

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: The indispensable ally? US, NATO and UK Defence Relations, HC 387

Tuesday 22 May 2018

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

Questions 141-260

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, Secretary of State for Defence, Giles Ahern, Head of MOD/FCO Joint Unit on Euro-Atlantic Security Policy, Ministry of Defence, and Peter Watkins, Director General Strategy & International, Ministry of Defence.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Gavin Williamson, Giles Ahern and Peter Watkins.

2.30 pm

A one-minute silence was observed.

Q141 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome, Secretary of State, to this, the final session examining the US, UK and NATO relationship. We have provisionally called it “The indispensable ally?” Would your two colleagues like to introduce themselves briefly for the record?

Peter Watkins: I am Peter Watkins, director general, strategy and international in the Ministry of Defence.

Giles Ahern: Good afternoon. I am Giles Ahern, head of the Ministry of Defence and Foreign and Commonwealth Office joint unit dealing with Euro-Atlantic security policy. Essentially, that is NATO policy, EU common security and defence policy and conventional arms control.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Q142 **John Spellar:** Secretary of State, what would you say are the UK’s priorities for the NATO summit?

Gavin Williamson: The first thing we want to do is ensure that NATO has the right command structures and is properly resourced to deal with the increasing threats we face—not just as a single country, in terms of the United Kingdom, but all of our NATO allies are increasingly having to deal with these threats. We also need to be pushing as hard as possible to deliver all countries within NATO spending a minimum of 2% going forward. There is no better way of demonstrating that commitment to collective security than by going down the route of making sure that 2% of GDP is actually being spent on defence. Those will be two of the core things we will be aiming to deliver.



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Doing that goes a long way towards sending a message to those potential aggressors that look to NATO countries, and it also makes sure that we have that NATO command structure that is able to adapt and to deal with those increasing threats. We have seen a significant shrinkage in the NATO command structure over the past 20 years or so, and it is right that not just Britain but all countries are contributing a little bit more, not just in terms of money but also in terms of resources and of that command. Currently we have 971 service personnel serving within NATO, and I would imagine that that number will increase in order to make sure that NATO had the right amount of flexibility and resource there.

Q143 John Spellar: Following on from that, and your remarks about maybe having more people in NATO headquarters, and also the interesting phrase you used about delivering all countries in terms of increased resources and expenditure, do you think the UK has got to play a greater leadership role in NATO—especially in the light of the changed relationships in Europe on Brexit—not just at the summit but more generally?

Gavin Williamson: We should be really proud of the role that we have played historically within NATO. I would be slightly cautious about trying to imply that we have not always played a significant role within NATO, because it is fair to say that ever since its foundation we have been a leading nation, along with the United States. Our exiting the European Union makes NATO even more important than it has been in the past. It is a collective of not just European but also north Atlantic nations, and as a forum for building relationships and working together, the significance of the organisation is growing with our exit from the European Union. I also think that the significance of it is growing because of the increasing threats we are facing. Can we do more? Yes, we can, and we should be looking to do more. As I say, we should be very proud of what we have done in the past, but we should equally be looking at future opportunities to use our influence and capabilities in a more significant role as part of NATO.

Q144 John Spellar: Mention was made by the Secretary of State of the foundation of NATO, and I think we should put it on the record that that was under the great leadership of Clem Attlee and Ernie Bevin in the post-war Labour Government.

Gavin Williamson: For the record, I think it is absolutely right to pay tribute to Clem Attlee. Those inspirational leaders of the Labour party had a strong understanding of national security and the important role our armed forces play in keeping Britain safe. I think we will always be deeply grateful for their leadership and for what they did.

Chair: That was a very skilful party political exchange on both sides. Let us have Martin briefly and then Johnny.

Q145 Martin Docherty-Hughes: May I ask about Nord Stream 2? Some of our key allies in the Baltic have concerns that the UK's leaving the European Union allows for a vacuum of leadership, critically on an issue that many



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of them think undermines European security. Do you think that the United Kingdom, once we leave the European Union, can come to bat on an issue such as Nord Stream 2 in terms of defence and security?

Gavin Williamson: When you talk to so many of the European nations that are members of the European Union, they truly do value our opinions and what we bring in terms of the security of the whole of the continent of Europe. I think we will have to look at different ways of articulating our views, because we are obviously not going to be in the European Union—we are not going to be sitting around the table at the European Council. But I do not think that at any time we should look at that as stopping us being able to have an important influence on European nations.

In terms of Nord Stream 2, I think there are significant concerns. We have voiced those concerns in the past, and will continue to do so in the future. But when you look especially at those nations that are facing a threat—the greatest threat—whether it is the Baltic nations or some of those nations at the most eastern border of the European Union, they want Britain to continue that close relationship and to continue to support them in their security. Our voice will be incredibly loud with them.

Q146 **Chair:** Has the United States expressed any view that you are aware of about this manoeuvre to create greater dependence on Russian power supplies while potentially leaving Ukraine isolated?

Gavin Williamson: I think there are significant concerns.

Q147 **Johnny Mercer:** Secretary of State, when it comes to NATO and the defence planning process within NATO—we are doing our Modernising Defence Programme at the moment—what conversations have gone on between the MoD and NATO to ensure that they are complimentary? What unique capabilities are we bringing? What gaps are we plugging?

Gavin Williamson: At the very start of the Modernising Defence Programme, I took the opportunity to meet with the Secretary-General of NATO to talk about what we are planning to do. We have been having very close dialogue with officials from the Ministry of Defence and officials within NATO to talk about how best, in terms of the development of our capabilities, we can complement NATO. We should be looking at being able to do three things. First, if we look at our defence—not just of Britain, but of continental Europe and the north Atlantic—NATO is everything towards delivering security in that area. What we do in the development of our forces should therefore, quite rightly, be complementing NATO, so that we can work best with NATO, continuing the leadership role that we have had over the past few decades. The second part of that is having the capabilities to be able to work with allies.

Q148 **Johnny Mercer:** That is exactly what I am interested in. What are the specific capabilities that we will bring to NATO? NATO say, “We are good in this area. We are not so good in that area.” Clearly, we have some capabilities that we will want to contain unilaterally, but you have spoken before about working as part of an alliance. What specialities are we looking to inject into the NATO mission?



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Gavin Williamson: We bring an awful lot of specialities. Without wanting to pre-empt the Modernising Defence Programme and going into any of our findings or the development of that, if you look at the north Atlantic, we have seen a significant increase in the amount of submarine activity in the north Atlantic. Britain has a long history of dealing with the submarine threat in the north Atlantic. That is why we are investing in eight Type 26 frigates that are specially designed to deal with the submarine threat. That is why we are investing in the Poseidon aircraft, which will be based at RAF Lossiemouth, and we will be working with the United States and Norway out of Lossiemouth, dealing with that submarine threat. That is why we have made that investment in the next phase of Merlin anti-submarine helicopters. That is a very unique leadership role that we can do there. If you look at cyber-warfare, the UK is taking a major leadership role. Right across the spectrum, Britain is taking a leadership role in so many different areas, whether in the enhanced forward presence, naval command or what we do in the Royal Air Force. Every step of the way, we are a major contributor to NATO and continue to take a major leadership role. Those are some of the areas that we bring unique capability to.

Q149 **Johnny Mercer:** Has amphibiosity come up in any of these conversations on our unique alliance with the Netherlands and the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps? I know you will not comment on speculation on the MDP—and I would not expect you to—but how has the general direction of travel in the UK around this particular subject influenced those discussions?

Gavin Williamson: We have always been clear on the issue of amphibiosity. It is important that we have that amphibious capability. That is very much part of what we do in support of NATO. But if we look at different areas of support of other allies, who might sit outside NATO, it is an important ability to have, and if we look at the ability to act alone as a nation, which we need to be able to preserve, amphibiosity is certainly a key element of capability.

Q150 **Johnny Mercer:** You have talked about personnel—I think you said there were 971 personnel. What does being a member of NATO cost the UK?

Gavin Williamson: Our contribution to NATO is £138 million a year. The cost of staffing is an additional £96 million. When we think about what NATO offers in terms of security—

Q151 **Johnny Mercer:** It is pretty good bang for your buck.

Gavin Williamson: I would say it is exceptionally good value, given what it can actually deliver.

Q152 **Chair:** Peter and Giles, do you have anything to add to what we have been discussing so far?

Peter Watkins: The only point I would add about the NATO planning process—I am afraid this is a statement of the obvious—is that it involves 29 countries, all of which, bar one, provide military forces to the alliance, so it is inevitably conducted in relatively generic terms rather than in terms of specific solutions. The NATO planners seek to ensure that there is

the right balance of capabilities across the alliance, whether they come from the UK, the US, Germany, France or wherever.

Giles Ahern: Perhaps this is so obvious that it was not mentioned, but in terms of the capabilities we provide, there is the nuclear deterrent. We are one of two countries that provide a declared nuclear deterrent to NATO. That is one extreme. The Secretary of State alluded to this, but I come back to the point about people. We have talked about capabilities. Part of that is the experienced people who have deployed on operations and come back with operational experience. We take that back into the headquarters and the various NATO structures, and that advice and experience is very much relied on by allies and contributes to the overall good.

Gavin Williamson: It is a challenge that we often face in different countries. They are very keen for us to provide staff officers into those countries, because of the world-renowned experience that they bring and the fact that they have a lot of battle experience and a lot of leadership experience. It adds an awful lot of value to their command structures.

Q153 **Chair:** In the opening exchanges we had that little joust over the origins of NATO and the work of the Labour Government. It is true to say, is it not, that NATO remains recognisably the same sort of organisation today that it was when it was founded in 1949? Is there any reason to believe that the advent of the Trump Administration has materially upset or weakened the smooth onward functioning of the alliance?

Gavin Williamson: No, I don't believe it has at all. President Trump was absolutely clear about his commitment to NATO. If you look at deeds—that is what is most important—you have seen a doubling in the amount of money that the US is going to be spending in the next year, in terms of the reinforcement of the security of NATO countries. You have seen an increased commitment of the US in terms of support. They lead the enhanced forward presence in Poland, which the United Kingdom plays a part in—we provide reconnaissance support. Everything that America has done has reinforced its commitment to NATO, but it is vital that European nations equally play their part and pay their contribution to NATO. That does mean us stepping up to the mark in terms of contributing to Europe's defence.

Q154 **Chair:** I am going to ask you to do one very difficult thing: to try to get yourself inside the psyche of the President of the United States.

Gavin Williamson: Righty-ho, okay.

Chair: He said at the outset that NATO was obsolete, that they might turn their back on it and that the other allies were not pulling their weight. Do you think that was because of a genuine disregard and failure to appreciate the value of the alliance, or do you think it was conceivably part of a negotiating strategy to try to make the other members of the alliance ante up the dosh, so that America would not be carrying the lion's share of the burden and looking at the rest of the NATO allies as free riders?



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Gavin Williamson: I think that he was very keen to make sure that all European nations made a significant contribution to the defence of Europe, so I would say it falls more in the latter point. I think President Trump very much understands that the security of Europe contributes very much to the prosperity of the whole north Atlantic area. And I think that he will continue to make the point forcefully that all European nations should be contributing 2% of GDP as a minimum, and we have seen a gradual increase of European nations spending 2% of GDP on their defences. By the end of the year, I think that there are expected to be eight nations doing that, but it goes to show that significant progress still has to be made.

Q155 **Chair:** That was going to be my very next question: what is the state of play with the other nations? The Lithuanians had a delegation with the IPU only last week and they said they're going to reach the 2% target this time. I used the word "target"; I shouldn't have. The 2% minimum—it is a floor, not a ceiling.

Gavin Williamson: It is very much a floor, not a ceiling.

Q156 **Chair:** Peter, you look as if you're straining at the leash.

Gavin Williamson: Do you want to do a full list of all European nations that are going to be spending 2%?

Peter Watkins: Well, I wasn't going to do a full list. *[Interruption.]*

Q157 **Chair:** A progress report will do.

Peter Watkins: I just wanted to record what the Secretary-General said, which again was noted in the White House press statement following his visit to Washington, and it is about the direction of travel. So, if you go back to 2014 and the Wales summit, there were only three NATO nations that were spending 2%. The Secretary-General, who has all the figures for all the countries, believes that number will have risen to eight by the end of this year and that it will go to 15 by the end of the 10-year bracket, which is 2024. I think that's quite a significant movement.

Q158 **Chair:** Traditionally, the United Kingdom used to spend substantially more than the rest of the NATO allies and your colleague Tobias Ellwood has made the correct historical point that in the 1980s we were spending approximately the same on defence as we were on health. I never tire of the statistic that as late as 1995-96, even after we had taken the peace dividend and obviously years after the end of the cold war, we were spending not 2% but fully 3% of GDP on defence.

In an ideal world, and a realistic ideal world, is not the notion of a target of 3% of GDP for defence by the United Kingdom—set in that historical context and bearing in mind the state of the international community at the moment—a realistic and achievable goal?

Gavin Williamson: I am always a little bit concerned about setting mandatory percentage targets. I think that what we need to do is to look at the threats that this nation faces; we then have to look at the



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capabilities that we need to deal with those threats; and then we should resource those capabilities and that manpower up to the amount of money that is needed to deal with those threats.

I do not think that we should get into a game of trying to guess what that percentage is. This Select Committee produced an excellent report that looked at percentages that had been spent. I think that as recently as 2011 the UK had been spending 2.4% on defence. I imagine that was an increased figure because of the conflict that we were still involved with in Afghanistan, but we need to look at the threats, the capabilities that we need to deal with them and the right finance, in order to support those capabilities.

Q159 Chair: I will not push it much further. I just simply observe the fact that if we were go by the costs that we needed for the capabilities ideally for meeting those threats, I suspect that we would require a lot more than the 3%. However, I accept that it is a necessary rather than a sufficient condition, and I know that you're fighting a bit of a battle with the Treasury at the moment, are you not?

Gavin Williamson: We have a very warm and close relationship between the MoD and the Treasury.

Chair: Very good.

Q160 Leo Docherty: Secretary of State, you mentioned Afghanistan. Clearly, the contribution we make through our operational deployment there is a very significant contribution to the NATO effort, including the 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards from my own constituency. We know you have written to the Prime Minister requesting additional uplift in that deployment. What is your expectation of the role they will play?

Gavin Williamson: I was very fortunate, a little bit ago, to have the opportunity to go and see the amazing work our forces are doing in Afghanistan. At the time, it was the Yorkshire Regiment who were serving out in Afghanistan as part of a Kabul security force. We should not underestimate the value of what that our forces are doing out there. It is important that we continue to do what we can to ensure that, as Afghanistan works towards elections that will be coming up very shortly, there is as much stability in the country as possible. I am sure you will appreciate that we keep all deployments under very regular review of what resources are best there, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan or different parts of the world. I am afraid I cannot be drawn any further, but we keep it constantly under review. We are committed to ensuring peaceful and stable elections going forward in Afghanistan.

Q161 Leo Docherty: The Afghan Government is reportedly potentially open to some sort of peace deal with the Taliban. Do you have a judgment on that?

Gavin Williamson: We need to find a long-term solution to the challenges in Afghanistan. Ultimately, that will be bringing all the participants in this conflict around a table together. I know the



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Government of Afghanistan are very committed to doing that. They made a very open and generous offer to the Taliban to start that discussion. This is something incredibly painful for many people to accept, especially as such a price has been paid, but we need to look at the future of Afghanistan, and what you are seeing is an increasing number of different nations having an interest in Afghanistan, some of them for slightly more malign reasons. That is why we need to encourage a peace process and bring people together in a long-term peaceful solution to deliver for everyone in Afghanistan.

Chair: Before we move to the maritime with Martin, I have a couple of quick bids on the previous topics.

Q162 **Graham P. Jones:** Secretary of State, you say that we should have the resources to meet the threats. If the threats were to increase considerably, would we increase defence spending commensurately? Would you look to see defence spending increase if the threat level increased?

Gavin Williamson: As part of the Modernising Defence Programme, we want to do things more efficiently and better, and make our money go further. That is something that everyone would expect any Government Department to do. That is a significant part of the work we are trying to do. It is quite obvious that, with a changing threat environment, we must look afresh at whether we are putting our money into the right kind of capabilities to deal with that changing threat. We discussed at the last Defence Committee the fact that the threats are changing. We face the challenge of state-based aggressors; we are continuing to deal with people operating in ungoverned spaces, but we have the additional threat of a resurgent Russia and other nations changing their approach and being more assertive around the globe. Going back to the north Atlantic, we see a much greater amount of activity there from the Russians. That is why it has been right to make the investment in the Type 26 frigates; it is why it has been right to ensure that we make the investment in the Poseidon anti-submarine aircraft; and it is why it has been right to order the additional Astute-class hunter-killer submarine in HMS Agincourt. It is right to be making those investments. If we need to be making a greater investment in those areas or different capabilities, we have to look at that and we will have to spend the money in order to deliver those capabilities.

Q163 **Graham P. Jones:** So that is more money, if there is a greater threat.

Gavin Williamson: We may look at prioritising things in different ways. You might say that there is less of a threat in some areas, so you can prioritise resources in a different way. But I think that most people on this Committee would agree with me that the threats are increasing to this country and we have to respond to those increasing threats.

Q164 **Chair:** As I understand it, your success in winning back MOD control of the defence strand that had been part of the National Security Capability Review has one big difference from that previous planned review, that is, you will be giving this assessment and publishing this document without



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the constraint of saying that it must be completely fiscally neutral. Can you confirm that what you will be doing—as we understood from a meeting with some of the officials who will be involved in the process—is what you said earlier, looking at the various threats, stating what the capacities needed to meet them will be and putting costings on them, so that people know exactly what their menu of options will be?

Gavin Williamson: You are correct to say that one of the key elements—an important element—in terms of the Modernising Defence Programme was that it wasn't to be a cost-neutral exercise. If the evidence points to the fact that we can do things more efficiently for less money—I was born and bred a Yorkshireman and we are not always known for wasting money—we would rather make the saving.

Q165 **Mr Francois:** Good afternoon, Secretary of State. If I can just take you back to Afghanistan for a moment, we know we had the drawdown in 2014, and since then we have maintained around 500 troops for security in Kabul and also for training the Afghan forces, not least with the Afghan national academy, the "Sandhurst in the Sand", as some people have called it. If we are talking about an extra 400 to 450 troops, can you tell the Committee what they are for? Are they for more security and training or is there a suggestion that these troops might actually be employed in combat?

Gavin Williamson: Currently, we have over 600 deployed in Afghanistan. I apologise; I do not wish to appear evasive. We constantly review all force numbers right across our deployments, but I am really not in a position to go into any more detail on this issue.

Q166 **Mr Francois:** Hang on, we have had the drawdown from Afghanistan. Everybody has grown accustomed to that. People have grown accustomed to the fact that we have, as you said, 600 troops in there, helping to train the Afghans and helping to maintain security in the capital. But if we are now going to go back up to 1,000 and you want Parliament to support that, you have to be able to tell us what it is for.

Gavin Williamson: What we always do is look, in all our deployments, at how best they are resourced, not only in terms of the safety and security of those deployments, but also the aims of the operation—what you are trying to deliver on. What we have been doing in Afghanistan over recent years is not just training and support, but actually playing a key leadership role in the Kabul security force, ensuring that Kabul is as safe as can be, secured against a Taliban attack, working with a broad range of international allies. If there is any decision in terms of changes in troop numbers in any areas, we would quite rightly update Parliament on this matter.

Q167 **Mr Francois:** What I do not understand, forgive me, is why you cannot tell the Committee this afternoon what these troops are for. We know the Americans have been pushing us to provide extra infantry in Afghanistan. Are we going back into combat or not?



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Gavin Williamson: You seem to be assuming, having read newspaper reports, that a decision has been made in terms of deployments. All I can really say is that we keep all our deployments in all parts of the world under regular review. If we made a decision in terms of changing deployments in any part of the world, we would regularly keep people updated on that.

Q168 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, Secretary of State, you said you didn't want to be evasive. I do not mean to be rude but you—

Gavin Williamson: I am quite sure I am.

Q169 **Mr Francois:** You are being rather, I'm afraid. It is reported that you have written to the Prime Minister and have asked, basically, to nearly double our troop commitment in Afghanistan, but you are not prepared to tell the Committee this afternoon why you have made that request.

Gavin Williamson: What we always do in the Department is keep everything under regular review. Obviously, if any decisions are made in terms of changes in deployments in any part of the world, I would be quite right to keep Parliament updated on that matter.

Q170 **Chair:** The suggestion we have had, Secretary of State, is that these extra troops would fulfil a backfilling role and thus liberate more American troops to take more of a frontline role. Do you not feel you could comment on that?

Gavin Williamson: I would not be in a position to be able to comment on that at this stage. As I said, we would obviously keep people informed as to any sort of changes in terms of force deployment.

Q171 **Chair:** So this will not happen without there being a statement to the House, for example.

Gavin Williamson: We would always inform the House of any changes that we made anywhere around the globe—

Q172 **Chair:** Yes, but can I be specific? This would be an oral statement that people could ask questions about, which is a perfectly defensible thing to do, rather than just some written announcement, wouldn't it?

Gavin Williamson: There is no decision that has been made on this matter, but I am always very keen on the maximum amount of scrutiny, and I am sure that if we were making significant changes, whether it be in Iraq or in any other theatre or field, we would constantly keep the House informed through some form of oral statement.

Chair: That is extremely helpful.

Q173 **Graham P. Jones:** Have you written to the Prime Minister on this matter?

Gavin Williamson: I am not going to go into the details of correspondence with the Prime Minister.

Q174 **Graham P. Jones:** So we will presume that you have, and in that case, what would be your reasons for writing to the Prime Minister on this



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matter?

Gavin Williamson: I am not going to go into the details of correspondence that I have with the Prime Minister. But, as I have said, we constantly keep troop numbers in all fields under constant review. That is something we have a very wide-ranging discussion on in terms of all our—

Q175 **Graham P. Jones:** Is there a shortfall of capacity or assets in Afghanistan currently?

Gavin Williamson: What I think both the Afghan Government and other NATO allies are looking at is how they can give the Afghan Government as much support as possible as they approach the elections. It is within everyone's interests to make sure that those elections go as smoothly as possible.

Q176 **Chair:** I think we should move on now. Secretary of State, I am sure you have got the message loud and clear that a major change in deployments of this sort we would expect to see properly announced in the House so that it could be questioned and defended.

Gavin Williamson: I have no doubt that if such an announcement were to come that would be the manner in which it would be done.

Chair: That is very helpful. Martin has waited patiently to move us on to the maritime dimension.

Q177 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Secretary of State, I wonder whether you could tell us what the UK's role now is in forming NATO's new maritime posture.

Gavin Williamson: We play a very important role in NATO maritime. We take the role of commander of maritime command. More than 50% of naval resources that are currently deployed are under UK command. We have HMS Duncan, which is a flagship in terms of leading the standing NATO maritime group two. Equally, one of the key areas of defence, and one of the areas of greatest vulnerability, is the north Atlantic, because so much of our defence is delivered through one of our key NATO allies, the United States. Without the ability to keep the north Atlantic in a position in which people can have safe passage, an important supply line would be cut off. That is why we play such a vital role in anti-submarine operations, not just on our own but working closely with the United States, Norway and other nations. We see British naval officers at every level of command within NATO, playing a really important role in shaping policy going forward. You also see British royal naval resources playing an absolutely pivotal role in keeping the north Atlantic safe.

Q178 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I am sure you will appreciate that many members of the Committee will be delighted to hear that there is a recognition that the north Atlantic is a key area of defence, not only of the UK but of our European allies. It was not mentioned at all in the SDSR in 2010 and had only a brief mention of less than half a sentence in 2015. I think it was Admiral Lord West, who comes from my home town



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of Clydebank, who said that it was not even mentioned that the UK was an island.

Gavin Williamson: We definitely recognise that Britain is an island.

Q179 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Yes, it is a good step forward.

Members of the Committee will also want to know whether, when you attend the NATO conference, either you or the Prime Minister will make a case for the UK to host the new north Atlantic command. As a Scottish constituency MP, I would love to see it in Scotland, given that our most major naval port is on our most southerly coast. Have the Government thought about hosting the command structure of the new north Atlantic command? Will we be making an argument for that at the conference?

Gavin Williamson: We already have two NATO commands in the United Kingdom. It is probably unlikely that that command will be coming here, but it is something we have had broad discussions on. We should not underestimate the significant part that the Royal Navy plays in the Scottish economy—8,000 personnel are based at Her Majesty's royal naval base, Clyde, not just protecting and serving on the nuclear deterrent but in the hunter-killer submarines that are based there—while also playing a significant role in keeping Britain safe.

Q180 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I take it the answer is no, then.

I shall move on the next question, which, forgive me, is a long one. How capable is the UK's current ASW capacity, and could it be ramped up if tensions increased over the coming decade, with what assets, and which allies could share the burden of deterring and countering Russian submarine activity in the north Atlantic? I could break that up if you wanted.

Gavin Williamson: Can we increase our capabilities? Yes, and that is what we are doing. That is why we are making the investment in the nine Poseidon P-8s that will be based at RAF Lossiemouth. That is why we have invested in the upgrade of the Merlin helicopters to deal with the increased threat of Russian submarines in the north Atlantic. That is why we are making the investment in the additional Astute hunter-killer submarine. In terms of working with allies, it is important that the United States and Norway will be operating with us out of RAF Lossiemouth to deal with that threat, and it is a good example of how three nations and strong NATO allies are working together to deal with that increasing threat.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am glad to hear that, Secretary of State. I look at the UK taking nine P-8s, and yet Norway is taking five, so per capita Norway is, some would say, stepping up to the plate more.

Can we have a wee bit of clarity on the Merlin upgrade? Is that converting back the Merlins that I am led to believe were taken to emergency warning that were already submarine warning? Have they been converted to emergency warning coming back to submarine warning?



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Gavin Williamson: If I remember correctly, it is the Mark II Merlins, so I think it is new ones. Could I seek clarity on that detail?

Peter Watkins: I am not sure of the detail. It is in order to upgrade the ASW capability.

Q181 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** So that is the existing ASW ones?

Gavin Williamson: Yes.

Q182 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Could somebody write to us? I believe it is around the capacity of the 10 that were converted to emergency warning which might have to step up in terms of capacity.

Gavin Williamson: I believe that it is to upgrade them to the improved systems—mark 2 status.

Q183 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** You talked about getting capacity. I refer to the Type 26s. Forgive me for going over some old ground, but they are reduced from 13 to eight. Two will be tied up with the carrier group, so there are six left. You will need to correct me if I am wrong, but I think a third could be deployed, so there are not many to choose from. Would there be capacity to build some more Type 26s to fill a gap if required? Type 31s have no anti-submarine capability.

Gavin Williamson: What we have are the Type 23s that have been operating for quite a considerable time, but their capabilities are second to none. As we bring the Type 26s into service—we have HMS Glasgow that is currently under construction in Govan—that will start replacing the capabilities we have had with the Type 23. One of the challenges we need to be looking at is how we improve the availability of ships within the Royal Navy, and how we can get a greater number of ships constantly available, not just in terms of carrier task force groups, but also, vitally, in terms of operations in the north Atlantic and anti-submarine warfare.

Q184 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Finally, during a recent visit to Washington it was being alluded to that those carriers might even be placed in the north Atlantic. Is that being given consideration, if you are not considering the options—I am not saying you are going to commit to more Type 26s—for more Type 26s if there is no availability in the long term?

Gavin Williamson: We always look at every single option to deal with the changing threat environment that this country deals with. In terms of where the carriers are deployed, I have no doubt that the carriers will be deployed in the north Atlantic, south Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf, and the Pacific: they are a global strike capability and they would be used on a global scale. Will they spend time operating in the north Atlantic? Almost certainly, yes.

Q185 **Chair:** Can I make one point? We have talked about the 13 Type 23s being replaced by eight Type 26s, and at least five Type 31e. Is it very definitely your intention, if the Type 31e comes in on time and on budget at only £250 million apiece, that we would have more than five, and for



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the first time reverse this seemingly inexorable reduction in the number of frigates?

Gavin Williamson: I apologise for ducking the question, because this is something that we are really looking at in the Modernising Defence Programme. The key thing that was clearly established early on is the fact that we need—this is what have made a financial commitment to—the eight Type 26 frigates to deal with the submarine threat in the north Atlantic. We are clear that it is a commitment made by the Government, it is a contract we have entered into with BAE Systems, and we are going to be delivering on that. In terms of any flexibility and changes—

Q186 **Chair:** I am talking about the Type 31s, I know about the Type 26s.

Gavin Williamson: On the Type 31s, we are looking at that as part of the Modernising Defence Programme. We are proceeding ahead with what we had outlined with the Type 31es, but if there were opportunities to expand on that, we would look at that as part of the Modernising Defence Programme.

Q187 **Chair:** And there is an option, is there not, to have anti-submarine warfare capabilities—albeit not at the level of the Type 26 systems—in some or all of the Type 31es?

Gavin Williamson: Yes, that would be correct.

Q188 **Chair:** So you're reconsidering that?

Gavin Williamson: But what is absolutely critical in terms of our investment in the Type 26s is that they were specifically designed for anti-submarine warfare. They are at the very cutting edge of the capability that any nation will be able to offer, and it is important that we have that specialist capability to deal with the threat that we are facing.

Q189 **Chair:** Although, as Martin observed, there are only eight of them.

Gavin Williamson: I am not sure whether you have ever met a Secretary of State for Defence who does not always want more, but it is always about the budgets that you have.

Q190 **Mrs Moon:** When we had Mark Sedwill in front of us a couple of weeks ago, he told us that he felt we did not need to worry at all about the state of our maritime capability because NATO would fill the gap. Do you agree?

Gavin Williamson: I worry about many things and have many sleepless nights. We have a responsibility in terms of keeping the north Atlantic safe. That is why we are making what can only be described as a considerable and significant investment, not just in terms of the Type 26s, but going back to the Poseidon aircraft and what we are doing in terms of the Astute submarine. But it is right to say that we are able to achieve the most by working with our allies, and by working with the United States and Norway we are able to achieve much more than we could just by working on our own. We have a very strong and close relationship with both those allies. I know that this evidence session is about our



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relationship with the United States. The way the Royal Navy and the US Navy work hand in glove every single day to make sure that the north Atlantic is safe goes to show the closeness of that working relationship.

Q191 Mrs Moon: Secretary of State, I do not think anyone on the Committee would disagree with the emphasis you have put on the UK's responsibility for the safety of the north Atlantic. I suggest you look at the evidence from Mr Sedwill, because his emphasis was quite different from yours. He believed that it was a NATO responsibility, not a British responsibility, to ensure that our borders were safe.

Gavin Williamson: As members of NATO, we obviously all work together to make sure that not just the north Atlantic but the Mediterranean and the North sea are safe. I know that all of the Government are very committed to making sure we continue to deliver a very safe north Atlantic. Britain has always and will continue to play a pivotal role in doing that, but it is incredibly good to have the support of some amazing allies and to be working together with them to achieve those aims.

Peter Watkins: Another way of saying it is that we rely on NATO and NATO relies on us.

Chair: And, like a good team of doubles tennis players, you have to make sure the ball doesn't drop between the two of you.

Q192 Mr Francois: Secretary of State, you said—

Gavin Williamson: I hope I can answer your next question better than your last one. I feel as if I am already destined to disappoint you.

Chair: Secretary of State, that is what is known as a pre-emptive cringe.

Mr Francois: Let me be as helpful as I can, Secretary of State. You said just a couple of moments ago that every Secretary of State wants more. I take it by that you meant more warships, and I think we would have sympathy with that. In terms of anti-submarine warfare capability, the Type 26 is, as you say, a highly capable ship—it is world class—but there will only be eight, and no one ship, however capable, can be in more than one place at one time. The Type 31 is a light frigate conceptually, it does not really have ASW capability and, as it is currently configured, it will not even have a sonar on it, so its utility in anti-submarine warfare operations would be, to put it politely, limited. You have got 13 Type 23s now. They were designed from the outset for anti-submarine warfare. They are going through a capability update programme that the Department is paying for, in order to keep them current in terms of ASW technology. Therefore, would it not make sense, when you start retiring those ships, rather than sell them to Brazil or scrap them, for you to put at least some of that class into a war reserve that would have some cost, but such that you maintain their capability—which you could then mobilise in times of tension or, indeed, war? You would then have perhaps half a dozen extra ASW-capable frigates at your disposal for use in the north Atlantic, for a relatively minimal cost.



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Gavin Williamson: I certainly very happily undertake to look at that as an option. I think that when the Type 23 was initially launched there was quite a lot of cynicism about its utility and capability. I think they were rather uncharitably referred to as the Skodas of the sea. In fact they have ended up proving to be one of the most capable frigates that have served in the Royal Navy. The idea that you float is something that can be looked at—we should bear in mind that the expected lifespan of the Type 23 has been substantially exceeded. Maybe we should have looked at how we could have brought forward their replacement almost a couple of decades ago, in terms of the thinking and planning. So we do have to accept that these ships have a lifespan. Some of the work that we have had to do to extend their life has been quite extensive. In terms of what they do—the capability they bring to the north Atlantic but also their presence right around the globe; we have a Sutherland currently in the far east—they have given amazing service. Such options that you highlight are worth looking at.

Q193 **Mr Francois:** At the risk of hammering the nail, they were built over a range of years. Obviously, you have got some of the latter ships of the class that are still “comparatively young” compared with the earlier ships of the class. They can operate a Merlin helicopter. If you put a 2076 towed array sonar on, which they are fitted to carry, they are some of the most effective anti-submarine platforms in the world. So, if the skies were to darken—and history shows this, as if you go back to the second world war, we had to beg the Americans for 50 lend-lease destroyers—it takes well over a year, perhaps two, to build a complex warship. You might not have the time to do that. There might be some utility in having a small reserve.

Gavin Williamson: You make a very powerful point. Having that flexibility is something we should always look at, if there is an option there. The ships that are latest in their class will not necessarily be the ones that are worth preserving, or the ones that have undergone the most recent refurb. But it is certainly an option that I happily undertake to look at. Building as much flexibility in terms not just of our naval forces but our Army and air fleet, brings considerable value.

Mr Francois: Thank you—you answered that far better.

Gavin Williamson: I will try to improve during the session.

Q194 **Chair:** A bit of early warning: this is a theme that Mark Francois has been pioneering. It is highly probable that the Committee will come back to look at the whole question of whether we dispose of valuable equipment too early, when we could perhaps keep it in reserve.

Gavin Williamson: I think that that is a very important point. We have sometimes found ourselves in a situation where we have been disposing of different assets, when maybe we could have looked at having an extended life on them. We have got to be realistic. Obviously, there is sometimes a cost to keeping that asset going. But we should also be asking the question: instead of it just being kept in store, is there a way we can change and adapt the way we use those vessels in a slightly different way



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if we are going to be able to get an extra five years'-worth of use? I think it is a very valuable and useful option to look at in more detail.

Peter Watkins: To pick up on what the Secretary of State said, perhaps I could just add that one of the challenges we have is that with the pace of technological change, maintaining the currency of the equipment on some of these older ships and the people who operate them is a challenge.

Q195 **Mr Francois:** If you are spending a lot of money on a capability upgrade for these ships, you are spending money to do exactly that.

Gavin Williamson: There is a bit of an institutional weakness sometimes within our services where, quite understandably, people are always very attracted to having something new, against keeping something extended. But it is about getting that balance; if it gets to a point where it is just costing too much to keep something in service, we have to be brutal enough to say, "Actually, that is a ship that has to be moved on". You do not want to put so much resource into keeping something in service that, frankly, is not worth keeping in service. On your point, for the vessels that are not in that place, it is certainly worth it.

Chair: That is a question from which we must move on.

Q196 **Leo Docherty:** Secretary of State, given that the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap is a priority for the US, do you think they would welcome UK leadership in that area? Could our carrier strike group play an important role in that?

Gavin Williamson: Yes and yes.

Chair: Marvellous.

Q197 **Mr Francois:** Secretary of State, when the Committee went to the United States a few months ago, pretty much everywhere we went, people raised the issue of readiness. In the US, it is fair to say that they were particularly alive to what you might call the Baltic states scenario. They were very concerned about how long it would take NATO nations to be able to deploy reinforcements to the Baltic states above and beyond what are really tripwire forces that we have there at present. In that context, could we move a brigade to Baltics within 10 days?

Gavin Williamson: Yes, we have high-readiness forces in terms of the Parachute Regiment and the Royal Marines. They are ready to move in the space of two to 10 days. That amounts to a total number of 10,000. Do we need to look at how we can have a higher level of readiness? Yes, we do. We need to look at how we enhance our ability to move forces right across Europe. It is not just us as a nation that needs to do that; it is everyone, from the United States to Germany, France and all other NATO nations.

Q198 **Mr Francois:** On that point, 16 Air Assault Brigade, as its name suggests, is usually deployed by air. Under this sort of scenario, are you assuming that 3 Commando Brigade would deploy by sea?



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Gavin Williamson: No. I know that Mr Mercer probably would like always to see them deployed by sea, but for speed, we would probably look at deploying them through different means.

Q199 **Mr Francois:** Okay. How long do you think it would take to deploy a mechanised or armoured brigade?

Gavin Williamson: It would obviously take considerably longer than the two to 10 days. We are looking at how we can get that to within 20 days of being able to deploy. As General Sir Nick Carter discussed openly, we need to look at how we enhance that military mobility. One of the areas that you must look at is how you forward deploy resources in future. We have had a long period of time where we have been drawing down from Germany. We may have to look at different options, because we can put a lot more resource in terms of having the physical stuff to move them much more rapidly right across a continent. Do we need to look at that forward deployment? That is part of the case.

When we talk about deterrence we often talk about deterrence purely from a nuclear perspective. Deterrence is not just something that is about nuclear weapons. That is the ultimate last line of defence deterrence. Deterrence has to be our conventional forces. It is how we deploy them and how we send messages to people who may wish to do us harm. We must be able to deploy them quickly and swiftly and be able to react to situations that develop very rapidly.

Q200 **Mr Francois:** Okay. In terms of that 20 days, is that just the strike brigades, the concept that General Carter has been particularly keen on? Were you saying you can do that with an armoured or a mech brigade in 20 days as well?

Gavin Williamson: We would be looking at working towards a mechanised brigade, but we have work to do on that.

Q201 **Mr Francois:** Okay. Allied to that, one of the Department's stated aims is to be able to deploy a war-fighting division. How long do you think it would take to deploy that war-fighting division to the Baltics if you had to?

Gavin Williamson: Sorry, Peter, you were just about to say something.

Peter Watkins: I was going to say, going back to the very first question, this issue of readiness is one that we are addressing with allies in the run-up to the NATO summit. It will be discussed by Defence Ministers next month. It would be fair to say at this stage that we have not reached any conclusions, but there is a general desire across the alliance to enhance readiness, including the mechanised brigades, as you mentioned. I cannot say any more at the moment because the discussions are ongoing, but it is an emerging theme for the summit.

Q202 **Mr Francois:** Coming back to my question about the war-fighting division, it is a stated aim of the Department to be able to field a war-fighting division from its resources. How long would it take you to field that division in the Baltics?



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Gavin Williamson: To field a full war-fighting division, I think we would be looking at probably about 90 days.

Peter Watkins: It would be of that order, yes. Obviously, in that sort of circumstance, exactly what you fielded and how quickly would depend on the nature of the threat and so on. It would always be possible to deploy some advance elements faster. In terms of 90 days or whatever other figure, that is at one end of the spectrum.

Gavin Williamson: But to get a full division, you would probably be looking at that full 90 days. In terms of rapid deployment, we would be looking at two to 10 days in terms of up to 10,000 service personnel and, following in close proximity, many other forces. This is what is very important about Exercise Trident Juncture, which we are conducting in Norway. There will be 35,000 service personnel from right across Europe playing an important role in that operation. Many British service personnel will be travelling from the UK by road to take part in that.

Q203 **Mr Francois:** Okay. I appreciate that, as you said, some brigades can get there quicker, but I think the risk would be that, without wishing to write future history, if it took 90 days to field a war-fighting division to where it was needed, it could all be over by then.

Gavin Williamson: That is very much why having the ability to deliver a very rapid force in terms of 16 Air Assault and Royal Marine commandos is absolutely integral to defence and deterrent. That is why we have forces based in Estonia and Poland. That is why we do air policing in Romania and why we are looking at the different options as to how we actually increase that mobility and increase that speed.

We must not forget that in the last 10 years the threats that we have been looking at have changed incredibly rapidly. It is right that we change the way we look at dealing with them and how we can forward-base service personnel. It is right that we look at how we forward-base equipment and how we have our forces at a level of readiness that means they are able to respond to those threats. That is why we are looking at changing some of the ways that we do things.

Q204 **Mr Francois:** In 2010, it was a fundamental of the SDSR that we had had the drawdown from Germany, withdrawing the troops to the UK. Are you saying that as part of the MDP you are reviewing that?

Gavin Williamson: One of the key areas at which we look in the Modernising Defence Programme is how we improve mobility right across Europe. We look at all different options for how that can be best achieved. But the defence of the continent of Europe does not rest on our shoulders alone; it is something that NATO has to deliver, although we have to deliver it together. Different countries can play a significant role in improving and increasing that mobility of forces, not just of British forces across Europe but of US forces, French forces, Dutch forces and suchlike.

Q205 **Leo Docherty:** On that note, do you think that the German reliance on Russian gas is a fundamental flaw in that proposition?



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Gavin Williamson: I wouldn't like to go down the route of being dependent on Russia for anything.

Leo Docherty: So that's a yes.

Mr Francois: It was a good yes though.

Q206 **Chair:** I am going to take us into some areas of slight specialism, not particularly connected with one another but all quite relevant. Thinking back 20 years, when the cold war had gone and the then Labour Government produced their 1998 strategic defence review, we had a clear concept, which was that the threat from Russia in the NATO area had gone away and that if we were to be engaged anywhere else it would be of the nature of an expeditionary conflict. For that reason, we developed the two-taskforces idea, with the carrier taskforce and the amphibious taskforce, comprising a seabase that we would take to any far-flung area where we needed to engage with an opponent. Those taskforces were meant to be self-sustaining and self-contained. Do you think that we will continue to have the capability to operate independently in conflicts of that sort, as the French have done in Mali and as indeed we did in the Falkland Islands?

Gavin Williamson: It is my belief that Britain has to have the ability to act independently, if we choose to do so. Equally, it is important that we should be able to lead an intervention where maybe other allies follow. We have always been a framework nation, and we have to maintain that ability to be a framework nation. We have to have the broad range of capabilities to operate on our own and, as I say, also to act as the senior partner if other nations wish to work with us. It is something that our allies really value. Going back to the report that you are doing, it is something that the United States particularly values—our ability to do that, if we choose and wish to do so.

Q207 **Chair:** On that specific point, have the Americans expressed themselves as especially concerned that we should retain that autonomous capability? Is one of the reasons why, until recently at any rate, Franco-American relations were quite good the fact that France clearly has retained the ability to act autonomously in certain theatres?

Gavin Williamson: The US has a clear understanding that we have that capability to act independently. They have been clearly of the view that that is something that should be preserved going forward and, equally, most Members of the House also believe that it is a capability that we should be able to preserve as a nation.

Chair: You will be aware of the report that we did on the Royal Marines and the future of our amphibious assault ships. We are grateful for the reply that came through a few days ago to the conclusions and recommendations of that report, some of the strongest of which related to the need to keep HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, and not to lose the ability to insert land forces from the sea over a beach. I noticed in that reply, and I was encouraged by it, that specific attention was drawn to the letter that Harriett Baldwin had sent to me in January 2017,



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emphasising that the out-of-service dates for HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark remain 2033 and 2034 respectively. Can we now, at last, breathe a sigh of relief and accept that these ships are not going to be deleted early?

Gavin Williamson: I know that you gave me the opportunity. As part of the Modernising Defence Programme, we are looking at all these issues. We are quite clear that we need to have the amphibious capability as part of the range of tools we are able to deploy, but we are looking at all of this as part of the Modernising Defence Programme.

Q208 **Chair:** Okay. I obviously cannot expect you to pre-empt its findings, but I am sure that you will appreciate the fact that we had 96 written submissions for that inquiry and that our report branding the decision to delete these ships 15 years or so early as “militarily illiterate” led the news cycle for the full 24 hours. I hope all that has not faded from your memory.

Gavin Williamson: No, it is engraved on my mind.

Q209 **Chair:** Marvellous. I turn to something where there was the closest possible Anglo-American co-operation. It is a matter that is primarily the responsibility of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office but in which Defence does have an interest in relation to hybrid warfare and political warfare. Can you express a view, as your predecessor did, of the value of open source intelligence or information, as supplied by the BBC Monitoring service at Caversham Park, in the closest possible co-operation with the US similar service, known as Open Source Enterprise? Do you share the regret of this Committee that the BBC seems determined to close Caversham Park and, as a result, instead of having two complementary operations in the same building, the Americans are taking their part of the operation back to the other side of the Atlantic? Don't you think that is extremely regrettable?

Gavin Williamson: We rely, as any organisation does, heavily on open source material. Obviously we get an awful lot of intelligence right around the globe, but looking at open source and what is breaking, whether that is on news channels or in local news press or on Twitter or Facebook is an important thing to be always looking at. That is something that we continue to do and will continue to do. What you outline does seem a shame. I understand that the Foreign Secretary had indicated his willingness to take you for a tour around the site, along with other colleagues. I am sure he will probably be looking forward to that. Obviously, it is not an area that the MoD has a say over but we would always be looking at being open. If there were facilities that the MoD had that were suitable for the BBC and the US to be based at, we would always be very welcoming in terms of having a discussion with them. I am sure you will appreciate that we would probably charge them a rent for that, but that would not be unreasonable. I would be very happy to look at that as an option, if the BBC were open-minded to do it.

Q210 **Chair:** That is an extremely interesting offer and it is precisely because the Committee has visited Caversham Park and was very impressed by



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what it saw that we wrote the report that we did. However, it is true that the Foreign Secretary has said that he would be happy to visit Caversham with the Chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the International Development Committee and myself. However, that visit never seems to quite happen. I hope this hearing can give it some impetus.

Gavin Williamson: I am sure he will be trying desperately to get that sorted out in his diary. He will no doubt shout you lunch as well as a result of the length of time that this has taken to organise. On a practical level obviously the MoD doesn't have any involvement in terms of the policy of the BBC, but, in terms of helping and facilitating practical solutions and practical ways forward, we will always be willing to look at how we can use our estate to the very best of our ability, especially when it is doing something that is valuable there; but obviously we need the willingness of the BBC and the US to have an interest in that, but we would always be very open to having that type of discussion.

Chair: I greatly appreciate that. Thank you.

Q211 **Graham P. Jones:** We have touched on some of this previously, Secretary of State, but the Trump Administration have expressed concerns about European defence spending. Have they or their representatives spoken to you formally or informally with regard to our defence spending?

Gavin Williamson: We often discuss defence spending and I must confess I look a little enviously at how much is spent in the United States; but what the United States does recognise is the value that we provide as their very closest and most reliable of allies. We are not just here today and gone tomorrow. We actually provide one another with a level of support that it is very difficult to put a price on. I think, from my discussions that I have had with Secretary Mattis, he has always put an immense value in terms of our capabilities, in terms of the service that our armed forces provide. He always says that Britain is one of the few nations that he would be very comfortable with, in terms of commanding US forces, because of the quality of the leadership we provide, and the quality of our armed forces. They recognise that our commitment to 2% is something that is to be praised; and our commitment to 2% is an important signal to other European nations to be spending at that same level.

Q212 **Graham P. Jones:** Have they informally or formally told you that the UK cannot cut its defence spending further?

Gavin Williamson: No.

Q213 **Graham P. Jones:** Do you think that the US expects the UK to increase its defence spending to take up its responsibilities in NATO and around the globe?

Gavin Williamson: I think that that US probably expects more of its closest friends. I think they recognise the amazing work that we do and they are appreciative of what we do. Would they like all European



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countries to be doing a bit more? I would imagine they would, but it is not a discussion that I have had.

Q214 Graham P. Jones: So they have not asked you to increase defence spending—you personally, informally or formally, or the United Kingdom Government.

Gavin Williamson: What the US is interested in is they want all European countries—all NATO members—to be spending a minimum of 2% of GDP. That applies to us, it applies to Germany, it applies to France. What they are most interested in is our capability, and they put a very high value on the capabilities that we have, so they would be very concerned to see that capability eroded.

Q215 Graham P. Jones: Just to repeat my question, have they asked you personally, or the Government, to increase defence spending, formally or informally?

Gavin Williamson: What they have asked is to make sure that we have the right capabilities, but we have not had a discussion about defence spending, no.

Chair: Thank you.

Q216 Gavin Robinson: Good afternoon, Secretary of State. In what way have they engaged in the MDP process?

Gavin Williamson: At the very start of the MDP process I had the opportunity to have discussions with Jim Mattis as to what we were doing. We discussed at some length how our countries can continue to work closely together. We have had delegations both from the UK and the US that have met up to discuss the Modernising Defence Programme, as we had UK delegations that fed into US defence strategy as they produced their paper as to what they wanted to do in defence going forward. We benefit massively from our relationship with the United States. I said that you could not really put a price on it, but on a yearly basis I think conservatively we benefit to the tune of probably a minimum of £3 billion. That is taking a very conservative approach. That is about using one another's capabilities well together, in terms of their satellite technology and joint programmes that we have working together. Frankly, we would always struggle to put that level of investment into a new programme in order to bring it to fruition.

We are a massive net beneficiary of the relationship. Sometimes the Government will be criticised for having that close defence relationship. Britain benefits enormously from having that defence relationship. If you look at the new Queen Elizabeth class carriers, so many of our service personnel who had been serving on our carriers, when they were decommissioned were able to keep and hone those skills by serving on US ships. We have US service personnel serving on HMS Queen Elizabeth, as I say. As I have touched upon, we have had British service personnel serving on US vessels. That is something that really benefits both nations.



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It is very difficult to put a true value on the closeness of that relationship and the bonds that we have. These are relationships that will long outlive whoever is Secretary of State, because there are men and women who have served side by side with one another, who have fought together, and who have worked to deliver both our nations' aims together. That is something that should always be deeply valued.

Q217 Gavin Robinson: We know what capabilities the United States have that we rely upon or benefit from. They know what capabilities we have that they rely upon or benefit from. What are their priorities for the future of UK force strength?

Gavin Williamson: It is the ability to deploy rapidly as part of NATO. Our special forces offer something that is absolutely unique in terms of the carrier battle group. That is something that they put an enormous value on. We talked about anti-submarine warfare in the north Atlantic. Again, if Britain was not playing a critical role in that, NATO would be significantly more vulnerable. Our nuclear deterrent is an integral part of the whole deterrence of NATO. Those are all massive ticket items that the US sees as pivotal for the defence and security of NATO members.

Also, we are world leaders in terms of technology and the development of technology—new technologies that are brought forward that we are developing alongside the United States, but also technologies that we develop that the United States are much further behind us on. We could then go on to the role that our minesweepers play in the Gulf. That is world-leading capability in something that, frankly, the Americans would dearly love to have. The fact is that our Royal Marines train US marines in certain areas of warfare.

It is difficult to draw out one, two or three things, because there are so many different areas where our armed forces have developed a relationship, over 70 years or more. There is a real sense of two nations that can work closely together, that can absolutely trust one another, and that by working together are stronger together.

Q218 Gavin Robinson: We complement one another in that truest sense of what they hope to achieve and what we hope to achieve. In terms of the MDP, how much engagement has there been outside the standard structure? You will have service-to-service engagement, you will have engagement fostered by and through NATO, and you will have MoD-to-DoD engagement, but are we engaging with other political actors—those in Congress, say, and state governors? Are they feeding into our MDP process?

Gavin Williamson: We have a broad range of interaction. This Committee plays an important role in terms of dealing with and building relationships with the United States. When I was over in the US, I took the opportunity to see people who have a strong defence interest who serve in Congress and the Senate, and it is important to have that strength of relationship there. The strongest relationship will probably always be through the services, going back to the point that these are many men and women



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who have actually served together. Their current Defence Secretary has served alongside British officers in many different fields of conflict and puts an exceptionally high value on the skills, capability and leadership that they bring. There is a very strong relationship. Should we be doing more? I think we can—

Q219 Gavin Robinson: Very genuinely, are we engaging with members of the Armed Services Committees in Congress? Are we talking to Senators and Congressmen about the MDP and asking them for their views about our process?

Gavin Williamson: This is something we discussed when I was over in the US. One of the things that was discussed from the US side was how they had fed into US defence strategy and the key role that they had played in terms of the development of US defence strategy. The key thing that came through in all the discussions I had was the value that they put on us as an indispensable ally and the fact that we are consistently there. We are a nation that has always been willing to do a lot of heavy lifting in terms of the relationship—look at the Gulf, the Mediterranean, the north Atlantic and NATO in general. They put a true value on that. We certainly have engaged with them, but the main thrust of engagement has been through the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Defence in the United States. That is where the bulk of our engagement has been.

Q220 Gavin Robinson: I would like to get to a position where we have an assessment of how much Congressmen are engaged in our MDP process. We as a Committee end up seeking to challenge and revise, but we do not get the opportunity to shape. Further to the questions from Mr Francois about the rationale for seeking to double our presence in Afghanistan, for example, we cannot engage in those discussions. Are elected representatives in the United States shaping our defence policy more than elected representatives here in the United Kingdom?

Gavin Williamson: Absolutely not, no, but it would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to talk to people who have been involved in shaping US defence strategy and seek their thoughts, very much as we have sought the thoughts—

Q221 Gavin Robinson: You have structural discussions but not specific discussions?

Gavin Williamson: This is a national sovereign decision that will be made here in the United Kingdom. This is why we have run a public consultation. This is why we would seek the views and the thoughts of this Committee as to how we actually shape the Modernising Defence Programme. I would be somewhat surprised if the level of interest in how our forces look for the future was greater in the United States than it is here in the United Kingdom. That is why I will always be very open to different ideas and, if we can incorporate them into what we do and what we deliver going forward, be happy to do so.

Peter Watkins: We have a strong defence staff in Washington, who routinely engage with Congress, the State Department, the NSC, the

Department of Energy, the think-tanks, industry and so on. That is part of our normal relationship.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you, Secretary of State. I do have some further questions—

Gavin Williamson: Mr Robinson, can I make it absolutely clear that I always put a far higher value on your views than those of any Congressman?

Gavin Robinson: Flattery will only get you so far, Secretary of State. Chair, I will cede the floor, if there are no further questions on those aspects, but perhaps we can come back on issues pertaining to Northern Ireland later.

Chair: Yes, indeed.

Q222 **Mrs Moon:** Before I look at some other issues that I want to address, I wonder whether I can take you back, Secretary of State, to some of the replies that you gave to Mark Francois' questions. You talked about possibly retaining maritime capability—slightly mothballed, but retaining it, possibly for future use—and about our capacity to provide brigades and divisions. Given the problems we are having in recruitment, are you happy that we have the numbers—in particular, the numbers trained and deployable—to cover those sorts of capabilities, which you have said are essential?

Gavin Williamson: Yes.

Q223 **Mrs Moon:** Have there ever been any questions raised with you from the United States about the cuts in our capabilities in either of those forces?

Gavin Williamson: No.

Q224 **Mrs Moon:** Can I ask you, then, how the role that the UK plays in NATO impacts on the UK-US relationship?

Gavin Williamson: It is a vital part of our UK-US relationship. It would be fair to say that the US turns to us, whether it is through the command structures in NATO, in terms of the role that General Sir James Everard plays in DSACEUR; whether it is in terms of our service personnel, who are layered within every command of NATO; whether it is in terms of what we are doing on the ground, such as the enhanced forward presence in Estonia, where we have been very much pushing the boundaries of changing that relationship in terms of how closely we work with the Estonians; whether it is the fact that we are continuously the nation that is willing to step up to keep Europe safe; whether it is in terms of, as you touched upon, NATO, as I mentioned earlier, or our support for the US enhanced forward presence in Poland; whether it is in terms of our air policing with the Typhoons in Romania; or whether it is in terms of half the maritime NATO commands being under British command. This all goes to show that we are absolutely indispensable to what NATO wishes to do.



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If we weren't there, NATO would have an enormous hole. The US would face challenges in being able to fill that hole because, again, the US don't just have commitments in Europe and the north Atlantic; they have commitments right around the globe. It is right that we play that role, because it is about our defence. It can't be right for us to always expect others to pick up the tab for our defence. We have got to be showing that we are engaged and we are willing to invest in our security, willing to put the resources in and willing to have the men, the women and the equipment ready to deploy—and to deploy, as we have touched upon, potentially in various areas such as Estonia, Poland and Romania—and we will continue to do that.

Peter Watkins: If I could just add to that, I think the US also looks to us to provide a degree of, if I may use this term, thought leadership in NATO, whether it is about the way that the alliance modernises itself to meet new threats, the adaptation of its command structures, which the Secretary of State mentioned earlier, making new capabilities available to the alliance—we were one of the first countries to make an offensive cyber capability available—or also in terms of NATO's wider role, for example NATO's role in Iraq and the potential mission in Iraq, where we have worked hand in glove with the Americans to make the case for that sort of role.

Gavin Williamson: Like any organisation with so many members, you do have different views on this. You do sometimes need the major contributing nations, which are the UK and the US, to stand together to very forcefully make those arguments about a modernised command structure and the need to reform. I pay particular tribute to the Secretary-General, who has been a key driver in making that change. We have been in a position where we have had a command structure that was more reflective of the post Cold War situation, where we didn't actually feel that there were such major threats from state actors, so we need to have that modernisation and that change and a more streamlined command, if we are to be able to deploy forces effectively.

Q225 **Mrs Moon:** Do you feel able to say, "No, that is not a good idea"?

Gavin Williamson: Yes, I feel perfectly happy to say no.

Q226 **Mrs Moon:** May I move on to the developing relationship with the European Union, working alongside NATO in the defence sector, in relation to European defence planning assumptions and, in particular, PESCO? The UK has indicated that it is interested in engaging with the Dutch-led military mobility PESCO project. Could the UK gain more out of being involved in PESCO rather than integrated projects within NATO?

Gavin Williamson: We don't want two organisations basically doing the same thing. I think if we are to play a role in PESCO it is only to do things that complement NATO. The only organisation that has the ability to command and organise military forces on continental Europe is NATO. It is not the European Union. If any programme is to be developed, it is to use PESCO as something that complements what NATO does. That is why the Dutch proposal in terms of military mobility is something that is worth



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considering. It is an area that we maybe need to look at investing in. All European nations do.

Going back to the point that Mr Francois was making a little bit earlier about the need to move forces rapidly across Europe, if that is something that the Dutch initiative could help with, we should look at whether it could help us and help NATO, but there is no value in ever seeing the European Union develop a command and control structure for the military, because that is pure and simple duplication—and, frankly, it will not do it very well.

Q227 Mrs Moon: I have not seen anything that suggests that PESCO is planning to do any of that, but there is perhaps potential for tension if there are projects being developed within PESCO that, because of current rules, where the UK defence industry has particular skills and capabilities, they are excluded from engagement. Do you see that tension being one that we need to be addressing now? Do you see it as one that will cause difficulties in our relationship within the NATO alliance, if we are excluded?

Gavin Williamson: I do not see what European Union countries gain from excluding Britain, in terms of our expertise, our technology and our people and the businesses that have been the cornerstone and are often the only businesses that can make these things happen. I cannot see what the European Union gains by excluding them. Obviously, it is part of broader negotiations. Galileo would be a good example. Do I think it is acceptable that we stay part of a project where British businesses cannot actually compete? Of course I don't. Why on earth would I? It is our technology, it is our money and it is our people who have been able to make that happen. There has got to be a fair and equal playing field in terms of this going forward. I just cannot see the logic of what any European Union country would gain by excluding us. I would hope that common sense was used and that a real understanding of the benefits of British science, technology and expertise are able to bring was acknowledged.

Q228 Mrs Moon: May I ask, are you involved in those negotiations, or are they being undertaken solely by DExEU?

Gavin Williamson: They are undertaken by the Department for Exiting the European Union.

Peter Watkins: If I could add a footnote, in terms of PESCO, one of the criteria that the European Defence Agency has to apply is complementarity with NATO.

Q229 Mrs Moon: I am aware of that. The question wasn't whether it was complementary or not; it was whether Britain was going to engage with it and whether the capabilities that we have, in particular the research work we can assist with, were going to be excluded because of the current rules as defined by membership of PESCO.

Gavin Williamson: Just for clarity, because I wouldn't want to have inadvertently misled the Committee, the negotiations on these matters are



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led by the Department for Exiting the European Union but, just for clarity, we have MoD officials as part of the team. These are negotiations that are led by the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, although we provide support as part of those negotiations.

Q230 **Mrs Moon:** When I was at the Atlantic Council in December, it was stated very clearly by the US Administration that PESCO is not a threat to NATO but a strength to it. I would have thought that we would want to do our best to be part of that strengthening. I am sure you would agree.

Gavin Williamson: We would always look at how we can strengthen complementary organisations. In terms of what the Dutch have come forward with on military mobility, we think that this is an excellent project. We think that it goes to the absolute core of what we would want PESCO to deliver to support NATO. An awful lot of countries turn to the UK. They know that we are leaving the European Union, but they very much respect and value our leadership. They want to know when taking part in something on military mobility, "Is this good?" They look for our leadership and to see the direction that we are travelling in.

Q231 **Chair:** Our general approach to this, I believe, is that we shall judge each individual PESCO initiative on its merits case by case.

Gavin Williamson: Very much so. It is the only thing that we can do, and the only right thing, because we do not want to be bound into an organisation that gives an open-ended commitment. We wouldn't wish to be bound to any organisation where it was just assumed that we would be there. We have to make an assessment as to whether it is the right thing to do, whether it is complementary to NATO, whether it enhances what we are doing and whether it is worth us putting the resources into it.

Q232 **Chair:** Several times you have referred to the United Kingdom as being an indispensable ally both of the United States and of NATO. Before we move on to our last one or two topics, outwith the main parameters of this meeting, is there anything that any of the three of you would like to say specifically on the indispensability of the United States' contribution to deterrence and defence in Europe?

Gavin Williamson: If I look at the support we have had from the United States, I touch on the fact that it is very hard to put a price on it. Even conservatively, if you did try to do that, it is a pretty big price in terms of the benefit that we gain by having such a close relationship—

Q233 **Chair:** Is it indispensable?

Gavin Williamson: It is completely indispensable for us. Also, I wouldn't undervalue our value to the United States. It is not always headline operations; it is sometimes our reach with different nations around the world, the fact that we have relationships with and a reach into different countries that, frankly, the United States will never have, and it could never hope to have that closeness of relationship. Also, like all good friends, good friends are sometimes critical of one another. That is a role we can play, because sometimes we can say things to the United States



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that few other countries would be able to say to them, and that is of value to the United States as well as to ourselves.

Q234 **Chair:** Anything to add, Peter or Giles?

Peter Watkins: I would only add that the UK has always said that one of NATO's greatest strengths is that it is a transatlantic alliance and the word Atlantic is in its title. That is a point that bears repeating.

Q235 **Chair:** Giles?

Giles Ahern: No, thank you, Mr Chairman.

Q236 **Chair:** Let us move on, as we indicated in advance that we would, to discuss the rather disappointing development on the Committee's report into the investigation of fatalities in Northern Ireland and our recommendation that a statute of limitations option, coupled with a truth recovery process, was far preferable to the re-investigation of hundreds of cases, some dating back 40 years or more.

We were delighted to see that the response your Department gave to our report, in the normal way, stated that there would be a special section of the consultation document, which is about to be issued on the way forward in Northern Ireland, that would look at what were described as "alternative approaches" to dealing with these legacy issues. In particular, it said that people would be invited to comment on the merits or otherwise of a statute of limitations/truth recovery process option. Sadly, it now appears that that special section flagging up that option has been removed from the consultation document, although it is still possible for people to write in to recommend it.

Within the accepted constraints of collective Cabinet responsibility, which the Committee fully appreciates you have to operate under, can you tell us as much as possible about why the proposal was not included in the consultation when it was published a fortnight ago, what role the MoD will have in the consultation process, what you would recommend people do who are worried—as are all the members of this Committee and a wide section of society—at the prospect of elderly veterans being dragged through the courts and probably acquitted in the end, but only after a formidably unpleasant ordeal, and whether any other approaches might be considered?

I mentioned the Falklands campaign earlier. Only on Friday evening I attended the annual dinner of the veterans of the battle of San Carlos, and they said to me, "What's going to be next? Are Falklands veterans going to be put on trial for deaths that occurred in the course of that campaign?" Are there any ideas you wish to share with us about ways in which veterans from other campaigns could also be protected?

Gavin Williamson: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I am incredibly grateful for the important role that the Committee has consistently played in this and in developing a whole set of arguments. Your recommendations on a statute of limitations were exceptionally well considered and well argued. The Department has been consistent in expressing a view on how best to



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approach this, which has been very much aligned with what the Committee thought.

Obviously, we respect the fact that the Northern Ireland Office considers a whole range of views and approaches to this issue, but it is very important that organisations such as the Committee—we wanted the Committee to have a formalised say in this matter—have the option of expressing different approaches that they think might be most appropriate. That is open not just to this Committee but, much more widely, to the general public.

What is more important is that so many service personnel who have served in Northern Ireland are under a great amount of stress and worry. That is not something that anyone wants to see. We need to find a solution to meet their needs and to deal with this problem as swiftly as possible.

Q237 Johnny Mercer: Can I just ask a question? We had a meeting today with the Northern Ireland Office. I understand the different areas that this issue falls into, but you have asked for a very specific thing there: for this option to be counted in the consultation document. Why is it not there?

Gavin Williamson: Ultimately, there is a broad range of views in Government. Different Departments will sometimes take a different view on these things. It is not our consultation document, so we can make the argument and that is what we will do. We have to look at the broader issue, as the Chair rightly touched on, of service personnel who have been involved in many conflicts, whether during Mau Mau rebellion, or through Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. There is a slightly bigger issue that we need to start looking at in order to make sure that combat immunity is properly addressed.

Q238 Johnny Mercer: Yes, of course. The real frustration with this is that last year we went through the IHAT process. At the start, we were told, "Nothing to see here; this investigation will go on and on." In the end, your predecessor just closed it overnight. He showed a bit of political courage and leadership, and that was closed down overnight.

If we do not dominate this debate, the idea that servicemen and women can go around committing crimes is ludicrous. No one is asking for that. But if we do not have a formalised structure of getting this process done, such as a statute of limitations, it will never end.

The profoundly disappointing thing from your Department—not you—is that they did not look at IHAT and think, "Right, that is a series of bad decisions that have left us in a very dark place," and done something about it. I have seen nothing over the last 12 months from your Department that says in any way, "We have changed our view," or, "We take seriously what we, not the enemy, put our people through in historical allegations. We have learnt from that process and we are now on the front foot and we are going to deal with that." Why is there no urgency in Government to get this sorted out?



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Gavin Williamson: My view is quite clear: we have the Northern Ireland issue, but we have a much wider issue of service personnel, so we need to look right across the spectrum.

Q239 **Johnny Mercer:** Yes, but the question is: why is that not happening in your Department? You have had a year now since IHAT, and nothing has been done in your Department; whether it is your legal department or the guys who are continuing to run this process, nothing has been done to say, "We have a serious problem in this country when it comes to historical allegations." There has been no outreach to the US or to France, yet we just continue this process in the hope that people like me will go away. But that won't happen.

Gavin Williamson: Mr Mercer, that is certainly not the case.

Q240 **Johnny Mercer:** So why has nothing been done?

Gavin Williamson: What we need to do is look at how we—

Johnny Mercer: I know what we need to do.

Chair: Johnny, you must let him answer.

Q241 **Johnny Mercer:** But it is not an answer. Why has nothing been done?

Chair: You must let him answer, and then you can come back.

Gavin Williamson: Do we need to look at alternative approaches more broadly? Yes, I think we do need to look at alternative approaches. We need to look at different ways. Actually, when we asked service personnel who go and act on the wishes and are deployed by the British Government how we can give them maximum protection, that—

Q242 **Johnny Mercer:** I am sorry, but we know this. This is literally wasting time. I know that we need to do more. Everybody needs to do more. The question is: why has that not been done in the Department?

Gavin Williamson: We are always looking at ways that we can improve things and we will continue to try to find a broader solution to what is a major problem.

Q243 **Chair:** But do you accept the fact that, in the case of the Northern Ireland veterans, this is happening now? These people are going to court now. You would not want to hold up a solution to that problem for the sake of having something we also admittedly need, which is a wider solution for everything else, unless you can come up quickly with that wider solution in time for the Northern Ireland cases.

Johnny Mercer: Exactly.

Gavin Williamson: What we had always been consistent with is our approach in how this issue should be dealt with in the Northern Ireland Office. That route was not included in part of the consultation, but we do think that there is a wider issue that needs to be addressed.

Q244 **Mrs Moon:** Can I just come back to the statement that you have just



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made? People who have communicated with me suggest that the basic problem is that the decisions are coming out of the Northern Ireland Office and not the Ministry of Defence, and that the Ministry of Defence has been sat upon. Within the Ministry of Defence there is an understanding.

Gavin Williamson: Legacy consultations in Northern Ireland are led by the Northern Ireland Office. It is their consultation and, as I touched upon, we have been very consistent in the approach that we think is the best approach. It is a consultation, and it is about looking at different options. That is why I would strongly urge people to take part in that consultation.

Q245 **Gavin Robinson:** Is it not the truth, Secretary of State, that the consultation that the NIO is bringing forward is the consultation of an agreement that was reached and negotiated between the parties of Northern Ireland?

Gavin Williamson: The consultation in Northern Ireland is something that Her Majesty's Government have brought forward, and something that obviously all Departments are able to have a say in, and input to.

Q246 **Gavin Robinson:** The content of the consultation arises out of negotiations that took place in Northern Ireland. It is the Stormont House agreement consultation, and therefore the content of it was agreed back in 2016.

Gavin Williamson: The Stormont House agreement had a heavy bearing in how that consultation was developed. If we were looking at a different approach, and looking at things more in the round, you would probably do things differently outside that context.

Q247 **Gavin Robinson:** I think that it is fair to say that back in November of last year, the Ministry of Defence, having considered our report, prior to your appointment, indicated that it would like to see our recommendation form part of the agreement. Our report was then debated in Westminster Hall, and some of us were quite opposed to the view that it should proceed as part of this consultation. Am I not right to say: one, that the MoD supports the concept of our recommendation; two, that you would like to see it happen; and three, that the onus is now on the Ministry of Defence to bring forward its plans as to how best you could protect service personnel?

Gavin Williamson: We have always been consistent in thinking—and we have consistently made these arguments—that there was very considerable merit in what the Committee brought forward. We have written to the Committee to that effect as well, which is all very much part of public record. We continue to have an issue here in the United Kingdom in terms of service personnel who continue to have this very dark cloud hanging over them. I think it would be wrong if I did not want to work to find a solution to deal with that—I would expect any Defence Secretary to want to try to achieve that end.

Q248 **Gavin Robinson:** Do we envisage, then, that a process will be brought forward in the next number of weeks and months, or the sense of a



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process from the Ministry of Defence about how best, in the absence of this consultation, you will respond to our Committee's requirement?

Gavin Williamson: The thing is that you have the Northern Ireland consultation, which obviously has got to run. That is absolutely important and should be the focus of the Government.

Q249 **Mr Francois:** Last year, the regular Army was 3,000 recruits short. This year, it will be about the same. It is not exactly an incentive to sign up to join the Army if you suspect that you will be sent off to a warzone to fight, your life will be at risk, and then years later, when you are in latter middle-age or older, a group of lawyers will sit down and second guess what you did in a ditch, trench or compound 30 or 40 years ago. To my mind, if we are to maintain recruitment into the forces, which you know is something I have strong views on, we have to do something about this. We have this in Northern Ireland, but we also have it with regard to Iraq. I think you can understand Mr Mercer's evident frustration, because he did a lot to get IHAT closed down, yet these investigations still carry on under another name. We have the issue of Afghanistan as well. We have to solve what some now call the lawfare question—the issue of combat immunity—even if that means taking on the International Criminal Court, which the UK Government are signed up to.

My honest feeling on this, in trying to move things forward, is that there is a lot of strong feeling now among Back-Bench Members that something must be done, and I don't think just solving the issue for Northern Ireland is enough. You said that we need to look at this as a broader issue, and I suspect you are right. We need some kind of statute of limitations to provide combat immunity after so many years. That will probably require a Bill, and that would probably have to come from the MoD or, perhaps, the Cabinet Office.

There is real anger about this, which I think, to be fair, you are aware of. You are probably realistically going to see more and more colleagues cutting up rough, to use an old Whips' phrase, unless the Government actually bring forward some proposals to do something about this. Although Mr Robinson may correct me, my understanding is that at least one of the major parties in Northern Ireland would support a statute of limitations, provided it is UK-wide.

Gavin Robinson: We do support it.

Mr Francois: Yes, so I think there is a potential way forward on this. I think we are prepared to make representation across Government, and even to the head of Government.

Gavin Williamson: I always say that my door is always open to anyone with potential solutions or ideas about how to deal with this. On your point about it being a drag on recruitment, we want to get to a position in which these legacy inquests don't cast this ridiculously long shadow over people's lives. We should all be committed to trying to find a solution that lifts that shadow.



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Q250 **Mr Francois:** I am grateful to hear that, but can you give the Committee any reassurance that, somewhere in the bowels of the MoD, you have some of your best and brightest actually working on this, and that the MoD is actually trying to come up with a solution?

Gavin Williamson: We are always looking to try to come up with solutions on these issues.

Q251 **Mr Francois:** Okay. Just so we understand you, the MoD is actively working on a way forward, yes?

Gavin Williamson: We want to try—I think all political parties and all those organisations that are tied to and affected by this want to try—to find a solution to this going forward.

Q252 **Mr Francois:** Sorry to press you on this, but I want to be clear on what you are saying. Are you telling me that the MoD is actively working on a solution?

Gavin Williamson: We have a consultation that is live and ongoing. That is an important part for everyone to take part in, in terms of making their representations. We will always look at different options and ideas for how to take this forward.

Q253 **Mr Francois:** Do you accept that it will ultimately be down to the Ministry of Defence? If this needs legislation, it will have to be an MoD-led Bill.

Gavin Williamson: If there were such legislation it would be from either the Attorney General, the Cabinet Office or, most likely, the Ministry of Defence.

Q254 **Chair:** I think the Committee would like to know that, apart from all the senior people of the MoD looking at this dreadful problem from time to time, you might consider setting up a dedicated small taskforce whose specific responsibility it would be to drive this forward and come up with proposals that can then be lobbied for within Government.

Gavin Williamson: We have a team that is looking at this and at how we can best improve and take it forward. It is not the fact that there is a lack of will. We need to find a solution that will work going forward.

Q255 **Chair:** Would it be possible for members of the Committee to sit down privately with that team?

Gavin Williamson: I would be very happy—

Chair: Go on, say yes.

Gavin Williamson: I would be very happy for you to make representations. I am not sure if it is appropriate for the whole Committee to come in to quiz the team, but if you would like to submit a written presentation, I would be sure to pass that on.

Q256 **Chair:** I want a little more than that. Can we compromise on a small delegation? Four members of the Committee.

Gavin Williamson: I am not sure if that would be quite appropriate, but we could look at different options and take that discussion offline.

Chair: There is something to be said for face-to-face contact.

Gavin Williamson: I am sure there is. We can have a discussion about it.

Q257 **Chair:** Our time is virtually up. I just want to slip in one more question.

Gavin Williamson: I thought it was maybe up about 15 minutes ago.

Chair: Ten minutes ago.

Gavin Williamson: It depends which clock you are looking at.

Chair: The one on the right. It was supposed to be 4.30 pm.

Gavin Williamson: I apologise; I am actually going to have to go very soon.

Q258 **Chair:** This is a very quick question to ask. In the course of this meeting, something has been drawn to my attention. We started off by talking a lot about anti-submarine warfare. You may be aware that we have preserved from the first world war a very small number of naval vessels—a coastal motorboat, a cruiser and a Monitor. HMS President, the last of the anti-submarine secret Q-ships, has sponsors but does not have anywhere to tie up in perpetuity. Is there any possibility that some space might be found in a dockyard to preserve that last piece of world war one heritage? I would have given you notice of this question but I did not know that the negotiations for the wharf had fallen through until a few moments ago.

Mr Francois: When you prepared for this session, you didn't game plan for that question.

Gavin Williamson: That wasn't actually at the forefront of my mind. My instinct, as someone who wishes to preserve history, would always be to say yes, but the MoD is probably not the best organisation for looking after historical ships.

Q259 **Chair:** The idea would be to pay you rent for a wharf.

Gavin Williamson: Our bases are secure bases and are not for volunteers to be coming in and out of, and we don't really want to be in that position. I am happy for people to send me details; it would be more sensible for them to engage in a negotiation with the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth, which I think would be an organisation that would be much better equipped to be able to provide them with a home. We are always happy to look at options.

Chair: I think Gavin may have an idea.

Q260 **Gavin Robinson:** The National Museum of the Royal Navy has just finalised its work around HMS Caroline in Belfast. It is the last surviving cruiser of the Battle of Jutland in 1916. There is oodles of space around it



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and it is well set up. Secretary of State, with your input into the matter, and perhaps some financial support, we could make it a success.

Gavin Williamson: I think Belfast is offering a home, which is a truly generous and spirited offer.

Chair: So we can conclude that even if one Gavin can't say yes, another one can step into the breach.

Gavin Williamson: There is always a Gavin who wishes to say yes somewhere.

Chair: I can't think of a better note on which to finish. Thank you Secretary of State, and to your colleagues.