence-based assessment, so it comes into the National Security Council, but it should be done in the course of this calendar year. That is the intention.

Q161 **Mr Francois:** Does that come in via the JIC?

Sir Mark Sedwill: They make an important contribution to it, yes. It is not entirely done by the JIC. It is collated by people in my unit, but of course the JIC, Defence Intelligence and others with responsibility for national resilience all have an important contribution to make.

Q162 **Mrs Moon:** I am a little worried about the almost simplistic view that if everybody spends the 2%, we will be better off. It is not just about money, but about capability and capacity. There is a long tradition of Britain's armed forces having a high level of capability. It is not just about money and equipment, but about the training, ethos and experience of the personnel. Sometimes, we need to factor that into any assessment we make, not just of spend but of our ability to meet a threat.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I agree entirely. That is not only true for us. We have a very proud record of achieving high bang for our buck compared to many of our allies in terms of the quality of our forces, the quality of their training and their ethos, but also in the equipment and capabilities they bring and some of the innovative approaches they have taken, such as Joint Forces Command and the joint cyber-command. All those things are leading many other countries.

You are absolutely right that it comes down to the training, morale, ethos, commitment and teamwork of our forces. Our forces work in a more integrated way than most others across the different services; that is an important component as well. I agree entirely that we should not allow money to be the measure, but it is just a useful indicative shorthand, as we were just discussing, of the level of commitment, including political commitment, by different countries to the alliance and the defence of Europe and the North Atlantic. In the end, money is only useful if it is spent on the right things and in the right way, so I agree with you entirely about that.

Q163 **Mr Francois:** If we continue to make earnest pleas to our NATO partners



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to spend more money but are unsuccessful, bearing in mind the increasing intensity of the Russian threat, don't you then think we need to spend more ourselves?

Sir Mark Sedwill: We may. We are, but not only on defence. You have mentioned rightly some of the upgrades to both conventional and nuclear military capabilities that the Russians are pursuing. That is quite uneven, by the way. They are not totally unconstrained in their resources themselves and large parts of their forces—to go to the qualitative point—are not at the same level as ours. Even though their numbers are impressive, the impact would be much less so.

Of course, as we have seen most acutely with Salisbury, but also with a range of other activities in the UK and elsewhere, such as aggressive cyber activity, subversion, money flowing in to politics, information operations, etc., the Russians are operating aggressively just below the level of armed conflict as well. That threatens our national security too. We are also having to invest to deal with that full-spectrum threat, that hybrid threat, as well as the upgrade of the familiar threat, which was the military threat.

You are right that if in the end we cannot count on our NATO allies, we will have to think about what that means for us, but most of the significant ones are investing more and do have programmes to increase their investment in defence. As you will know, it has been something that the Trump Administration has not just continued from its predecessors, but been much more assertive about than its predecessors—not only the President, but Secretary Mattis. We are seeing some changes there.

It was at the Wales summit that we got NATO to commit to the 2%, so now we just have to ensure they deliver their commitments as allies, because that is one of our strategic capabilities in dealing with the Russian threat: they don't have allies, but we do. We have to make the best of that.

Q164 **Ruth Smeeth:** May I revert to something you said about the use of the military going forward and how it might change? You talked about serious organised crime as a threat and that military assets or our wider defence assets may be used to combat that—how?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Serious organised crime mostly spills out of conflict zones. I cannot remember the exact number now, but when I was in Afghanistan, over 90% of the heroin on Britain's streets came out of Afghanistan. The military are not dealing with the downstream consequences of it or law enforcement, but rather with the stabilisation upstream in a place like Afghanistan. Also, if you think closer to home, a lot of organised crime spills out of the western Balkans, for example. The military has a role—not directly, but indirectly—in helping to stabilise those countries.

Ruth Smeeth: But that has been a traditional use of the Army.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes.

Ruth Smeeth: So that is not new.

Sir Mark Sedwill: No.

Q165 **Chair:** Sir Mark, do you accept that the history of conflict in the greater part of the 20th century and beyond has been one of the unpredictability of what occurs?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Absolutely right, yes.

Q166 **Chair:** If so, what is the point of the national security risk assessment?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Although things are unpredictable, we still need to have planning assumptions. We need to do a risk assessment. To be simplistic about it, risk is the difference between threat and capability, or hazard and capability, because there are risks that are hazards as well as threats. Without overdoing the crystal-ball gazing, it is important that we look at the range of threats, challenges and hazards that are out there and configure ourselves as best as we can.

One of the themes in the capability review is trying to create threat-agnostic capabilities, so that we are not designing ourselves against predictions of specific kinds of events—to go to your point about unpredictability—but can deploy capabilities flexibly and in a blend with the fusion doctrine, to bring them together in a more sophisticated way against a range of different manifestations of a threat depending on how circumstances take us.

Q167 **Chair:** Would you accept the analogy with paying the premiums on an insurance policy when we are dealing with defence against an unpredictable threat?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I think it is a good analogy. I would apply it not just to defence, but more broadly to national security capabilities as a whole. In a sense that is what we are doing. We are buying an insurance policy against threats to the security of the country and also the safety of our citizens. Sometimes we have to make a claim on that. I don't want to drive the analogy too far. Having that insurance policy—this is where the analogy breaks down a bit—of effective defence and national security capabilities is part of suppressing the threats, as well as dealing with them if they manifest themselves.

Q168 **Chair:** But the point about paying premiums on an insurance policy is precisely that you are investing against an uncertain future. You don't know when you are going to have to call in the security from that policy, and therefore you are paying money up front in the hope that you will be able to meet whatever happens in the unpredictable future as a result of the investment you have made. Where is this leading in respect of the national security risk assessment?

In a talk I gave in January 2017, I looked at the risk assessment and said that there are three tiers that have been published in it. The first includes terrorism, cyber-attacks and UK involvement in conflict between other states. The second tier is chemical, biological and nuclear attacks—if



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those really happened, despite their lower probability, they would dwarf anything in tier 1. Finally, the third tier is a conventional military attack on the United Kingdom, or its overseas territories and bases. Again, if that less likely threat were to materialise, that would completely overshadow everything else.

What is the point of these assessments if the more serious threats are the less likely ones? For example, with our aircraft carriers, it has taken us 20 years from the decision in 1998 to build them and bring them into service. Surely we are going to have to design our military forces and other security assets in a way that gives maximum flexibility, and not in a way that simply meets the threats we can see at the present time.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I agree. There is a second question in there, which is about the time it takes from decision to delivery. That is part of what the Modernising Defence programme is about. I know you are exploring it and have been following the NAO report on it quite closely. You are right.

To take the insurance analogy—we are perhaps at risk of driving it a bit far—if we get insurance on our property or life insurance, the premiums are based on an actuarial risk analysis of the different threats that might manifest themselves. Your premium also depends on the cost of replacing whatever it might be. In that sense, the national security risk assessment, or any risk analysis work, is designed to provide that input into a judgment about relative resources.

You are right that we need maximum flexibility, which is why we have talked about threat-agnostic capabilities. You are also right that we have to look at both the probability and the impact of a potential threat manifesting itself. Where I think the insurance analogy breaks down is that the fact that we buy an insurance policy does not make it less likely that our house will be burgled, whereas the fact that we have a nuclear deterrent makes it less likely that we will face that threat. That is where it is different. The investment is part of suppressing the threat, even if—as we all hope and pray—it is never used.

Q169 **Chair:** I entirely accept that. Surely that strengthens the case for saying that we must have as wide a range of capability as possible. If we cannot predict which threats are going to arise, and if we want to have the maximum chance of deterring those threats from arising—the very point you are making—we need to invest in the appropriate capability, not for the threats that face us today alone, but for all the other threats that could arise.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes, I agree. To broaden your point, that applies to the national security capability spectrum—the capability set—as a whole, and of course it applies to the defence component of it. As I mentioned earlier, I think it also applies to thinking about how we dock in with our allies. Some of the capabilities that we can provide versus some of the ones they can provide could give us that blended and more flexible approach, rather than every country trying to do a little bit of everything. As we know, that does not achieve the kind of effects that Mrs Moon was referring to earlier.



Q170 Chair: That, then, brings us back to the evidence that you gave to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, where you seemed to take the view that before we start looking at spending any more money on defence, we ought to decide whether we are investing the money that we have available to spend on defence in the right way.

Yet, as Mark Francois pointed out, only a couple of years ago, the threat of state-on-state warfare was considered a low probability, and indeed, arguments were being made that the future of the armed forces in terms of action, perhaps for several decades to come, was going to be about counter-insurgency and that we should invest in that rather than in the theoretical possibility of state-on-state conflict. Here we are, only a handful of years later, and the scenario has been reversed, has it not?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I accept the point, but I do not think, Dr Lewis, that it was ever quite as binary as that. Although we were configuring parts of the infantry, for example, and the commando forces and so on particularly to deal with that expeditionary set of issues, notably Afghanistan and Iraq, at the same time we were continuing to invest in the deterrent and the Astute submarine programme. Those were always designed to deal with a strategic state-based threat.

It is a matter of balance and emphasis. I agree that we need to configure ourselves against a wide range of eventualities. We have to make a judgment about which are most likely to manifest themselves and when, to ensure that we are essentially match-fit to deal with those issues with our allies, but I do not think it is ever as binary as one or the other. It is a mixture of both, and then it is a judgment about how much of both across the whole national security capability.

Q171 Mr Francois: I served in the Department from 2012 to 2015. At that time, the Department was still—this was as we were drawing down from Afghanistan—focused primarily on expeditionary warfare at reach with a counter-insurgency element against a technologically inferior but none the less very determined enemy.

What you might have called more conventional capabilities, such as air defence, were run down. Our anti-submarine warfare capability was run down because the planning assumption was that we were not going to have to fight a conventional war in the way that we had planned to do in such detail during the cold war. A lot of officers had made their careers in the sand, as the saying has it, and that is what we increasingly focused on and became more efficient at doing.

In actual fact, there was a great deal of concentration of effort on that, and not least because the MoD was under such financial pressure, it became more efficient at doing that, but a lot of other things effectively went by the board. Now what is having to happen is that there is a tremendous amount of catching-up going on, and the MoD is having to change its thinking and reassess its capabilities against a resurgent conventional threat.

I am here to tell you that we actually went so far in one direction that it was quite difficult to get the Ministry to look at some of the more



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traditional conventional capabilities. In terms of our spending, we have quite a lot of catching-up to do.

Chair: Sir Mark, before you come back on that, you said it was not such a binary choice, but I remember General Richards, as he then was, formulating that quite reasonably from his perspective as a very senior Army officer. He said that he thought—I can remember the exact words he used—that a tipping-point was coming when we would have to choose between “a war”, meaning the theoretical possibility of state-on-state conflict at some indeterminate future time, and “the war”, meaning the counter-insurgency campaigns in which we were embroiled, and that we could probably not do both. I think it was fairly binary, but please respond.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I think we are expressing a similar point in different ways; I do not think we are fundamentally disagreeing. When General Richards became chief of defence staff, one of his first decisions was to direct the MoD that the campaign in Afghanistan was the main effort. You are absolutely right, Mr Francois, that there was then a shift of resources to try to achieve that. That was the war we were fighting. It had gone on longer and was proving more challenging than had been anticipated. It required more resources from us and others, at a much higher rate of casualties than anyone had expected.

It was absolutely right in the short term to surge effort into trying to get that campaign right. I served in Afghanistan, as you will know, so I strongly supported that. I felt in the end, to use a sporting analogy, that you have to play what is in front of you. That is what was in front of us at the time.

You are absolutely right: this is a problem. I do not think it is completely binary, in the sense that those other capabilities were still there, but there was clearly some hollowing out of some of those strategic resilience capabilities: air defence—we don’t really have the kind of missile defence that we may need—and there are a range of other things that we need to have in a balanced force and national security capability posture for the future. That will have to be the subject not only of the current work but, more importantly, of a future strategic review.

Q172 **Mr Francois:** Would you accept that that rebalancing costs money?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Of course, yes. What I do not yet know is how much. That is really what the Defence Secretary is working through with the defence programme.

Q173 **Mrs Moon:** Given that it has taken us 20 years to build the two aircraft carriers, that money should have gone in five years ago. We are playing very belated catch-up in areas where there are serious capability and national security gaps: not least of all in our submarine capability and missile defence capability, our naval capability and our air protection capability. The question is whether we are spending enough. The suggestion that we are does not seem to sit alongside the threats and the lack of capability that is in front of us.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Of course, “Are we spending enough?” is one question. “Are we spending it on the right things and in the right way?” are two equally important questions.

You mentioned the carriers and the fact it will take 20 years—we are not quite at full operating capacity yet—from the initial decision. The carriers were a discretionary choice made by Government, to be able to project power. There are others who are more expert on this, but their primary purpose is not theatre defence in Europe; it is to project British military power, as part of our overall national security and foreign policy strategy, around the world. That was a deliberate choice made, to invest in that discretionary capability.

I think the Committee is driving at something quite profound: that there needs to be continuing investment in some of the less eye-catching capabilities that preserve the underlying coherence of defence and national security as a whole. If that is a reasonable way of inferring the line of questioning, I agree with that.

Q174 **Mrs Moon:** You could say that the aircraft carriers were a valid decision to project force, given the level of capability we had at the time, to use that projection effectively. The problem is that we now have the capacity to project force, but not a lot to back it up or even to protect it.

It worries the Committee that we will have these two nice, new, shiny aircraft carriers with nothing to put on them and not a little gap in our capability to protect them. There seems to be a lack of financial, political and, quite honestly, strategic recognition of that gap, especially when we are told that the money that is there, if you play around with it a little more, will fill the gap. It will not. We are going to have to spend more to fill the gap.

Sir Mark Sedwill: With respect, I am sitting here rather relieved I am not the permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence.

Q175 **Chair:** Why?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Because I know—some of this is probably more for Defence themselves. On the carriers, if I may just answer that point, we will be one of only about, I think, six countries in the world that have this kind of strategic projection capability, when the carriers are fully operational. But it is our intention, because of that, to use them with allies. It’s really important that we keep allies in play in our thinking here, so I would expect, particularly if they are in a contested deployment, that there would be allied capabilities—ships, aircraft, whatever—as part of those groups. We will see what happens in the circumstances, but that is part of the thinking about the use of the carriers. It’s projecting them as a British sovereign capability, but one that will almost inevitably—I would actually say “inevitably”—be used in the context of allied operations of some kind, if used in a contested environment.

Q176 **Chair:** May I focus on this a little more, and on your comment about not



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being the permanent secretary or, indeed, a Minister at the Ministry of Defence?

On the question of the decision to acquire the carriers, it made perfect sense at the time, didn't it, because the cold war had come to an end and in 1998 the reasoning was that if British military power were engaged anywhere, it would be not in Europe but further afield, and therefore you wanted to be able to have a sea base—that was the concept—with carriers exerting air power from the sea and with amphibious assault ships exerting land power from the sea? Now, of course, all the investment in world-class capability, both for carriers and for amphibious assault ships, having been made, the scenario has changed, as we have said it so often does, unpredictably. Russia is back in the frame as a serious adversary, and of course we are now trying to make the necessary alterations in our preparedness to deal with a renewed threat, and indeed—as you said earlier, quite rightly—going one better than an insurance policy, deterring a renewed threat from becoming an actual conflict.

What bothers us is when you mount a defence for the size of the present defence budget when in reality what we have are the three leaked lists that were published in *The Times* on 12 January this year. Those were the options drawn up by the military chiefs if we were going to invest in meeting the newer threats not by increasing the defence budget, but by operating within the same financial envelope, which of course is growing by a small amount each year. The problem that I have is that you are defending the size of the existing budget and you are admitting that threats arise unpredictably, yet you are not, apparently, bothered by the fact that to meet the new threats, we are having to consider cutting capabilities that were deemed necessary only a very few years ago to meet the previous threats—threats that have not necessarily gone away or, if they have, could easily arise again. How do you respond to that?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I don't want to comment on leaked documents, because, to be honest, there has been a great deal of pretty inaccurate leaking in the press about all this over the last few months.

Q177 **Chair:** But do you accept that if we had operated within a fiscally neutral environment, there would have had to be significant cuts in certain capabilities? Can you at least confirm that?

Sir Mark Sedwill: In a sense, I can't, because this is not the area of my own expertise. What the Ministry of Defence is doing is partly through the current programme—the Defence Secretary has made it clear that he does not accept any propositions of that kind—but defence always has to look at rebalancing. Are there capabilities as we look ahead that we think we can manage with less of, are there capabilities that we need more of and do we need to balance between the two as we look at the range of threats that we face, including, to go back to the earlier part of the conversation, docking with allies, thinking about what capabilities the UK can provide as part of an overall alliance or coalition set of capabilities?



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As for the individual decisions taken, that is very much for the MDP, the new programme, to work through. One of the underlying components of that programme, probably in some ways the most important—the reason the three work streams focus on it—is trying to ensure that defence is getting the greatest capability it can, the most effective and efficient capability it can, for the money that it puts in. For reasons you will be more familiar with than me—the National Audit Office report and so on—there is a very big question about that. It is only once we have answered those questions, and we know that the MoD is genuinely maximising the use of the resources that it has, that it will be clear whether or not, in order to achieve certain outcomes, it needs more.

All I am trying to do—I am not trying to defend anyone—is to explain the Government's position as an official. I just remind you of the context—it is worth keeping this in mind about all the points you are making—that we have the fifth-largest defence budget in the world, the biggest in Europe and the second biggest in NATO. So, relatively speaking, compared with other countries of our size it is still the case—it is not that I am not bothered by these issues—that we have an enviable set of assets as a whole, not just defence.

Q178 **Chair:** I hope we are not going to have a race to the bottom, in terms of who spends least among our allies—

Sir Mark Sedwill: No, of course not.

Q179 **Chair:** I am old enough to remember the cold war years—

Sir Mark Sedwill: So am I.

Q180 **Chair:** I remember that we always spent way more than most of our allies. What really matters is not whether we are spending more than our allies but whether we are spending enough to counter the capabilities of our adversaries, so it is no comfort to me to know that we are spending more than our allies because they are doing even less than we are. That doesn't really frighten the other side.

There is a little bit of a problem here about your role—not you as an individual, but the role of the National Security Adviser—in defending the size of the defence budget. This is what I want your comment on. If you were permanent secretary in the Ministry of Defence, you would be able to say, "Look, I've been given this parameter—I've been told the size of the defence budget is such-and-such—so if you want to have an argument about whether the defence budget is large enough, have that argument with the Secretary of State for Defence and the Cabinet." Increasingly, the National Security Adviser's role is to bring together all the different elements of security and defence, and yet there is no Minister whom we can hold to account, other than on the one hand the Prime Minister, and on the other the National Security Council, which is made up of various Ministers but in a sense is not a particularly cohesive entity for us as a Committee to hold to account.

Is there not a bit of an anomaly here in you as an official trying to argue the case that we don't need an increase in the defence budget, when



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really that ought to be a matter for the responsible Ministers to have to argue?

Sir Mark Sedwill: By the way, if I may, Chair, just let me correct a point there. Just to be clear, I am not arguing against an increase in the defence budget; all I am trying to do is to explain, in answer to your questions, the position that we are in and the choices that have to be made, but I am not making an argument for or against an increase in the defence budget. The defence budget is increasing. I have noted that there is a view that it should have increased by more. All I am doing is setting out the Government's position. But I am not arguing against an increase in the defence budget and, just to hammer the point home, I don't think anyone doing my job would ever be unhappy to see more resources coming into national security capability as a whole—I am never going to argue against that. All I am trying to do is to set out the position that the Government have reached. So just to clarify—

Q181 **Chair:** But there is a danger of appearing to be complacent.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I accept that.

Q182 **Chair:** And should we be complacent when we cannot meet the new and intensified threats that led to the setting up of this review without making significant cuts in other capabilities to meet threats that only a couple of years ago we thought were essential? How would you feel, for example, if we took Albion and Bulwark out of service now instead of in 2033 and 2034, when they are supposed to go out of service, and then there was another shift in the strategic situation in a year or two, and after all we had invested in that we had scrapped it, and could not meet the threat as it arose?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Without going into the specific issue, or I will end up working my way through a whole load of individual capabilities, which is not really my job—

Chair: No; use that one as an example.

Sir Mark Sedwill: In terms of the advice I would provide, in the end it is not for me, but for the NSC collectively—it is a Cabinet committee; it is a collective body—to look at the range of threats, the resources available, the position of allies and all the things we have been talking about, and to make some judgments. They are judgments in the end. It is not a process that just produces an outcome; these are judgments that Ministers and politicians have to make against all the other priorities, risks and resource constraints that they face.

My job is to try to equip them to make those judgments. In the end, it is for them—the Defence Secretary, the Prime Minister of the day—to make judgments. Those judgments are not only about capabilities; there are always political elements to choices between particular capabilities. If there are hard choices to be made about reducing some to pay for others, that is for them to do. My job is to make sure that they understand the consequences of that, and that those judgments are well informed.



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I missed the main point of your question, which was the accountability point. As an official, I am an adviser; it is my job to make the machine work, and to deliver the decisions that Ministers make. I can talk about that in more detail if you like, but that is fundamentally what it is. Decisions made by the NSC as a Cabinet committee are collective decisions. It is not a question of holding the Defence Secretary accountable just for the MoD's decisions, or of the FAC holding the Foreign Secretary accountable, and so on. If you are holding the Defence Secretary accountable you are holding him accountable as a member of the NSC, and of the Cabinet, for a collective Cabinet decision, which he has participated in on defence, but also on development, foreign affairs and all the rest of it. Therefore he can speak for, and any Defence Secretary can speak for, the collective decision of the NSC, led by the PM.

We do not have a presidential system. I am obviously overstating the point here, but the Prime Minister is not the only person responsible for the collective, advised by her advisers. Every Minister who attends the NSC is responsible for the collective, because of the way the Cabinet works.

Q183 Chair: I am going to put one more point to you, and then I will bring in Johnny and Ruth. You told the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy that the overall budget on national security was £56 billion. As £36 billion of that is defence, how do you account for the other £20 billion, and could you, if necessary, write to us with a full breakdown?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I can set this out for you, and I am happy to write to you, but it is not a budget. We do not have a single national security budget. The point I was making was to illustrate—at the risk of doing money rather than capability—the overall resource package that is devoted to national security.

That is essentially, as you say, the £36 billion on defence, the development budget, the Foreign Office budget, the budget for the security intelligence agencies, the cross-Government counter-terrorism fund, the cross-Government cyber fund, the cross-Government prosperity and stability funds, and components of—this is why it is not a proper budget; I have always been quite careful when I have said it is “around £56 billion”, because there is a definitional question—the Home Office budget that are devoted to counter-terrorism and serious and organised crime, and components of police budgets at a regional level and above that are devoted to serious and organised crime and counter-terrorism. It is not a budget in the accountability sense.

Q184 Chair: No; I did not think it was.

Sir Mark Sedwill: There isn't an accounting officer for it. It is a pool of resources to give a sense of the orders of magnitude.

Q185 Chair: Just send us a schedule, please, of how you divide that up.



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Sir Mark Sedwill: I will. As I say, it will not be an exact budget schedule, because of the way I have described it, but I can set out essentially what I have just said, with some broad numbers attached if that would help.

Chair: That would be extremely helpful.

Q186 **Johnny Mercer:** I have got a lot of sympathy for your position on this. I think that, in this country, we are fundamentally misjudging the argument about defence. If you were to be given more money—if the Chancellor came to you and said, “Sir Mark, I’ve managed to do it. I’ve managed to find £10 billion”—where would you put it across your whole national security suite? Would you put it in defence?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I wouldn’t be putting it anywhere, of course; the Cabinet would.

Q187 **Johnny Mercer:** I know, but what would you recommend as a professional?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I would want to look across the piece. I am sure a significant proportion of it would go to defence, partly because of the significance of the defence contribution to national security, but there are other areas that need investment.

Q188 **Johnny Mercer:** Would that be your first port of call?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I wouldn’t say it would be first. It would depend on the choices to be made. Of course, you would immediately find that there were twice as many calls on that money.

Johnny Mercer: Yes, but you must have an idea in your mind.

Sir Mark Sedwill: You would then be making choices.

Q189 **Johnny Mercer:** You must have an idea. If you were to be offered more resources now, where would you put them?

Sir Mark Sedwill: It would depend on the quantity, but I would want to put it across the whole set of national security capabilities. Other areas that are underfunded—we have got some money for them but we need to put more in—include strategic communications. As you know, information operations and information warfare is an area we should be good at, and we need to upgrade our capability. Some of that is defence; some of that is outside.

Q190 **Johnny Mercer:** I get that. Forgive me for interrupting, but we are quite limited on time. Are there areas in this country at the moment in which you think we need to build our resilience and capability, but we simply don’t have money in the pot?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I don’t think there are areas where we just don’t have the money, but there are definitely areas of vulnerability across our national security commitments, which I would want to invest in. For reasons you will all understand, I don’t think it would be wise in a public forum to be identifying areas of vulnerability that are not yet public, for



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obvious reasons—we would be setting them up to be under pressure. Yes, there are areas of vulnerability across the entire national security architecture. It is not just in Government; a lot of this is outside Government as well. Given the nature of modern warfare, the nature of non-state threats and the way they blend, yes, I would like to invest there.

Q191 Johnny Mercer: Do you personally think the MoD should have more money?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I don't think it is right for me to answer that, because I am not here in a personal capacity. I can only be here as an official representing the Government view. My personal advice has to be kept to Ministers.

Q192 Johnny Mercer: You have the most strategic view of national security in this country at the moment.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I have a central position, where I am able to take that view, but you will understand that in a formal hearing of this kind I have to stick to that.

Johnny Mercer: No, I understand that.

Sir Mark Sedwill: It is a very fair question.

Q193 Johnny Mercer: Do you ask the Prime Minister for more money?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Again, it is not for me to ask her. I have these conversations, of course, with her.

Q194 Johnny Mercer: Do you say, "We need more money in defence"?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Again, you are trying to draw me into private conversations with the Prime Minister.

Q195 Johnny Mercer: I am genuinely interested. I don't think anyone else is listening—it's just you and me.

Sir Mark Sedwill: You understand the constraints of my position in a public hearing of this kind.

Johnny Mercer: Of course I do.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Forgive me, I can't be drawn on it in this kind of forum.

Chair: Very good. Ruth.

Ruth Smeeth: I am not quite sure how I follow on from that.

Chair: You'll find a way.

Ruth Smeeth: I am sure I will.



Sir Mark Sedwill: I am not sure how I follow on from that!

Q196 **Ruth Smeeth:** Let's go back to the process that you have been through recently with the NSCR. It has been a very closed and secret process, which has generated a huge number of leaks—nearly day in, day out, at periods—on the front page of *The Times*. Why did you choose to undertake such a closed process? Why did you not include Parliament? Why did you issue a press release and statement on the day we were called into recess? Why weren't we included?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I do not think it was a closed process overall. A lot of the leaks were about defence, and a lot of that—to be candid—is some of the usual jockeying within the Ministry of Defence among particular capabilities and particular vested interest. There have been very few leaks. Defence is one of the 12 projects within the capability review.

Q197 **Ruth Smeeth:** It is the most significant.

Sir Mark Sedwill: It's the biggest amount of money, but it was not the most significant in the capability review, because there were other areas that needed more attention in this review. It is the biggest investment, but it was not the biggest area of focus in the capability review itself.

Actually, it was not a totally closed process. We had a range of engagements with academics, non-governmental organisations and experts and so on. I chaired four seminars myself. The individuals leading the 12 different strands all ran outreach sessions with stakeholders. I had a meeting, for example, with a whole range of international NGOs on it. So I don't think it was a totally closed process.

What was different from the SDSR was that we worked to a classified outcome for the NSC. Rightly, I think it was this Committee—Dr Lewis, you have raised this point in the past—that was unsure about working straight to a public document. Some of the decisions, for the reasons we have discussed, need to be confidential for the NSC, so we worked to a classified proposition to the NSC. Its having then accepted that, it said, "Right, now try and produce an unclassified version." So that was different.

Q198 **Ruth Smeeth:** Working to a classified proposition—absolutely; I would expect no less. But that does not stop you in terms of who you are engaging with at various points. The fact that it was released on the day that Parliament went into summer recess last year, so after the general election, meant that you excluded us. We have been very up front about the fact that we think this is an appalling way in which to run this—without any proper democratic scrutiny in terms of how we have ended up where we have ended up, before we have even got to the MDP. The issue is more about why you have undertaken this in such a secret way. There should always be an element of secrecy in classified intelligence, but you chose not to engage with key partners in the way that you traditionally have in the SDSR process.



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Sir Mark Sedwill: The process for conducting this was decided by the NSC. It was not a personal decision. I cannot recall any conversation in which that was the motive. There was no suggestion that we wanted this to be, as you have put it, a secret process. I don't believe that it was. We had lots of interaction with key stakeholders through it.

Whether the announcement of it could have been slightly earlier, I can't remember what the decisions were. You know how the grids work for these kinds of things in Government. You are always bidding even to get an announcement out at all, because of the grid disciplines. But there was no desire to keep it quiet. I think it has been a fairly engaged process. We talked to allies and stakeholders. Obviously, with the summer recess there is a limit on how much one can talk to Parliament, because you are not sitting.

Just to be clear at a personal level, I have repeatedly offered to appear before the Joint Committee, and it has taken up that offer on one occasion. You will have seen some of the letters, Dr Lewis. On each occasion that we have sent any material, I have said that I am happy to come and provide further evidence. I have at least created the opportunities for more scrutiny at a personal level, but I had not thought of it in quite the terms in which you have expressed it, I must admit.

Q199 **Ruth Smeeth:** The Joint Committee that you have just raised was as critical as I have just been, remarking that the NSCR was launched on the day that the House of Commons rose for the summer recess by a press release. It was written in vague terms and the Government did not submit substantive information to its inquiry. So it was just as irritated as I am.

I want to move on. I am chair of the Armed Forces Covenant APPG in this place and we spend a great deal of time with serving personnel. One of the most difficult things that has happened over the last six months is the leaks—

Sir Mark Sedwill: I agree.

Q200 **Ruth Smeeth:** Whether it has been proposed closures or mergers between the Paras and the Royal Marines or the end of Bulwark or whatever, this has had a hugely detrimental impact on serving personnel and their families, so there are huge concerns about that. How extensive were the options for the armed forces structure and capability suggested by the MoD in 2017?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Can I come back to your first point and agree entirely with it? The leaks are not only damaging to the process of and the confidence in Government, but I have a lot of friends in the armed forces at all ranks. It has been a large part of my social circle for my entire adult life, so I absolutely understand the impact that this has.

People say to me, "What on earth is going on?" The answer, almost all the time, is that the leaks are entirely inaccurate and speculative. They come



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out of different bits of the MoD, unrelated to anything that I have any personal knowledge of. But I absolutely accept how damaging that is.

Q201 **Ruth Smeeth:** Okay, but no one pushed back on them. Obviously, some of that would be from the MoD, but this was something you were overseeing. I am not critical of all of the journalists. They were doing their jobs and were getting the information made public. The fact they were able to publish it is because no one pushed back to say, "That is not true."

Sir Mark Sedwill: But the problem with that—some of you have said this—is that you end up giving a running commentary on every leak.

Q202 **Ruth Smeeth:** You just gave no quote. You did not engage at all.

Sir Mark Sedwill: These leaks were coming out of the MoD, so that is a decision for the MoD. You will need to ask them about the specifics of it. There is a problem in Government if you are dealing with leaks and you give a running commentary. Some of you will be familiar with this, but you end up essentially trying to make up decisions as you go along, rather than actually looking at things in the round. Most Governments—not just this one—would essentially want to make decisions in good order, consider all the options and not say, "In response to this leak, we have ruled that out. In response to another leak, we have ruled something else out", because you end up totally constrained.

Q203 **Chair:** But you don't even want to tell us whether the price of meeting the new and intensified threats that were the reason for setting up this review was going to be significant cuts in existing conventional capability. You don't want to tell us any of that. If there are no leaks and if you will not tell us any of that, we are left with only one scenario, which is that we open the paper one day, or we switch on our tablets, and we find that—hey ho—two amphibious assault ships that we had been assured only a few months earlier would be in service till the 2030s are now going to be deleted. That is not a good outcome either, is it?

Sir Mark Sedwill: But with respect, the correct process here is for Ministers to take decisions and then to be held accountable for those decisions by Parliament. It is not for them to have to react to a whole series of leaks, many of them inaccurate and speculative.

Chair: Ruth was making the point that in previous reviews these things would have been debated out in the open.

Q204 **Ruth Smeeth:** And that's my point. There is a senior journalist who I think everyone around this table knows: Deborah Haynes. She has just tweeted that you have just claimed "that the deliberations and work that went on behind the scenes to generate the national security capability review were not secret...!" and that is why we have ended up with some of the leaks. She said: "This is incorrect. It was completely shrouded in secrecy". She is making it clear that she could not get any information from public sources. There was no wider engagement. There was nothing going on. That is why we ended up with these leaks, compounded by the



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fact that no one was denying them. We have ended up in a situation that was totally destabilising for our serving personnel.

Sir Mark Sedwill: As I said, there were 12 different elements to the capability review, and this problem exists only with the defence one—let's be candid about it. Deborah Haynes is doing her job, and doing it very effectively. She has got a lot of sources, and she gets information from them. Those sources do not always know what decisions Ministers might be taking and how all these various things are coming together, so you get a speculative leak on the basis of a request for a specific range of options. That is sometimes just because people leak, and sometimes it is because people are leaking deliberately to try to influence the ministerial decision. In the end, Ministers need to look at decisions on their merits, take those decisions and be held accountable by Parliament.

There is a separate question as to whether the conversation about all these decisions about changes to capability, emerging issues and so on should be conducted more publicly. With respect, I think that is a question for the Ministry of Defence as you go through the Modernising Defence programme, because this issue of leaks applied only in that area. It is one of the 12 programmes, and all the others were conducted in good order.

Q205 **Ruth Smeeth:** But it was hugely significant, because it was: 2,000 personnel; the Albion-class amphibious assault ships; cuts to our military from 82,000 to 50,000; a cut in the number of Ajax that we had just bought; a cut in the number of armoured brigades to the new deployable division; upgrades to Challenger II main battle tanks, which we are in the process of procuring; a delay for Warrior infantry fighting vehicles; a cut in the number of F-35s; a cut in the number of Army Air Corps squadrons; and, C-130 Hercules transport aircraft to be taken out of service earlier than planned. Every part of our armed forces ended up with these stories affecting their service personnel.

There is something wrong with the process when this number of leaks is coming out, either because the MoD or individual services did not feel empowered enough to make those arguments internally—that may suggest why some of the leaks were happening—or they just were not able to participate and were scared and thought they did not have any other voice to protect our national security. Something went very wrong with this process.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I did not run that particular project. I am responsible for the overall process. I am not going to condone leaks out of the MoD with whatever motive. There is too much of it and it is often designed to try to force Ministers' hands, rather than enabling them to take rational decisions in the national security interest. Ministers need to be able to proceed in good order.

The Defence Secretary has addressed some of the specific issues in your list about armed forces size and his own views on them, but the correct procedure for that—there are plenty of parliamentary opportunities, such as UQs and appearances before this Committee—is for the Ministers responsible to set out the Government's position. But they won't want to



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give a running commentary on every single speculative leak that comes out. There were opportunities, right the way through the autumn while this process was going on, for Ministers to set that out and I believe they did so.

The former Defence Secretary tackled some of those when he was before you. The current Defence Secretary has dealt with it both here and on the Floor of the House. I don't disagree at all. This kind of thing is really damaging. It is damaging to the process. It is damaging to confidence between Ministers and officials, and between officials and the military. It is damaging to the morale of the military. It shouldn't happen, but equally, you cannot conduct a review of this kind entirely in public. Ministers have to make a judgment about that.

Q206 Ruth Smeeth: You said specifically that the only leaks came from within the MoD during this process. Did you make formal complaints to Mr Lovegrove about leaks coming from the MoD during this process? What conversations were then had?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I wouldn't want to say on record that it is 100% from the MoD. I cannot think of any from anywhere else. There was clearly a pattern from the MoD, which was not true elsewhere. Of course, I have discussed this problem—not only with the permanent secretary, but with others in the Ministry of Defence as well, including Ministers.

Q207 Ruth Smeeth: You never actually answered my question, which was how extensive were the options for armed forces structure and capabilities suggested by the MoD in late 2017?

Sir Mark Sedwill: The MoD was working through a whole range of options to adjust the Joint Force 2025 programme, partly in order to reflect the changes in threats, and partly to look at the pace of delivery and the resource envelope. All of those things are there. That is still the subject of the Modernising Defence programme. Overall, of course, let us not forget that only two to three years ago the Joint Force 2025 programme was judged to be an affordable proposition in the SDSR 2015. That remains the baseline of the work that was done last autumn in the run-up to the launch of the MDP and remains the baseline for the MDP itself. There will be some adjustments to it, no doubt, but it remains the baseline.

Chair: I have quick interventions from Madeleine, Martin and Mark, and then we will get back to our main line of questioning.

Q208 Mrs Moon: There are swirling discussions about the black hole in the defence budget of over £20 billion, which I think has been officially confirmed—it is possibly even higher. Can you understand, when you have a secretive, closed approach, why personnel in defence might have leaked? They have gone through other cuts and hollowing out, which is now the official term, I believe, for where our armed forces are and where defence cuts have led us to.

These are people who have a passionate commitment to our defence.



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They put their lives on the line for our defence. So when they see yet more cuts to the capability that they will have to operate in, they too would think, "Hang on, we can't let this carry on," and feel that the only way to protect themselves, their colleagues and their country is actually to leak, because they have seen what happened in the previous salami slicing of our forces, which we have all accepted will leave us vulnerable. They felt they had to say, "No, we can't have yet more vulnerability coming down the line towards us." This is not about disloyalty. This is about the only way to be loyal. This is what they are thinking about—"Help us." Is that not what these leaks were about?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Some people might have been motivated by that, but the point is that you have to do these things in good order. These processes are run within the MoD by a combination of MoD officials and the military. The Chiefs are consulted. It then comes to Ministers for decisions. Ministers sometimes have to make tough choices.

These arguments have happened with every defence review probably for the last century. We must be clear: we are not talking about cutting the defence budget. The defence budget is increasing, but new capabilities may be required, and there may be choices to be made about rebalancing those with other capabilities. These are choices that Ministers have to make on the professional advice of their advisors. It is extremely difficult for Ministers to do that—I would have had this at the Home Office as well when I was running it—in an atmosphere in which this level of leaking is happening.

Of course, some people may have the concern that you set out, and people in the services need to be, and are, engaged in this, but strategic choices have to be made on the advice of the chiefs of staff, by Ministers. That is fundamentally what their professional duty is, and it shouldn't happen in an environment like that.

Q209 **Chair:** Would you agree that it would perhaps make more sense in future if, instead of operating within the straitjacket of a fiscally neutral budget, you were able to set out almost an à la carte menu saying, "Look, these are things that ideally we want and would like to have, and these are the price tags that go with them"? You could then present those menus to the politicians so that they can make the choice, rather than putting yourselves in a situation where in order to pay for new threats to be met, you have to not "rebalance", with respect, but "cut" not the budget, but other capabilities that were deemed necessary in the previous SDSR a couple of years earlier. Would that not be a better way of going about it?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Dr Lewis, that is essentially the way we do it. This was not a full SDSR, so I won't go over that again.

Q210 **Chair:** Well this was fiscally neutral and it was preventing you doing it.

Sir Mark Sedwill: It was fiscally neutral because the judgment that the NSC made was that we should look at that £56 billion-ish, and see whether those resources were being deployed in the right way. As a result

of that exercise we produced the fusion doctrine, which is the centrepiece of this.

Chair: We are coming on to that shortly.

Sir Mark Sedwill: In terms of this—let me put it this way: I don't like commenting on individual leaks. It would be unsurprising—we have all been in politics a long time. You suggest that Ministers should be given one option that involves more resources, one that involves a little more, a neutral option and one that involves less. Guess what the leaks come out about? They do not come out about the options to produce more; they tend to be about where there are potential cuts.

Q211 **Chair:** That is because you were ruling out an increase in the defence budget by saying that it had to be fiscally neutral.

Sir Mark Sedwill: No we weren't. The Government decided that this exercise was fiscally neutral—the MDP is slightly different for the reasons given by the Defence Secretary. This exercise was fiscally neutral. The 2015 review that is still coming through already set an increase in the defence budget, but this exercise was not focused on that.

I know we are obviously focusing on defence. It is the biggest part of the national security set of capabilities, but it wasn't the primary focus of the capability review. Those big choices were made in 2015. Defence is looking at delivering those choices, and whether any adjustments need to be made to them. The big choices were made not in this capability review, but back in 2015.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: In response to some of the points raised by Ruth, you said that within the MoD this is kind of what they do—they jockey for position in terms of budgets. As the National Security Adviser, if you knew that that is what it was going to be like within the short framework, could you have advised Ministers, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State that a more open and transparent process, within limitation, would have headed that off, and that we would not have been reading on the front page of the *London Times* what was being thought of behind closed doors? That seems a more effective use of your time and that of the Ministries, specifically the MoD because you have highlighted it yourself. It would not have placed those on the frontline in the position of thinking that they might be heading off into the sunset and into a pensioned age—it seems ineffective. At the end of the day, it seems to undermine our role as parliamentarians and to undermine parliamentary scrutiny, and that in itself is a threat to national security.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I was genuinely taken by surprise by the extent of this. I hadn't anticipated it and I don't know whether others did. Mr Francois, you were a Defence Minister—I don't know whether you would have anticipated this. I was genuinely taken by surprise by the extent of it, and the breadth of it. I just think it is wrong because it does impede good governance. That said, the defence component of the review was running right the way through the autumn and towards the end of the year. I think you had at least one hearing with the former Defence Secretary on it; you



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may have had more. There were opportunities for parliamentary scrutiny; it wasn't a totally closed process. Both the former and the current Defence Secretary had the opportunity to set it out—there are sometimes debates on the Floor of the House and so on—and there are other opportunities to question other defence officials as well. Of course, it has to be done in good order. I don't think any strategic defence review or SDSR has been done with a totally open public debate about it. We were simply trying to follow, broadly speaking, the established procedures.

Q212 Martin Docherty-Hughes: I do not think anyone is asking for full disclosure. I think they are looking at more engagement in terms of the scrutiny—that may be behind closed doors, or within a secure setting. Some of our own allies do a far more robust process—the Danish, the Norwegians and so on—and then there is parliamentary agreement. If there is the ability to do that across some of our allies, the question is why we are not able.

Sir Mark Sedwill: That is probably not a question for me, though. It is probably more of a question for the Secretary of State and the MoD.

Q213 Mr Francois: Let us go back to the leaks on 12 January and look at the context at the time. I have reason to believe that the three options that were presented to the Defence Secretary were absolutely accurate and no one in authority has come out at any point and denied that those were the options. As far as I am concerned, those were the three options that were presented to the incoming Secretary of State. To his credit, he refused to endorse any of them.

The context at the time is that everybody knew that this review was meant to be fiscally neutral. The MoD knew that it had an additional challenge—it was trying to close a gap in an over-programmed equipment budget, which, again, everybody knew. It was made very plain that the review was to be fiscally neutral. I mean absolutely no disrespect in saying this, but because much of your background has been in the Home Office counter-terrorism and with the agencies, I think there was a suspicion in many quarters, including in the Ministry of Defence, that in the recommendations you would make, you might naturally favour increasing some of the budget for some of those agencies—it would be a human thing to do—and therefore that money was going to have to come out of the defence budget because everybody had been told repeatedly that the exercise was fiscally neutral. That is the context in which this took place. You could argue that that was the MoD “defending” itself against what it saw as a review that was going to take money away from it, when it was already under tremendous pressure over its own equipment budget.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I understand that. There were one or two articles where I wondered whether I was starring in “Dr Strangelove”, to be honest. Some of the headlines suggested exactly that—that somehow or other I had an agenda that I was pursuing. To be clear, without commenting on the specifics, nobody had endorsed any of the kinds of recommendations that you just referred to, not only the new Defence



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Secretary—that kind of stuff had never been brought to anyone for a decision. There was a whole load of work going on inside the MoD, as you say, primarily to deal with the MoD's own financial pressures and the over-programming. The NAO report is very interesting because it talks about up to £20 billion. If I remember rightly, it says the minimum is about £4.5 billion, and there is an up to £20 billion gap in the equipment budget. Those are eye-watering numbers, but let us not forget that those are eye-watering numbers with a very large number behind them. Over a 10-year period, well over £400 billion will be invested in defence—£178 billion on equipment. Although the numbers are eye-watering, the percentages are not as explosive as they might appear. For Defence, they had committed to deliver Joint Force 2025 with a degree of over-programming within that budget, with, as this Committee has already identified, certain fairly ambitious efficiency targets to enable them to do that.

This piece of work essentially focused on how they were going to do that, whether they could do it, whether they could deliver the efficiencies and whether it was affordable. It was not a full SDSR looking at the overall priorities, but it is as a result of that that we now have the Modernising Defence programme. To be crystal clear, going back to your earlier question, I have no agenda. You are right that I have spent time in the Home Office, but I am a diplomat by background, and if you look at the places I have served, I have served alongside the Forces almost all my career. I have a very strong affinity with them.

Q214 Mr Francois: These options were proposed because the MoD officials were anticipating a cut in their budget in order to pay for plus-ups elsewhere. It was not just about the over-programming; the fear that led to these options was that, at the end of the review, the MoD's budget would be cut.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Again, I do not want to comment on the specifics, but it is normal in circumstances of this kind to ask officials to do a certain amount of work that is plus five or minus five, that kind of thing. You will remember that from your own time in government. As I said earlier, what tends to happen is that the leaks are all about the minus rather than the plus. That is human nature, just to go back to the point you were making about me.

We looked at the overall £56 billion, and there were two constraints, as I think we set out initially, that were clearly maintained within that overall £56 billion. One was the 2% commitment to defence and the other was the 0.7% commitment on development, both of which were published Government commitments. There were a series of other ring fences—the CT ring fence and other things—that we said we needed to have a look at, but there was no suggestion at any stage of a wholesale shift of any kind out of defence into other areas. They make a contribution on CT, for example, but there was no suggestion of that kind.

Q215 Mr Francois: So you are telling us that in all the work up to the point where the MDP was broken out, which we are coming on to, there was never a suggestion of reducing the defence budget?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Not that I am aware of, no.

Q216 **Chair:** But were there suggestions of reducing defence capabilities?

Sir Mark Sedwill: The officials who were working on that were having to look not so much at reducing defence capabilities as at the affordability and deliverability of the Joint Force 2025 programme.

Q217 **Chair:** Yes, but deciding that certain things that were previously going to happen were not going to happen and certain assets that were previously going to remain in service for longer were now not going to do so.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Those kinds of options always have to be canvassed as part of a process of this kind.

Q218 **Chair:** I think that is a yes, Mark.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Please don't over-interpret that, because officials have a responsibility to present a range of options within whatever fiscal envelope is set, usually against different assumptions on the fiscal envelope.

Q219 **Chair:** I still think it is a yes, though. Just say it sometimes; it won't do any harm.

Sir Mark Sedwill: It may not do you any harm, Dr Lewis.

Q220 **Gavin Robinson:** Good morning, Sir Mark. Without the benefit of jargon, could I ask you to outline the benefits and the purpose of the fusion doctrine?

Sir Mark Sedwill: That is a very important qualification. Let me try. Fundamentally, it is about deploying the full set of our national security, economic and influence capabilities, set out in the document, against the full set of our national security, economic and influence goals. That is fundamentally what it is about. It is then a question of how we organise ourselves to do that in the most coherent way possible and effectively deliver the decisions taken by the NSC.

Q221 **Gavin Robinson:** What has gone wrong, then? The concept of NSC itself, your appointment as a National Security Adviser and the whole purpose of that programme is to encourage co-operation. Why the need, five years into the project, to create a doctrine if the whole thrust and purpose of the structure of the National Security Council is to encourage such co-operation?

Q222 **Sir Mark Sedwill:** I do not think it is a failure of the project—it is building on it. If you talk to anyone who has served in government before and after the creation of the NSC, they will agree that it was a very important innovation that enabled the Government to work in a more collective way on this. It was a step forward, but you should always be looking to improve.

We are dealing with a more complex set of threats and challenges. We have already talked about hybrid warfare from the Russians and so on, which was not quite as apparent at the beginning. This is an effort to build



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on the previous progress, if you like, that has been made with the NSC and bring it together in the most coherent way that we possibly can. If you think of the counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan, we talked there about the comprehensive approach. That was a version of this, which brought together development with defence, politics and other kinds of efforts to stabilise a country such as that.

We have talked about Russia, and I talked to the Joint Committee about modern deterrence—that you might push back at a country that is threatening you in an area that they are vulnerable in, rather than necessarily contending the ground that they have chosen. For example, they are vulnerable on corruption, so you push back on that area, whereas they may perceive that we are vulnerable to a cyber-attack. You do not necessarily contest in exactly the same area.

In terms of opportunities, one of our big assets as a country is the fact that we are a global security player. We need to play that into our economic agenda as we pursue the whole Global Britain agenda and go through Brexit.

Those are examples of something, and what we are trying to do is bring all that together into a coherent approach that is readily understandable and that builds in a process of proposing options to Ministers and delivering the decisions they make. As I say, it builds on what has been done before.

Q223 Gavin Robinson: What has changed? Is it the appointment of senior responsible officers for individual decisions?

Sir Mark Sedwill: That is a component of delivery. What we have done is exactly that. I felt that one of the areas we needed to improve when I came into the job, having seen it from my previous perches, was that the process was good at bringing propositions to the NSC, but given the complexity of cross-Government delivery, where lots of different Departments are involved and in some cases, you are asking a Department to put more equity in and deliver more than their own pure departmental interest might require as part of the overall team, we needed to really improve the mechanisms for delivery to maximise the effect of the decisions the NSC was taking. Therefore, creating the strategy and implementation groups, putting an SRO in charge of each of those, and making those SROs personally accountable in the way accounting officers are to the NSC, in a sense, were other steps forward.

Q224 Gavin Robinson: They are personally accountable for the decisions they are asked to deliver, but they are not accountable for those who refuse to engage. What success has there been in the last two and a half or three years of the fusion doctrine that has fundamentally changed the way the National Security Council apparatus has operated in the last eight years?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Fusion doctrine is new—it is not in the last two and a half or three years. May I use Salisbury as an example? Our response to Salisbury is not a bad example of that.

Q225 Gavin Robinson: I have never found difficulty in getting someone to



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action a decision in an emergency situation, so I am not sure that it is a fair example for seeing the benefits of it.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Let me explain. It was not a question of actioning decisions, but of the nature of the response that we made. If you compare the Salisbury attack with the Litvinenko attack, what we did in Litvinenko was respond in the single line of operation that the attack had presented itself—criminal investigation, eventual identification of suspect, request for extradition, which was refused, and sanctions, which were quite targeted, following that. It took a long time, and of course, the individuals concerned are still at large.

Partly as a result of that, we concluded that with Salisbury, that was not going to work and therefore we had to react differently. We looked across the piece at what the most effective reaction would be to deter future attacks of that kind—to essentially raise the price of attacks of that kind and to take the Russian state in particular by surprise with the nature and effectiveness of our response.

So we were much faster and we acted on intelligence, rather than waiting for the investigation to conclude—it is still in process, but we acted on an intelligence assessment. We delivered our initial position to the Russians, which was that there were only two explanations, and then, as you know, the Prime Minister arranged a whole range of national measures. We then worked to get allies on board as well. That is, essentially, an example of the fusion doctrine in practice. We would not have done that had we not thought of what is the most effective way of imposing a cost on the Russians that they had not priced in when they took that decision.

In a sense, you could say that you do not need the name or the fancy title; it is just about working it. But it is about building it into the way that people think, so that they think laterally about how they respond to an issue or play our security capabilities as an asset, for example, in pursuing an economic agenda.

Q226 **Gavin Robinson:** Previously, the Prime Minister chaired the council, you had all the Ministers there and you outlined the collective nature of the decisions they made. That is a collective and co-ordinated process.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes.

Q227 **Gavin Robinson:** Beneath that, you have a permanent secretary group that you chair.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes.

Q228 **Gavin Robinson:** And that should be co-ordinated and representing departmental or agency interests, but co-ordinated and collective. That is not a problem and that is today as it was previously.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes.

Q229 **Gavin Robinson:** So the new and distinct difference is the senior responsible officer for individual decisions, who is more accountable. Is



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the problem in Whitehall? Has the problem always been that in Whitehall, further down the chain, you are not getting departmental responses? In truth, are some of the Departments happy to do what is expected of them, but they are very unwilling to give to another Department or agency their resource to deliver on a shared goal? Is that the problem?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I would not say it is a problem; that is the nature of any resource-constrained environment, not just in austerity but at any time. Departments and Secretaries of State have their own priorities. There are occasions when we want Departments to do something that is not fundamentally central to their own mission or sense of themselves.

If I think about the visit of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, for example, there are big components of the Vision 2030 programme that we are supporting, that involve education and health. They are not Departments that are configured to pursue either foreign policy or national security goals, because that is not their fundamental job, but we wanted them to be involved because there is a significant component of supporting the education and health elements of the Vision 2030 programme, where the UK has a very strong advantage because of the way we organise ourselves.

It is a question of how we bring the Departments in and how we ensure that a political decision to ensure that the whole of Government are involved in something is then translated into action. You need a programme of work that turns that political decision and intent into concrete delivery.

It is not just the individual SROs; they chair these strategy and implementation groups sitting below the group I chair, the NSC(O) as it is known—the permanent secretaries' group—topic by topic or big theme by big theme. There are about a dozen and a half of them, in order to be able to drive that implementation. Also, that is the expert group that brings the policy proposals and whatever back-up. It is really just imposing some coherence and spreading what was already best practice, across the entire system.

Q230 **Gavin Robinson:** Lord Stirrup, in the debate back in April, said, "If the new doctrine is to be successful, and not just the whim of the year, it will require a fundamental shift in culture, as the security capability review itself acknowledges. However, a change of culture is one of the most difficult things to achieve: it takes sustained effort over many years and a system of rewards and sanctions that drive behaviour. A senior responsible official, while helpful, will not achieve this fundamental shift."

Is that a proposition that you agree with? Does that helpfully contextualise the problem that you face?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Yes. To summarise: the innovations we have made are necessary but not sufficient. You are right: fundamentally, this is about a cultural and behavioural shift. That said, most civil servants are team players. It goes with the grain of why people join something like the public service—not only the civil service but the military and the police. They are



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fundamentally team players. Often, we are dealing with structural impediments to them operating that way: they have to tunnel through the silos in order to be able to operate as team players. We are trying to create structures and systems that enable teamwork rather than the classic federated system that tends to impede teamwork.

I am quite optimistic on this. There is a behavioural and cultural element sitting there in the people that we employ, whether military, civil, police or whatever; we need to enable them to operate in that way and positively reinforce and incentivise that. That is what we are seeking to do through the changes that will cascade down through the system.

Q231 Gavin Robinson: On a strategy level, did the separation out of the Modernising Defence programme from the national security capability review highlight the difficulties you have in seeking co-operation and a co-ordinated approach in decision making?

Sir Mark Sedwill: No, I don't think so. If you look at the capability review, it is, as I have said already, cut quite widely across Government—it is not just the Modernising Defence programme. You could not do everything in detail in the capability review; it would be four times as thick as my folder. So you have the Modernising Defence programme, which is essentially a deep dive into defence itself, to look at defence's own efficiency, deliverability, et cetera, and then of course the capability questions that we have addressed. But there will also be, sometime in the near future—for obvious reasons I do not know exactly when—a launch of the updated CONTEST strategy on counter-terrorism. That is touched on in the NSCR, but it is right that it is a separate package of work because it is clearly a very important self-standing piece of work—and the same probably with serious organised crime, for example. So I don't single out the MDP as that. The capability review was trying to draw it all together, to do, essentially, the horizontal piece and produce the fusion doctrine as a mechanism for enabling that teamwork across Government. You then have very important packages of work in the individual components of that, which will be delivered separately.

Q232 Martin Docherty-Hughes: In terms of the main lessons from the Chilcot report that the fusion document is seeking to embed, maybe we can talk about that. Maybe you could give us some examples of how the principles from Chilcot were applied to the recent operation in Syria.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Sure. Without running through the entire checklist, essentially the big lessons of Chilcot were to make sure that there was plenty of scrutiny and challenge of policy decisions that avoided group think, if you like, as you come through it; making sure that the legal basis was absolutely clear; and having very clear structured decision making, because there was a critique of sofa Government, if you like, sitting within it. Of course, to go to a point that Mr Robinson was just making, the fact of the NSC itself being the Cabinet Committee at which the initial decisions were taken, was in itself an important element in implementing the



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lessons of Chilcot, because it is a formal collective Cabinet Committee decision with all the process and papers that you need for that, properly minuted and so on. That was one of the key elements. The Attorney General is there and he offers the legal advice, et cetera. But what we also now do is try to build those things in. If we are taking any decision really now to the NSC—any significant decision—we try to run through a series of half a dozen questions that try to exemplify the clarity that Chilcot is asking us to bring.

The first question is a very clear view, from Ministers, of what our interests and goals should be—what the core national security interests should be. It is really important to define that. If I think back to Afghanistan, the ambitions we set for ourselves in Afghanistan—Mr Francois you will remember this—moved around all the time, and being really clear about what the primary goals and the secondary goals are and the distinctions between them is absolutely critical. That is the first question.

The second question is a really honest appraisal of the situation—not only the situation on the ground, but whether any previous plans or policies are on or off track. We largely get the JIC to do that, because it is an independent body. It will do the situational approach; obviously it will not make a judgment about the effectiveness of policies, but we bring those two together.

Third is outlook. He talks about scenario planning. The Government does have a tendency to just go for the scenario that it wants to achieve and focus its attention on that rather than understanding that sometimes, particularly in national security, you are dealing with an opponent or an adversary who has a completely opposing set of objectives, and there is a sort of minimum acceptable. If you are dealing with something like Syria, or Afghanistan, what is the minimum acceptable outcome? What is the good outcome, and what is the bad outcome you want to avoid? I have sometimes caricatured that as the good, the bad and the ugly. You have to do that kind of work.

Fourth, and this is, again, important: what in most national security issues is our view of a comprehensive international approach? As we have discussed already, we will almost always be operating, on any significant issue, with allies and other partners, and across the full spectrum of capabilities—development, defence, political, diplomacy and all the rest of it. What is our view of that? We should always have a view on what that overall campaign, if you like, should look like. Only then do you come to the question: what is the UK's catalytic contribution? In other words, what do we need to put on the table in order to enable that collective international effort to happen and be able to focus on a leading or supporting role?

The final question is: do the resources that Ministers are prepared to commit as a result of that process align with the first point—our ambitions and goals? Again, if you look back at the lessons, not so much of Chilcot but of several of our campaigns, we have set very lofty goals and



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ambitions and inadequate resources—not only ourselves, but others too—to achieve them. So the final question is how we reconcile those. If we are prepared only to make a certain level of commitment, we have to make sure that we are not overstating our ambitions. That is the way we put it together.

You have then got to build legal advice into that. We put lots of challenge in. I have a shadow board of a diagonal slice of young officials whose job is to red-team these things. So as we go through it, we try to make that a more open, transparent and challenged process that really brings genuine choices to Ministers, which only Ministers can make.

Q233 Martin Docherty-Hughes: You mentioned scrutiny. There was some discussion in the House where there were briefings being given—rightfully—to Privy Counsellors with the appropriate security clearance, and then there was also discussion that that briefing was supposed to be given to all Members. I was just wondering if you could give some clarity to that.

Sir Mark Sedwill: On Syria?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Yes.

Sir Mark Sedwill: There were a range of Privy Council briefings. I did some myself, my deputy did some and the Chairman of the JIC did some over that week or so. The Defence Secretary did one or two briefings—I can't quite remember—for all MPs in the House. I can't remember whether it was one or two, but I know he definitely did one. I think he did two, actually—or he facilitated two, I believe.

There was one briefing, just before the Prime Minister's statement, where a group of Members who contacted No. 10—it was more of a mixed group that had asked for some briefing in advance of that—were given a briefing. It was portrayed as a full intelligence briefing; it wasn't, it was just sort of an explanation.

Q234 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Who was that briefing from?

Sir Mark Sedwill: The Chairman of the JIC gave some of it, I gave some of it and a senior military officer gave some of it as well. That was facilitated by the No. 10 team.

Q235 Martin Docherty-Hughes: So that was just a broad swathe of Members who were not Privy Counsellors or—

Sir Mark Sedwill: Some weren't. It was facilitated by the No. 10 political team, by the chief of staff, and it was a group of people who had asked No. 10 and expressed an interest in getting some material in advance.

Q236 Martin Docherty-Hughes: So you wouldn't, for instance, be perturbed by other Members putting that request to No. 10 and you giving that briefing again?

Sir Mark Sedwill: No. I believe, actually, that the offer was made to various party leaders over that weekend before the parliamentary events,



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beyond Privy Counsellors, to have those briefings. That is my understanding, but this was done very much through political rather than official channels, although my office did some of the administrative facilitation of the event itself.

Q237 Martin Docherty-Hughes: The annexe of the National Security Capability Review shows that 89 Strategic Defence and Security Review commitments are either in progress or ongoing or complete. Where some of them, in terms of perspective, have clearly not been met, is there a more accurate way of measuring and presenting implementation without Whitehall, as some would say, marking its own homework? Self-assessment is good as long as you can have a good empirical evidence-based approach that everyone sticks to.

Sir Mark Sedwill: That is a fair point. We report each year formally to Parliament and the Joint Committee on the delivery of the various commitments and, as you say, it is a fairly mixed group of commitments. Some of those are very big issues, some much smaller, and so we report into those. Then, through that, there is a process of scrutiny of those. It is a fair question as to whether they could be more empirical. Some of them would lend themselves to it, some not. For example, one of the commitments was to hold a debate and a vote on the deterrent. That happened and that is one of those that has been ticked off as achieved. Others are more in progress and there is a more qualitative judgment about the extent to which they proceed. It is a fair point.

Q238 Martin Docherty-Hughes: I suppose it is that point that the permanent secretary needs to recognise and deal with.

Sir Mark Sedwill: A permanent secretary in the Department concerned?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Yes, in terms of these not being complete.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Some are ongoing and were always intended to be. We are only two years into the programme. In fact, the majority are ongoing, while some have been completed. There is a rigorous process to make that judgment, but it is a judgment in the end, and it is a process that is then subject to scrutiny, as I said, by the Joint Committee.

Q239 Johnny Mercer: Quickly on Salisbury, Sir Mark, do you know who the individuals are who poisoned the Skripals?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Not yet.

Q240 Johnny Mercer: When it comes to defence and the Modernising Defence review, looking at security in the round, clearly defence is not a jobs club; it is there for security. Why has that been sectioned off? Was that something you were keen to see?

Sir Mark Sedwill: As I was explaining a few minutes ago, there were various areas of the capability review. It is a big portfolio, but a fairly broad-brush document—it covers 12 different projects. Several of them are going to be pursued individually. As I said, there is the CONTEST



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review, which I presume will be announced by the new Home Secretary in due course: CONTEST 3.0.

MDP is essentially the same as that. There is a deep dive, led by the Ministry of Defence, notably into their own efficiency, effectiveness, procurement procedures, commercial arrangements and so on, with one of those elements being a judgment about whether the capabilities themselves set out in Joint Force 2025 need to be adjusted. That is true of other elements as well. The capability review does not seek to do every piece of work in national security across the whole of Government.

Q241 Johnny Mercer: This plays into the narrative. The way it looks from the outside, as Ruth touched on earlier, is that the whole chaotic way of doing the review was that the security review came forward, which obviously we accept—it's great—but then there was a degree of public pressure, which hived off defence. That made it look like we were not doing it properly. Did you have any doubts about hiving off defence, and if you did, why did you not do that at the beginning?

Sir Mark Sedwill: We always presumed that the whole set of questions around defence and affordability that we have been dwelling on would not be completed by the time we had published the capability review, and there would be further work to be done on defence. There was then the question about what the shape of that should be.

We had never intended that the whole of the work that is being done by the MDP would be completed by Christmas, any more than we had assumed that the whole CONTEST 3.0 would be done within the context of the capability review. The capability review, in terms of those existing pieces of work, was designed to try to make sure that the big decisions on them about capabilities were coherent and aligned. We were not trying to re-do or duplicate those individual big pieces of work.

Q242 Johnny Mercer: Right. Sorry—I am quite slow on the uptake with this sometimes. When you started the security review last summer, why didn't you do it at the beginning? It looks like we are reacting to public pressure, and we do not know what we are doing around defence. Why did you not say at the beginning, "Right—we are going to do a deep dive on defence"?

You talk about the leakers, and I agree with you about a lot of that, but we would not be where we are without the campaign that has been run, and hiving off defence. Why did we not do that at the beginning?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I do not know that I would agree with that. You have to look across the board in order to understand exactly which areas we might need to do further work on. We always presumed that there was further work to be done on defence. The point is, if you are looking across the piece at all the national security capabilities, you need to understand, at least in high-level terms, what the defence component of that looks like, just as we need to understand, broadly speaking, what the CONTEST review will do, and broadly speaking what the requirements are on serious



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organised crime. The purpose of the capability review is to try to make sure that those things are aligned, rather than being dispersed.

Q243 Johnny Mercer: I put it to you that without the concerted efforts in this place and others to bring this to the Prime Minister's attention and to make it politically impossible for her to push through some of the proposals, we would not be here at all, but you are saying essentially that it was always part of the plan to do a deep dive in defence.

Sir Mark Sedwill: No, I am not. I am not going to be drawn on commenting on the politics of all of this. That is not my job.

Johnny Mercer: Forgive me, but that is not politics. Doing a review is a civil service process issue. That is not politics. At the beginning of the national security review you said, "We're going to look at all these different aspects of it." At that stage, there was no intention to say, "We'll have a deep dive in defence and try to sort this out." If there was, with all those leaks coming out, you would have said something to us.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Part of what was happening on defence was the deep dive. It wasn't a full defence review—that is the point I have tried to explain. It was never a full defence review. It was a defence project with the capability review, which was looking at essentially the affordability and deliverability of the commitments that were set out in the 2015 review. I recall conversations in the beginning that said this is probably going to go beyond the publication of the document, because that—

Q244 Johnny Mercer: Who did you have those conversations with?

Sir Mark Sedwill: People at the top of defence—the top officials and military at defence. There wasn't a decision to have a separate programme. The new Defence Secretary concluded that was the right answer and the Prime Minister and the Chancellor agreed with him, but I wouldn't overstate this. We hadn't anticipated all of the work that needed to be done on defence that has arisen from the NAO report and all the rest of it would be completed by the end of the capability review.

Q245 Ruth Smeeth: Sorry, but some of this is absolute nonsense. CONTEST was already meant to be under review. That made total sense. But defence has the SDSR process, so we are in an ongoing, every five-year process of review. The idea that there was going to be a bigger piece of work, when that piece of work is done every five years anyway, just doesn't make any sense. If that was the case, the MDP would have been announced when we started getting very political about this last autumn, so the timeline does not make sense, nor does the way in which you are comparing CONTEST to the MDP. That was a piece of work that was planned and scheduled, as the SDSR is.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Sorry; I am obviously not making myself clear. Let me have another go.

We were not conducting a full defence review within the context of the NSCR. The big decisions were taken in SDSR '15. The main exam question, which the MDP is also addressing, is the deliverability of those



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commitments and how defence is going to deliver those commitments and whether there need to be any adjustments made to them at the margin.

If you are doing a capability review across national security, you need to have a sense of what is happening in defence in order to be able to make judgments elsewhere and it made sense to bring that piece of work within the ambit of the review, but it was run by defence. The SRO for it was Stephen Lovegrove, the PUS of Defence. It was conducted by their officials. The new Defence Secretary concluded that he wanted to take a fresh look at it—a more fundamental look at the way defence was organising itself and at the way defence produces its commercial programme, its efficiency, its effectiveness and its delivery. That is what arose and what led to the MDP. I am not saying that the MDP was always going to happen. Being clear, the new Defence Secretary wished to do a more fundamental piece of work. What I have said was that, as we embarked upon the capability review, we knew that there would be ongoing work in defence on the piece of work that defence were doing, which was about delivering the SDSR 2015 commitments.

Q246 Chair: Surely the main difference, though, was that when you were doing it as part of the overall operation, it was within the straitjacket of fiscal neutrality and when the Secretary of State successfully wrested back control of the process, it was without that constriction.

Sir Mark Sedwill: The overall review has fiscal neutrality within it. Of course, we have redeployed some resources. Yes, that is a shift from when the new Defence Secretary when he came in and that he has discussed with you in detail. He had the reasons that he set out here for wanting it to be a separate programme.

You are asking me why we didn't do the MDP right from the start. The situation changed. The new Defence Secretary wished to have a more fundamental look. He had reached conclusions about affordability and the fiscal position and that is what meant that the MDP needed to be a separate piece of work. The point I was making was that when we embarked on the capability review—it is really simple—we didn't think the key issue that the defence project of the capability review was addressing, which was the deliverability of the 2015 commitments, was going to be resolved by the end of the capability review. That would be ongoing work and that is part of the MDP.

Q247 Ruth Smeeth: We have touched on it several times now. Given the leaks, the secrecy around this and the attacks on the whole process, why was that never clearly communicated at the beginning then—that the work in terms of implementation of the SDSR was going to be ongoing and that the defence aspect of this was continuing? Either you had an appalling comms strategy or that is not quite accurate.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I am setting it out as accurately as I possibly can for you, given the decisions we took at the time. As I have said already, we did not expect there to be quite this row about this—we did not expect that set of leaks in the autumn. But if you look back, we never said that



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the capability review was going to be the last word on the implementation of SDSR 2015. That was always going to be an ongoing process, not only for defence but for the rest as well.

Looking back, it may be that we should have communicated that differently. Nobody at the time expected this particular element to become quite as controversial as it did.

Q248 Chair: The main reason why the permanent secretary—rightly, in our view—took the decision that he had to seize back control of that element of the process dealing with defence was that he was going to have to face very significant losses in some military assets, given the fact that there was a financial lid on the process. We have been briefed by officials involved in the MDP, who have indicated the crucial difference between the MDP process and the defence strand, when it was part of your overall process, which is that they will be able to do what we discussed earlier today: to set out lists of potential capabilities and what they will cost, and then Ministers will be able to take an informed decision. They are not having to operate within the tightly-closed pressure cooker of fiscal neutrality.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I am not disagreeing with that; I was answering a different question, which was: had we expected the defence component of this to be complete by the time of the capability review? The answer to that was no, because the defence component of it was about the ongoing delivery of SDSR '15.

Q249 Chair: That was always going to happen, wasn't it? If you had said basically, "We have decided to spend this extra money to meet new and intensified threats," they were always going to be left with the headache at some subsequent stage of deciding what cuts to make in capabilities when they had been handed that poisoned chalice.

Sir Mark Sedwill: They had been handed a capability programme in 2015—Joint Force 2025—and a resource envelope to deliver that programme, which they accepted in 2015, with an efficiency programme and so on to ensure they could deliver that programme within that resource envelope. That was essentially the exam question we were addressing in the defence strand of it. It is wrong to say "seize back control", because they always had control. The defence project was led by the MoD themselves. It was SRO'd by their permanent secretary, within a capability review going to the NSC on which the Defence Secretary sits.

So it is a bit less stark than how you portray it. But of course if the Defence Secretary has looked at that programme, its affordability and the risks to delivery within it—of course, the NAO report that has come out has probably amplified some of those concerns about deliverability—he is then looking at essentially two things. One is the three strands of the MDP, which are essentially about how well the MoD can deliver the commitments they have made, what they do about their commercial strategy, their internal management and efficiency and effectiveness—meeting all of those savings and so on. Then, separately, but in parallel



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and linked to it, are the capabilities themselves and whether there are any adjustments that should be made to those in the light of the evolving threat, given that we are looking out to 2025 and beyond. The template remains Joint Force 2025 and delivering that, or something like that, with whatever adjustments need to be made.

Q250 Johnny Mercer: In your heart, do you think Joint Force 2025 is deliverable, based on the 2015 plan that came forward and so on?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I think delivering all of it with the money available to the timescale is really ambitious.

Q251 Johnny Mercer: Does “really ambitious” in the normal world mean no?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I do not think it does mean no, because even though—

Q252 Johnny Mercer: We have been really ambitious on this for a long time. You have said that we have always been ambitious about going somewhere and achieving the world but delivering nothing. Is it time to stop saying, “We are going for a really ambitious target” because we know actually who will pay the price for that?

Sir Mark Sedwill: In a sense, I will not know the answer to that question until the MoD have completed their current work.

Johnny Mercer: I accept that.

Sir Mark Sedwill: It is the case that you can do benchmark comparisons with, for example, other countries with similar-sized defence budgets who have a rather different force profile in terms of numbers—

Q253 Johnny Mercer: France.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Exactly—they are a natural comparator. There are serious questions about commercial capability; the NAO report sets all that out. But even though there is a big gap—as we were saying earlier, the numbers for the potential gap are, in themselves, eye-watering; it’s £4.5 billion to, potentially, £20 billion. It sounds ridiculous, but that is still a relatively small percentage of a programme that involves £178 billion-worth of equipment; the central point is well under 10%. And it’s in a budget that will be well over £400 billion over the period. So there is a question about whether it shouldn’t be deliverable. Why shouldn’t it be deliverable, given those numbers and given that we are talking about only a few percentage points? We will know, once the MDP has worked through; and then are there choices to be made about additional resources, changes to capability and so on?

Q254 Johnny Mercer: Do you have any role to play in the Modernising Defence review?

Sir Mark Sedwill: It is formally reporting to the Defence Secretary, Chancellor and Prime Minister, but I would imagine the NSC will look at it at some point. The strand that is looking at the capability mix I am co-chairing with Stephen Lovegrove. That is a group to look at the various options—not options of the kind we have been discussing, but just to



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ensure that it stays in line with the overall set of planning assumptions and parameters for the SDSR and the capability review itself. So I'm involved in that sense.

Q255 Phil Wilson: The basic structure of Joint Force 2025 is repeated in the NSCR. Does that mean that there will be no fundamental changes to the armed forces?

Sir Mark Sedwill: That has to await the outcome of the defence programme, but Joint Force 2025 remains the baseline. That, of course, in itself involves some pretty significant changes to the armed forces: a significant beefing up of the joint forces and changes in capability—changes in the nature of capability within the individual armed forces. But that remains the baseline for the current work.

Q256 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Mark, what part does hard power provided by defence play in modern deterrence against a competitor such as Russia?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Fundamentally, it's the suppressive effect that is the deterrent. The reason why, in my view, we have not faced more aggressive military activity by Russia, to go along with all the more aggressive hybrid activity we have seen from Russia, is NATO and the military strength and deterrent that NATO provides, of which, of course, the UK is a major component. In a sense, a modern deterrent is about how we achieve the same effect on the rest of that hybrid spectrum, to suppress and deter effectively aggression from a peer adversary of that kind.

Q257 Martin Docherty-Hughes: You referred earlier to less eye-catching capabilities. There are some less eye-catching capabilities, such as deterrence through knowledge. Do you agree with me that capabilities such as the Russian military studies archive at Shrivenham, which I visited the other week, is an essential part of our capability in terms of having knowledge of the present Russian state, especially when we believe it is using chemical weapons here in the UK? I went, and I can't actually believe that anyone from the MoD has been there in, say, the last 10 years. That would be an extraordinary moment.

Sir Mark Sedwill: I genuinely do not know about the specific example—who has visited and to what extent it's there. But obviously, deep knowledge, not only in the MoD but in the Foreign Office and agencies elsewhere, of our adversaries is an important component of—I wouldn't necessarily say of deterrence, but of making sure that we are presenting the most intelligent set of choices to Ministers when we are presenting options to them and having to make a judgment about what the potential response might be.

Q258 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Do you think it might be important for someone in the MoD to go and visit the Russian military studies archive?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Again, I genuinely do not know whether they have or haven't, but if there is a source of knowledge there, I hope, obviously, that it is available for us to draw on, not just in the MoD but more generally. I just don't know enough about the particular example.



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Q259 Mrs Moon: You have talked a lot about Salisbury—let's start with that—and your role there. Is that an extension of your role and is it something that you will carry on doing—having greater involvement where there is a security threat on mainland Britain?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I don't think it was really an extension of my role. I did not think of it as such. In my role I have three jobs, really. One is to be secretary of the National Security Council and make that work, including implementation, as we discussed. The second is essentially as a senior policy adviser to the Prime Minister, the NSC and the Cabinet on national security. The third is this sort of representational role, because there are lots of people with jobs a bit like mine around the world, and I am the natural channel of communication with them. They are alongside the Heads of Government. It is a fairly familiar role. We have had people doing this for many years. I talk to my American counterpart, for example, and that is part of our liaison with the Americans.

Although it was unusual in the way that it attracted quite a lot of attention, some of which was deliberate, I saw what we did on Salisbury as really an extension of the third. I went to brief the North Atlantic Council, a group of ambassadors at NATO, except when it meets at a ministerial level. It was felt right for a senior official to go and do that briefing, and we felt we would have more impact if it was me rather than just asking our ambassador or someone else to do it. We wanted to gain attention for Salisbury and create an international consensus. Of course, I was familiar with NATO, having worked for NATO when I was in Afghanistan, so I did that briefing.

Perhaps the most public moment was when we released my letter to the Secretary-General of NATO, which updated the North Atlantic Council on the material that I had briefed them on about 10 days before, because we had more material. So the fact that we released that letter made my particular role more public. That was a deliberate choice in order to deal with the Russian disinformation campaign—to try and help punch through that and land not only with our allies but with their publics and ours. It was just a feature of the particular circumstances of the Salisbury attack. It did not feel as though I was doing anything remarkably different to what that part of my job is; it was just a bit more public than usual.

Q260 Chair: How was the decision taken and who had the bright idea of trying to get this international expulsion of diplomats? After all, if it had just been left to a tit for tat between Britain and Russia, Russia has, I think I am right in saying, expelled more Brits than Britain has Russians

Sir Mark Sedwill: It was the same.

Q261 Chair: Well, it was the same initially, but they have since announced that certain other agencies are being closed down. But that has not impinged on the dramatic impact of having had so many allied countries react all for one and one for all. It reflects great credit on you and whoever else were involved in coming up with the strategy. Can you explain a little more who did it and how?



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Sir Mark Sedwill: On the earlier point, there is a difference between expulsions and a cap. They imposed a cap and the Foreign Secretary is considering what we might do in response.

Q262 **Chair:** I thought they had also closed down some agencies such as the British Council.

Sir Mark Sedwill: That was in their initial set of responses to our expulsions. The idea for internationalising it arose over the course of that week.

Q263 **Chair:** In what forum?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Being kicked around by policy officials. We then took it to Ministers. We discussed it in the NSC. We made the proposition that we would seek to internationalise and get other expulsions to dismantle these covert networks. In process terms, it was the normal policy process with a decision by Ministers at the NSC. Inevitably, it was much more intense because of the nature of the situation.

As I recall, the idea arose after I did my first briefing at the North Atlantic Council. I first set out the situation and told them what we were doing, and I said to them, "You need to recognise that this is an acute example of a whole range of aggressive Russian activities: cyber-attacks, the shooting down of MH17, and all sorts of other subversion. It is a threat to everybody's national security, not just ours." Therefore, when we went to others, we were saying, "Don't act just out of solidarity with the UK. Act in your own national security interests." I had said to them at that Council, "You would be well advised to review your own protective security around any dissidents or defectors," because clearly the attack on the Skripals had changed our appreciation of who might be at that kind of risk, and I said they should look at these covert networks that are essentially the platform for cyber-activities or an operation like the chemical weapons attack in Salisbury. We got a fairly positive response to that. It was as a result of that that we then thought we should now move ahead and see whether we can achieve that goal in concrete terms and get a co-ordinated set of expulsions.

Q264 **Chair:** Are we now going to change our policy with regard to people such as the Skripals living openly? There are other defectors such as Victor Makarov, for example, with whom I have been in contact, who are worried about their safety.

Sir Mark Sedwill: The police who are responsible for protective security and the various agencies alongside them are reviewing the security of all people who might be vulnerable in that way. In terms of the diplomatic campaign, I should, by the way, give some credit to the French. It was a very concerted diplomatic effort between the two of us. That was probably why it was so effective so quickly.

Q265 **Mrs Moon:** All of that outlines the much more public and forward-leaning profile for you within NATO. Do you intend to attend the NATO summit? Will you be there?



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Sir Mark Sedwill: If I am, it will be as a sidekick to the Prime Minister. That is my role in those summits. The summits are obviously for Heads of Government. Either I will go or one of my deputies; we always attend the Prime Minister when she is at a summit of that kind.

Q266 **Mrs Moon:** That is an interesting addition to your job description—sidekick. Moving on, you talked at the beginning quite a lot about Britain looking at its capability within the NATO umbrella, and not always having to assume that we need the support, for example, for the aircraft carriers always coming from British capability but being provided by NATO allies.

So, how much are you looking at integrating our own SDSR with the national defence planning process within NATO? Are we looking at them sitting side by side more in future? Is that a new development? Is that something that is going to be much more brought into focus?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Both bilaterally and multilaterally, the short answer is yes. We and the French, for example, with whom we have increased substantially defence and security co-operation over the past decade, consult each other heavily on their *livre blanc* and our national security structures and SDSR. Of course, it is the same with the Americans. I would not say just NATO allies, by the way. Other allies—Australia, for example—are very close to all of this.

NATO's own defence planning process is going through quite a modernisation anyway, so we would always want to ensure that we both influence and shape that as a significant NATO member but also that our work is aligned. One of the most important points of context for our own judgments is what is NATO doing. As we go into the summit, cyber is going to be a new area of activity, defensive and offensive. That is going to be one of those areas that we will need to discuss with our NATO allies and how we organise ourselves most effectively together as well as individually.

Q267 **Mrs Moon:** When the Committee was in the US, two areas of particular concern raised were of logistic command and the GIUK cap. The GIUK gap, in particular, has great strategic importance for the UK.

Given the cuts that we have seen in our submarine capability, as one of those areas where we felt that the threat had perhaps been reduced following the end of the cold war, is there an issue of the UK needing to look at particular areas of capability and investment, not only for UK defence but NATO defence, where we are going to have to step forward? Is that also part of our thinking, that it is not just about the UK defence, but where we have a particular capability and expertise, that can be utilised, not just for UK defence but also for NATO defence? Are you looking at that?

Sir Mark Sedwill: Overall, yes. But to be fair, that was also part of SDSR '15 and will again, I am sure, be one of the context points for the defence programme and any future SDSRs. We should always look with our allies to see where we have either unique capabilities or comparative advantages and can make a contribution—to see where we can punch



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above our weight, if I can use that phrase, particularly in areas where our allies are not necessarily as strong. That is a more effective approach than everyone trying to do a little bit of everything—only the Americans have the scale to do that on their own—so it should always be part of our thinking. That said, of course we need to retain at least some balance in our sovereign capabilities, otherwise we could only ever operate with certain allies. There needs to be some flexibility around it—it is never going to be the same as a single country's defence programme—but it is an important element.

I was in Norway just a few months ago. As you can imagine, they are very preoccupied with Russian activity around the High North. There is the new Russian northern command and more aggressive Russian activity in the North of the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea and so on. That is a natural NATO partner, which we are talking to about exactly that set of issues and what contribution we can make, what contribution others should make and whether we should do what we do with the Canadians, Iceland and so on, as well as the Americans, within NATO. It is an ongoing conversation with our closest allies.

Q268 Mrs Moon: Is there a particular area where you see there is a particular weakness? For example, maritime has been highlighted in many papers as an area where NATO generally has reduced its capability and has a weakness. Would you agree that that is an area where Britain, with its maritime history, has a particular capability to step up and help?

Sir Mark Sedwill: We play a very big role in NATO's maritime capability already, but there are of course vulnerabilities—when the CDS was here, he talked about the threat to deep sea cables, for example—and NATO as a whole needs to think about how we are best going to address those. Of course the UK, as a major maritime player, has a role in that. I would not want to speculate about specific elements of what we might do, because that depends on conversations with our allies.

Q269 Mrs Moon: Would you agree that it is very difficult to be a major player with only 19 ships?

Chair: Nineteen escort vessels.

Sir Mark Sedwill: We keep circling around this, but let me say again—I know you are going to get cross with me for saying it—that we should not forget that we have not only the second-biggest defence budget but the second biggest defence capability in NATO and the biggest in Europe, so we are a pretty major player in the NATO alliance and more broadly. You will remember, Dr Lewis, that I have said in front of the Joint Committee that, while of course I would always like more, anybody doing my job in any other country of our size would envy the set of capabilities—hard power, soft power, smart power and all the rest of it—that this country has available to it. While we are addressing these issues about how we can do more, what the constraints are and what the pinch points are, we have to be really careful not to talk ourselves down. We do have an enviable set of capabilities, and we need to use those capabilities with confidence.



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Q270 Chair: But, Mark, the cost of our capabilities and the size of defence inflation runs above the size of ordinary inflation, and we have to remember the context in our national priorities. We used to spend 4.5% to 5% of GDP, and even after the cold war ended and we took the peace dividend we were still spending not 2% but 3%. I would just say it is horses for courses. These are political arguments to be had with your political masters. In terms of you being a super-senior official, it might be better to leave that to the political debate rather than to enter into it. That is just my perspective on the anomalies of your role, especially given the absence of a single Minister, other than the Prime Minister, whom one can interrogate at will.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Absolutely true. I am not making a comment about the individual proportions, but if you do my role, you see across the entire piece. The mixture of defence, development and so on—all the other things we have talked about—is an impressive set of capabilities. Whether it is enough is a matter for politicians.

Chair: Exactly.

Q271 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Following on from Madeleine's point, Mark, the North Atlantic—it is in the title of NATO—is a bit of a hobby horse for me when I am sat around this table. I was glad that you visited Norway, who are one of our key allies in the North Atlantic and have been dealing with the Russians for quite some time. Going back to the SDSR, in 2010 and 2015 there was no mention of the North Atlantic in any shape or form. That is a huge omission. I am sure you would agree—well, I do not know whether you are going to agree—but we are in a process now where the North Atlantic sea lanes of communication are a linchpin between the United States and Canada and the rest of continental Europe if there is a state-to-state threat in getting mobility into the eastern flank. How do we rise to that capability when—Madeleine is correct—we have 19 vessels?

Sir Mark Sedwill: We rise to it as part of an alliance, of course. That is particularly in the maritime space—that is where you need to operate as an alliance. We all have different zones and specialities. It is a judgment for NATO as a whole as to what sort of capabilities NATO as a whole needs in order to be able to do that.

Q272 Martin Docherty-Hughes: We are a North Atlantic state.

Sir Mark Sedwill: We are.

Q273 Martin Docherty-Hughes: So, in this review, are we now saying that we need to put back the North Atlantic core into our security and defence policy?

Sir Mark Sedwill: I must admit, I hadn't noticed we hadn't explicitly, other than presumably within talking about NATO specifically, talked about the North Atlantic as a zone. Lord West, who is known to many of you, pulled me up on the fact that the 2015 review didn't mention the UK was



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an island, which he was exercised about. So it doesn't mention it as a zone, but we do talk about the maritime capabilities that we and NATO need.

The key point here is, if we are looking at the North Atlantic as a zone and at the Russian threat—it goes back to the point I was making in answer to the questions about Chilcot—what is, in this case, the NATO response to that set of challenges and threats, and what is the UK's contribution to that? It is important that we ask the question in that order, rather than assuming it is a national responsibility that we should acquire. We need to look at it in the alliance context first and then, as part of that, ask what we think we are going to contribute, alongside all the other contributions we make to the alliance.

Q274 Martin Docherty-Hughes: So in terms of those contributions—again, this is one of the points Madeleine made in terms of our visit to the United States, where senior members of the Administration were wondering how we could get a division to the front within 10 days while our aircraft carriers were out in the South China Sea—our maritime zone may be somewhere else, but the entire North Atlantic is wide open, in terms of our own capability.

Sir Mark Sedwill: But not in terms of NATO capability.

Q275 Martin Docherty-Hughes: We can only rely on Norway to fill that capability.

Sir Mark Sedwill: No, we rely on NATO, just as every other member of NATO relies on NATO, because that is what the article 5 guarantee is. We have 1,000 troops in the Baltic states. That is a concrete sign of our commitment to the overall defence of NATO territory. We are not expecting those 1,000 troops to stop the Russian army; we are expecting them, as part of a full-spectrum NATO defensive capability, to be able to deal with any threats that face them.

We make offers in some areas, and others make offers—that is the way NATO itself deals with it. We should not seek to suggest that the UK is uniquely responsible. We have a responsibility as the second biggest contributor to NATO to ensure that NATO is effectively policing those areas—not any individual member of it.

Q276 Mrs Moon: But in terms of national security, we do have a particular vulnerability to the Atlantic, and therefore it is within our national priorities to make sure that we can protect the North Atlantic and that any reinforcements coming from North America can actually access us. It is all very well to say, "Ah well, the greater NATO", but, quite honestly, the Estonians don't have the same view or priority necessarily in terms of the North Atlantic as the UK has, and we have a history of knowing how vital making sure the security of the North Atlantic is.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Please be clear: I am not at all downgrading the importance of the North Atlantic. All I am saying is that we have decided for 70 years now that the security and defence of the North Atlantic is a



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NATO responsibility, and we contribute to that security and defence as a member of NATO. Of course it is a national security preoccupation of ours. It is through NATO that we deliver the national security outcome that we wish to see in the North Atlantic with our allies.

Q277 **Mrs Moon:** We also know that NATO is under-equipped in terms of its maritime capability.

Sir Mark Sedwill: My point is that that is an issue for NATO as a whole, not just the UK. Frankly, we would be in a pretty insane position if every time there was a capability gap in NATO, we immediately said, "It's for us to fill it." NATO then starts to unravel. You have to be clear that NATO has accepted those responsibilities. We contribute to NATO. We play our part. It is essentially a team effort. We should not be trying to suggest that we need a whole range of separate national capabilities to deal with something that is NATO's responsibility and has been for many decades.

Q278 **Mrs Moon:** Except senior American military personnel have made complaints about Britain's maritime capability and its lack of capability to respond, so it is an issue for us. Clearly, it is a British issue that we need to look at in terms of our defensive security capability.

Sir Mark Sedwill: We could go round this. To be crystal clear with you, it is a national security priority for the UK that the North Atlantic is secure. NATO is the means through which we, including the UK, achieve that goal. If you are telling me we should do it separately to NATO, I am afraid I am not going to agree.

Mrs Moon: No, I am not saying that.

Sir Mark Sedwill: We have a contribution to make to NATO. We need to ensure that NATO as a whole is properly exercising the capabilities necessary to protect the North Atlantic. My point is, we do that through NATO, not as an individual maritime nation.

Q279 **Chair:** I think, Sir Mark, as we have been going for two and a half hours—

Johnny Mercer: We should let this man go.

Chair: We should let you go. If, with your permission, we could put three dots and the words, "To be continued at some future date"—

Sir Mark Sedwill: Not with my permission, but with the Prime Minister's, I think, Dr Lewis, as you will be aware.

Q280 **Chair:** May I just say that it has been a pleasure to have you here today? Thank you for giving up your time so freely. In principle, I hope you can see the wisdom and utility of having a session like this, and that you would not have any—

Sir Mark Sedwill: I can see the utility of someone having a session like this.

Q281 **Chair:** And that you would not be unwilling to appear before us again after an appropriate interval.



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Sir Mark Sedwill: Well, we all know the correspondence to which you are referring. As you know, as an official, I appear at the direction or with the consent of Ministers. Subject, obviously, to all of that—point noted.

Chair: We look forward to that occasion. Thank you very much indeed.

Sir Mark Sedwill: Thank you.