

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: The Consequences for UK Defence of INF withdrawal, HC 1734

Tuesday 15 Jan 2019

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Graham P. Jones; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Gavin Robinson; Ruth Smeeth; John Spellar; Phil Wilson.

Questions 115-146

Witnesses

I: Rt hon. Sir Alan Duncan KCMG MP, Minister of State for Europe and the Americas, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Ben Fender, Head of Security Policy Department, Defence and International Security Directorate, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: The right hon. Sir Alan Duncan MP and Ben Fender

Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the third and final session on the future of the INF treaty, an agreement signed in 1987 between the United States and the Soviet Union placing prohibitions on the testing and deployment of certain categories of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. In this session we have evidence from the Minister of State for Europe and the Americas at the FCO, the right hon. Sir Alan Duncan MP, and a senior official, Ben Fender. Ben, would you just say a word or two to introduce yourself, and explain your role for the record?

Ben Fender: Yes, of course. I am the head of the Foreign Office's security policy department, although I am departing very shortly.

Sir Alan Duncan: He is off to Africa imminently.

Chair: Good luck with that. Gavin will begin our questions.

Q115 **Gavin Robinson:** Good afternoon, Minister and Mr Fender. Minister, does the INF treaty still matter, given the geopolitical and technological changes that have emerged since it was signed?

Sir Alan Duncan: We think the treaty is still relevant. A number of countries outside the treaty, which is of course a bilateral treaty, possess ground-launched, intermediate-range missiles—for instance, China and Iran. Countries inside and outside the treaty have developed other sorts of missile capabilities.

We think the treaty made—I put it in the past tense—a valuable contribution to European security because initially it eliminated all Russian and US ground-launched, intermediate-range missiles. We obviously now think that that situation has changed.

We think that Russia's development of the SSC-8 not only is a risk to our security but erodes the foundations of the sort of effective arms control this was designed to establish and that, of course, we would like to see. Together with other NATO allies we would support the preservation of the treaty if it could be made to work, but it requires Russia to return to full verified compliance.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you. I did have a follow-up, but I think the final part of your answer neatly leads into the next substantive question.

Chair: Very good. In that case we will move to Madeleine.

Q116 **Mrs Moon:** I am intrigued, Minister: is there a point in going back to that treaty in compliance if there are other actors who have developed capability? Is there a need to expand the countries involved in a new



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treaty, rather than going back to everyone complying with the old one? Is there a risk that, even if you got Russia back into compliance—I cannot imagine that Russia would do that—there is ultimately a weakness in capability if others are developing and you are not? How do we tackle that conundrum?

Sir Alan Duncan: I totally agree that it is a conundrum. I suppose it is a question of a bird in the hand. This was, and if it were complied with would be, a working bilateral treaty of some significance. In terms of our own interests, Russia is of course closer than China and Iran, so there may well be an academic argument that by continuing with this, it is America that is disadvantaged, because it complies, as indeed it has done, whereas others outside the treaty would not. However, we still think there is a good reason for going ahead with this. All kinds of arms limitation of this sort surely have a value, but if significant asymmetry arises on the back of it, that creates its own subsequent problems elsewhere. It is like squeezing one end of a balloon; the other end gets bigger. In terms of our own interests and where we assess the risk to have risen over the last few years, the continuation of this treaty would, I think, be an advantage rather than a disadvantage, and we would very much like that to be the case if it were possible.

Q117 **Mrs Moon:** Should we have reacted more quickly? The violations seem to have been happening for some considerable time. Have we been a bit slow in confronting the problem?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is not actually a new issue.

Mrs Moon: Exactly, so why have we taken so long to confront it?

Sir Alan Duncan: It depends what you mean by confront. The wish to address this issue and our assessment—NATO's assessment, America's assessment—that Russia has been in violation have been going on for some time. The US has raised its concerns with Russia in more than 30 meetings over the past five years. This is not something that has suddenly dawned on us late in the day. Allies have made clear their concerns in successive NATO declarations and Russia, of course, has had a lot of time to address those international concerns. I understand your question, but I don't think it quite gets to the diplomatic pressure and the comments that have been made through the proper channels and NATO over five years until we get to the point where you suddenly say, "Enough is enough,"—or America has.

Q118 **Mrs Moon:** Should NATO have reacted more quickly?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not making a judgment on that. One could always say it should have been quicker or it should have been later. These things are always a process of saying, "We think you are not in compliance; what are you going to do about it?" You build the case and then the United States has decided that it is going to terminate this treaty.

Q119 **Mrs Moon:** But we still have a situation where a bilateral treaty was being broken and at the same time other nations, with whom we do not always necessarily have the easiest of relationships, have been developing a



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capability. Did we lose five years in which other options would have been available to us?

Sir Alan Duncan: Your assumption is that, let's say, Iran and China have always been as they are today in the past five years—that is probably not the case, but that is probably more a Defence assessment than ours—and that you get one warning and it is dead. That is not the way the world works. You may argue that historically this would have been better done two years ago, or even, "They should be given longer—they've had their warning, let's see if they can now comply." There is no absolute right and wrong in this kind of assessment and subsequent action.

Q120 **Chair:** Do either of you have any insight, or even inkling, as to why Russia is behaving in this way?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will turn to Ben in a minute, if I may. The why is a matter of getting into the head and thinking and policy of the Russians.

John Spellar: Isn't that what the Foreign Office is supposed to do?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, of course, but it is often a magical mystery tour that we have to—

Chair: We are asking you to be our guide.

Sir Alan Duncan: You are a very good guide to things Kremlinological historically, Chairman. Of course, they have not admitted to violating it, let alone given reasons, so we do not know exactly why they have taken this course.

Chair: Can you speculate?

Sir Alan Duncan: We can speculate that they see a ground-launched system as more mobile, cheaper and perhaps less vulnerable. Maybe, as always with violating something, you think you can get away with it so you are going to do it, but our belief very strongly is that they have violated this treaty, and that the facts are very clear. As to their motives, it may be increasing Russian pride, if you like. It is, in our view, part of a wider policy of Russian muscle-flexing.

Q121 **Chair:** Could it be part of the symbolism of the Gorbachev years, given that President Putin described the breaking up of the Soviet empire as the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century—a very revealing comment? Could it be that this is part of his mission to dismantle the legacy of the Gorbachev era? Does that make any sense?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that does make sense. The mentality that one could easily assume for this is that the reversal of Russian—at the time, Soviet—power is something that Vladimir Putin would like to see. Therefore, inasmuch as Gorbachev led to that reversal, or to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the current President would like to reassert Russia's ability to influence events in wider theatres.

Q122 **Chair:** Ben, I think I am right in saying that for a long time Russia did not even admit the existence of the SSC-8. Is that right? Can you inform us



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what the trail shows us in terms of Russian initial denials and the final admission that they had the missile, but still not admitting that the missile falls foul of the treaty?

Ben Fender: Yes, of course. What we have seen is a classic Russian story in many ways. For many years they completely denied having this missile system, even when confronted by the US with evidence of their testing of it. It was only when the US publicised the designator—the name of the missile—that the Russians acknowledged that they had been developing the missile, but then they denied that it was of INF-violating range.

Since then, what we have seen is a rather classic case of Russian obfuscation. They have raised accusations that the US is violating the treaty that are complete nonsense. Just before Christmas, they introduced a resolution to the United Nations General Assembly that said what an excellent idea it would be if the INF treaty was preserved. It is an absolutely classic case of disinformation.

Going back to your previous question about Russian intent, I think it is clear that the pattern has been to conceal what they are doing. Some commentators have said that perhaps part of their intent in developing this system was not a military one but a political one, in order to make NATO more anxious, to reawaken memories of the past and to divide allies from one another. That may be true to an extent, but the very fact that they have sought to conceal it suggests that their primary objectives in pursuing this system have been military ones.

Q123 **John Spellar:** You mentioned 30 meetings over five years. Getting away from the question whether we should have been responding earlier rather than later, the actual decision was—shall we say?—extremely sudden. It is very unclear what the choreography was therefore supposed to be in order to win the opinion battle. The key question is, were the UK, other allies or NATO actually consulted or even informed before the President announced that the US would withdraw from the treaty?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think it is accurate to say that we were informed, rather than consulted, although it was no particular surprise. We thought for some time that this might be coming down the track. We received the courtesy of pre-advice by a couple of days. I spoke to my counterpart, John Sullivan in the State Department, and he explained their logic and the fact that they were going to do this. We had—admittedly at fairly short notice—courteous pre-advice of the intended American announcement. *[Interruption.]* There was an issue that the phone call was set up and then deferred, but the contents of the phone call were made clear, even though it came pretty well at about the same time. We won't be too Jesuitical about before or after, but we knew through the usual channels.

Q124 **John Spellar:** So you had already been pre-alerted that the President was going to announce that they wished to abrogate the treaty, or withdraw from the treaty.

Sir Alan Duncan: Ben is concerned that I did not know exactly in advance. As I recall, I did. Just so I don't in any way mislead you, we will



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absolutely clarify the time sequence between my phone call and the announcement.

Chair: We are not trying to catch you out.

Sir Alan Duncan: I just want to be accurate.

Q125 **Chair:** Absolutely. It's not a key point. Ben, would you like to say what you think it was?

Ben Fender: Yes. What I would say is this. When the current US Administration came in—just to go back to Madeleine Moon's point—they were very anxious to grip this as an issue. What we have certainly had over the last two years is an intensification of contacts between close allies and the Americans, where they have shared a great deal more information about Russian systems. They put in place something that they called the integrated strategy, which was their attempt to pressure Russia back into compliance.

I think what you will see, if you look back at what NATO said in its July summit last year and in December 2017, is a steady process of toughening up the language on Russia. Any sense that somehow this move came out of the blue or was a great surprise is not right. This is an Administration that had been signalling for some time that it really wanted to tackle this, and was doing that in quite close consultation with its allies.

Q126 **John Spellar:** I understand the direction of travel. Indeed—correct me if I am wrong—there was scheduled to be a NATO Foreign Ministers meeting. It actually did go ahead, taking a decision that Russia was in breach of the treaty. Surely, the choreography would have been expected to be that the declaration was made and then followed by a statement about a possible withdrawal from the treaty, or a notice of intention—as finally seems to have happened—by the US.

Ben Fender: Obviously, it is a bilateral treaty, so it is for the US to take its decision. All I was trying to say is that the US, both before that announcement and after, has been very open with allies about what its direction of travel was. That is what I think you saw in the 4 December statement from NATO allies, which shared entirely the US perspective on the analysis of the Russian breach, and shared the determination of the US to do something about it.

Q127 **John Spellar:** But not necessarily the timing, which may have enabled the Russians to confuse the issue slightly more than they would have done if the choreography that I have described had been followed through.

Ben Fender: If the Russians were hoping to cause confusion, I think they will have been roundly put in their box by the NATO statement. Whatever may have been in their mind, NATO allies have shown remarkable solidarity on this. Back in the '80s, of course, this was a very divisive issue; one thing that is really remarkable about what happened in



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December was how NATO was able to show quite such clarity and resolve. It is a really very strong statement.

Q128 John Spellar: To move on, you mentioned the UK's position, and obviously you are right to say that the US has been sharing a lot of information, but I understand that the Dutch Government, for example, has independently verified Russian non-compliance. Have we undertaken a similar exercise?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is not appropriate for us to comment on individual intelligence-gathering exercises of that sort, but what I would say is that we have monitored things very carefully. We agree with the US assessment that Russia is in violation. NATO allies have also come to that conclusion; they confirmed that in a statement by NATO Foreign Ministers on 4 December. Of course, I will not go into any more detail, other than to say that, in our view, the intelligence is absolutely clear. The very point that you make about others having reached the same conclusion reinforces us in saying that we have reached it too.

Q129 Chair: Are you saying that you have reached that conclusion independently of the US? In other words, have we verified it ourselves—I am not asking you to go into the hows, whys and wherefores—or have we just taken it on trust from the Americans because we find the evidence that they have gathered sufficiently compelling?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that would go too far into the detail of intelligence gathering and the way we go about these things, so I don't think it would be appropriate for me to answer.

Chair: All right. We will leave it at that.

Q130 Graham P. Jones: Given the current Russian Government's position on compliance, why would we negotiate with them? Why would we enter into negotiations in good faith, when we clearly believe that there is only bad faith on their side?

Sir Alan Duncan: Our short-term goal, I suppose, is not to negotiate another treaty, as it were, but to encourage the Russians to return to full and verified compliance of this one.

You are absolutely right to imply that the violation of the treaty has wider implications. NATO Foreign Ministers have reiterated that Russia's behaviour erodes the foundations of arms control more widely because all effective arms control agreements rely on the parties having confidence that those agreements will be respected. What we have seen from the Russians is that, while they do implement certain treaties—New START is a fair example—they take an approach to others, such as the INF or the chemical weapons convention, that not only undermines those agreements but is deeply corrosive to the rules-based system more generally.

It is because we are dealing with a difficult problem that these treaties are necessary in the first place. If we did not have the complications to which you accurately refer, we would not need these treaties, but we do,



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because we face the difficulty of serious global risks that require some kind of diplomatic policing, agreement, solution—call it whatever you like.

Q131 Graham P. Jones: The 60-day period is going to expire soon. Do you honestly think that the Russians might come into compliance before that period concludes?

Sir Alan Duncan: We hope they will, but we are realistic. I don't think many people think they will, particularly as they have not even admitted that they are not in compliance. But that is, if you like, the proper, decent process of timing through which this process needs to travel. Ben wants to add to that.

Ben Fender: We are making every effort to try and encourage them back into compliance. If anything other than tonight's vote makes it into the newspapers, you will see that the Americans and Russians are actually meeting in Geneva today to talk about this subject. There is a NATO-Russia Council next week, at which I am sure this will come up. We will take every opportunity to press them into compliance, but, as the Minister said, we are not really at first base yet, because they are not actually admitting that they have a system that is in violation of the treaty, and they have not had a record of initiating serious contacts on this, or of wanting to discuss the issues in any great detail with the United States. So, like the Minister, I think we need to be realistic about the prospects.

Sir Alan Duncan: I reiterate that US and Russian officials are meeting today in Geneva. There has been a little change, in that Russia has only recently admitted that the 9M729 missile system actually exists. It continues to deny that that is in violation of the treaty, but there has been a little bit of ground movement there. We don't think they have so far engaged in any serious and meaningful discussions to address the problem, so I suppose the dial is on the pessimistic rather than the optimistic side in terms of whether or not they will eventually, and in time, comply.

Q132 Ruth Smeeth: What are the defence and security implications for the UK if the treaty falls?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is part of a broader pattern of Russian behaviour, which I think can be said to undermine the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. So this is contributing to a much more challenging security environment overall, worldwide. We described this within the UK Government in the national security capabilities review last year, and before that in the 2015 strategic defence and security review.

NATO has already taken some significant decisions to adapt its defence and security posture; it did so at the Wales and Warsaw summits, and did so again at the summit last July. The continuing review and assessment of the NATO posture is what naturally follows from this. Are we confident? Yes, we are confident in NATO's capabilities and in our ability to deter and defend against Russian attempts to undermine the Euro-Atlantic security apparatus that I mentioned.



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Q133 **Ruth Smeeth:** Are we considering that the new Russian missile systems are placing British troops, who are currently deployed in eastern Europe, at greater risk?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think it depends where they are deployed, and of course they are mobile. The SSC-8s could potentially put at risk targets across most of Europe. Russia has long had other missiles as well—intercontinental ballistic missiles, for instance—so there is risk, and this is not the only risk. Does it increase risk? Yes, it can be said to do so.

Q134 **Ruth Smeeth:** Are you working with the MoD to look at additional military capabilities that we might require, as well as additional and enhanced capabilities within NATO?

Sir Alan Duncan: What Russia is doing is an essential part of any kind of defence review. We recently had the Modernising Defence Programme. We and other partners in NATO are adapting to the thinking there. I am not the only witness here. I think there is a line here where I need to say that this is one for the Defence Secretary and the MoD rather than the Foreign Office.

Q135 **Chair:** That is perfectly okay.

I have a couple of points. Russia says that it would like to preserve the treaty, doesn't it? Therefore, there is a degree of risk here. Even though it appears that the treaty is being rendered a nullity by Russian deployment of a ground-launched system in defiance of the treaty, there is a danger that the propaganda victory will go to Russia, which will maintain that it is America who has unilaterally walked away from the treaty. That is very much a Foreign Office area rather than a Defence area. How do you propose, as diplomats, to avoid that danger?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think we can and will avoid that danger. I think that Russia has not distinguished itself over the last year in terms of engendering trust in the general world community for its actions. What we revealed in The Hague in terms of cyber-hacking is an example. We of course have the issue of the use of Novichok in Salisbury and Amesbury, nearby. The actions they took in the OPCW were far from constructive and enlightened.

So this does fit into the broader category of what needs to be part of modern defence—in the way that cyber does—in terms of handling disinformation. As has been in the news recently, that is a high priority for the Foreign Office. I am confident that what you suggest might be a propaganda victory for the Russians over the US is not the case and will not be the case, because the reason for this is a widely accepted and recognised violation of the treaty. I think we can make that very clear, including by saying to the Russians, "If you now comply, it is not yet dead." It is very important that they are asked—that they are told this is a chance and they can take it: "Take the chance to re-engage in the INF treaty, rather than be in violation of it in a way that kills it." That opportunity is still there.

Q136 **Chair:** Are we missing a trick by doing this in relatively low-profile private



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meetings with the Russians? If we cast our minds back—those of us who are old enough—to the Cuban missile crisis, the reason why the world could see very clearly what Khrushchev was doing was that he was confronted with the visual evidence of the offending missiles in Cuba in a very public forum, at the United Nations.

Would it not make more sense to try and have this debate out in the open, in a forum such as the United Nations Security Council, where the argument could be for the whole world to see, and then our diplomats could stand up and say, like the Russians, “We want to preserve this treaty but this is the evidence and these are the missiles”? I am sure somebody’s intelligence agency could release a few photographs here and there—if they were able to do it in 1962, they can do it now.

Would it not be sensible to ensure that we do not lose the battle of the narratives by failing to confront Russia over its non-compliance in a very public forum and in a very public way? Ben, you would know what the opportunities might be for that.

Sir Alan Duncan: I will go first, and then I will turn to Ben. Dr Lewis, I can totally see the logic that you are putting to me and the Committee. I think I ought to say that I respect that this is a bilateral treaty. We do not own it, in that sense. Although we have a deep interest as a P5 country and a senior member of NATO, and what happens to it is of course very important, I think the sort of decision you are asking me to express an opinion on is primarily one for the United States. It would be wrong for us to be out in front of any sort of publicity statement like the one you are suggesting, although again I could see the logic. I would leave that to the United States, which may well be monitoring the Committee and will think of what your question suggests.

Q137 **Chair:** Although it is a treaty between the US and the former USSR, as it is something that it is so intimately bound up with the security of Europe I do not think that anyone would feel that we were being over-demanding by trying to influence the way that the process is handled and, if necessary, brought to an end.

Ben, can you tell me the opportunities that might be there? I would obviously leave it to the good offices of our excellent Foreign Office team to press America behind the scenes to take those opportunities, but can I ask you the more institutional issue about the institutional arrangements?

Ben Fender: Yes, of course. First, we are absolutely aware of the risk that you identify and the need to make sure that, if this treaty does sadly collapse, it does so with responsibility and blame lying where it properly should—with Russia. As I said to you, we have seen a number of Russian attempts to confuse that, and we have attempted to address those by making sure that NATO is very clear about what its position is. I am sure that when the 60 days expire you will find NATO again being very clear in public about what its position is likely to be.

Also, as you say, it is important that observers understand that there are very good and solid grounds for the position that we have on the evidence. I am sure you will have looked at the speech given on 30 November by



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Dan Coats, the US director of national intelligence. He did not use pictures, but he did exactly as you were saying and tried to set out, in so far as he could, into the public domain some of the evidence about why the Americans believe that this breach exists, which we endorse.

As far as we are concerned, we are confident that we are going to win this battle of public opinion. I mentioned that there was a resolution in New York just before Christmas. That was an attempt by the Russians to confuse the picture, and they lost. I am absolutely sure that all informed observers understand what the reality is here.

Q138 Chair: But if NATO urged the Americans to make a big deal about this in a session, for example, of the UN Security Council, that option would be there for the Americans, wouldn't it?

Sir Alan Duncan: I guess so. I do not see why not, but I am not going to make the decision for them, or push them in that direction. We all have options, of course. It is about whether they choose to take it or not—at this stage, as well.

Chair: Yes, but as we are one of their closest allies I am sure that if we made an urging in that direction it would at least be taken seriously, wouldn't it?

Q139 John Spellar: We have a substantial interest in this, as leading members of NATO, as part, with the other members of NATO, of a nuclear-based alliance, and in dealing with the potential threat from Russia. We have a real interest in the Russians not getting an unjustified propaganda advantage in being able to shape the narrative better than they should be allowed to. We have a real interest in this from our own defence perspective, particularly in retaining public support for the NATO alliance, do we not?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes. Just bear in mind that we do have a slightly changing cast of characters in the US Administration at the moment. We have to build up relations when they change in order to have discussions of this sort on what would be a very significant moment if it were to happen.

Ben Fender: Let me add to that. Of course when this 60-day window expires on 2 February that is not quite the end of the story because the Americans will then formally give six months' notice. My understanding is that at any point in that six months, if Russia were to come back to compliance, it would be open to the United States to rescind that intention to withdraw. I suspect that there is quite a lot more diplomacy left to come on this issue before we can finally say that it is over.

Q140 Chair: There is a lot of symbolism in this argument. To many of us, the INF treaty, which was based on President Reagan's zero-option offer and, before that, the dual track decision of 1979, is very much a symbol of the success of the arms control regime, which is why we would be reluctant to see it go. On the other hand, we have heard from Dr Franklin Miller, among others, about the importance of not allowing treaties to become



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debased by the flouting of their provisions by one side and acquiescence by the other. There are various principles at stake, but defence implications as well. The first one I want to ask you about is this: this is a bilateral treaty, but the missiles are mobile and can be moved easily from theatre to theatre, and that probably explains why the ban was not just a ban in Europe, but a ban on those types of ground-launched mobile missiles, of that particular range, worldwide, as it were. To what extent do you think Russia and, especially, America, are motivated by a wish to get out of the treaty, less because they are concerned about the changing nuclear balance as it may or may not be occurring in Europe, and more about third parties such as China or Iran?

Ben Fender: This is something that has been mentioned from time to time by both Russians and US officials. About a decade ago the Russians first started to float the idea that the treaty should perhaps be multilateralised. Their idea at the time was, "Well, China has ground-launched intermediate range missiles. Wouldn't it be better to have a treaty that includes China as well?" I suspect that their motives in doing that were less to preserve the INF treaty and more to manufacture for themselves an excuse for wriggling out of it, because they wished to have INF-violating missiles for other reasons. I think that should not necessarily be taken at face value. Likewise, when you look through public comments made by senior US officials you will occasionally see speculation about whether or not it would be militarily advantageous for the United States to have these missiles in theatres other than Europe. However, I think it has been very clearly the position of the US Administration that they would wish to preserve this treaty if Russia comes back into compliance. So again it would not be true to say that the US is somehow less than enthusiastic about the treaty for non-Euro-Atlantic reasons. On the contrary, they have been putting a huge amount of effort into diplomacy to try to preserve the treaty. I think the China issue, or the east Asia issue, is out there as a talking point, but I suspect it is a bit of a distraction. We are in this situation for Euro-Atlantic reasons, I think.

Q141 **Chair:** There is a danger you might say that the next question is going to take this more into the defence realm, but I would be surprised if the FCO were not having to consider the implications of it, nevertheless. You mentioned earlier that the deployments in the 1980s were very divisive in Europe. Originally, of course, they occurred at the request of European leaders, who were worried about the deployment of the SS-20s from 1977 onwards, and were afraid, in particular, that those weapons, being intermediate range, could in some way decouple the nuclear defence of Europe from that of the United States, in that the Americans might say that they would not reply with intercontinental ballistic missiles to an attack solely on Europe by intermediate-range ballistic missiles. There was the added question of their accuracy, which meant that they could be targeted at military infrastructure, rather than cities. Therefore, it was felt necessary to deploy ground-launched cruise missiles and Pershing II missiles in the case of West Germany, as it then was. The key question is, in the event that this all breaks down, and in the event that Russia continues to deploy these missiles on a large scale, would there be any



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necessity for western European NATO countries to consider basing similar missiles on their territory once again, or could the threat be countered by other means, such as air-launched or sea-launched weapons?

Sir Alan Duncan: From my point of view—unless Ben has anything to add—I really think this is a matter for a defence review or defence policy. Any decision of that sort would, of course, involve the Foreign Office, but we are not in the lead on the philosophy and practice of that sort of decision. I do not feel equipped to give you the sort of quality of answer that it merits.

Q142 **Chair:** Given that you will be in the frontline of negotiating any of these arrangements, and that the possibility of such deployments would undoubtedly feature in such negotiations, do you know whether any studies are being undertaken at the moment on what we might call the military deterrence implications of a possible major Russian deployment of these weapons?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am sure they go on all the time, but again I think that is MoD rather than FCO, unless Ben has something to add.

Ben Fender: All I would add, to repeat the point that you made earlier, Minister, is that this is a very serious development about the SSC-8s, but it is only one of a very wide range of things that the Russians are doing to modernise their missile forces and, beyond that, their armed forces in general, and to modify their behaviour. This is happening at the same time as we are seeing SS-26 Iskanders going into the Baltic states, a modernisation of their ICBM force, and so on and so forth. All that has gone into NATO's adaptation of its defence and deterrence posture over the last few years. Although one can ask a question about one tiny sliver of that, actually it is a spectrum of activity from Russia that needs a holistic answer. That is not just one that NATO has identified, but one that NATO has been acting on now for several years. You will have seen the continued acceleration of that at the last NATO summit, with the decisions about readiness and the command structure. I anticipate that NATO will remain very seized of this and will continue to adapt what it is doing.

On the specific question about missiles, I think we are talking at the moment about quite a hypothetical situation. The treaty is still in force and we are working for it to remain in force. If it collapses, there is a question about whether the United States develops a missile of its own, and then there is a hypothetical question about what might happen. For the moment, US officials have told the press that they have no current plans to introduce any more missiles into Europe. I think it is quite hard to go any further than that at the moment. It is a hypothetical within a hypothetical within a hypothetical.

Q143 **Chair:** That sounds like Russia being a mystery inside an enigma, and so on and so forth, so quite appropriate. As you rightly say, it would be for NATO to make such a decision. That leads me to the question of the role that the UK plays in NATO's nuclear policy structures—in particular, the nuclear planning group and the high-level group. Can you tell us a little



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about how that works and whether you feel that there needs now to be a discussion within the organisation in NATO about updating NATO nuclear policy in the face of this new Russian challenge?

Sir Alan Duncan: The starting point is that obviously the UK is a leading member of the NATO alliance, and it is one of NATO's three nuclear powers, so of course we play a significant role in their policy deliberations.

You mention the nuclear planning group. That brings together Defence Ministers from across the whole NATO alliance. I think you might, in fairness, ask the Defence Secretary to expand on that—I think you are seeing him next week—partly because he usually represents the Government at those meetings. I know it is one of those special responsibilities that he treats as a very high priority. He is your main person for this.

The high-level group is a senior official body that supports the ministerial group. We are of course engaged in all the meetings. We often lead on specific tasks and topics, which reflect our expertise and the broader contributions that we can make on nuclear issues.

Beyond those two groups, permanent representatives meet and discuss nuclear matters on a regular basis, as do officials. That work is obviously supplemented by bilateral work led by capitals, normally on specific issues. So we are very much in the mix all the time, at a significant level.

Q144 **Chair:** Have you anything to add, Ben, about the structures?

Ben Fender: Some of those groups are at 28, rather than at 29, because the French don't participate in them. They do so by their own choice, of course, and I would say that they have been very active in discussions with other allies on INF and related policy issues.

Clearly, the alliance keeps developments in the threat as it relates to nuclear weapons under very, very close watch. If you look back at the summit declaration last summer, you will see a commitment by the alliance to keep adapting its nuclear posture in relation to the environment that we now face. That is work that is going on and I imagine will continue to go on, depending on what happens in the external environment.

Q145 **Phil Wilson:** Minister, are you optimistic about the future of international arms control? How do you think we should handle the issue of the non-proliferation treaty review conference?

Sir Alan Duncan: One has to be determined and dogged. Optimism and pessimism, a bit like in Brexit negotiations, do not necessarily creep into the emotion that is best applied to this.

We are open to new arms control. Anything that can improve security and stability is a good thing but, as our discussions this afternoon have focused on, we think Russia's actions undermine the foundations of effective arms control because one of the essential requirements is that the parties to agreements must believe that they will be respected. If you don't have trust and transparency, then the deals don't work.



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In terms of any NPT review conference, the INF is a bilateral treaty, so it is not directly linked to the NPT. I don't know if you need to add anything on that, Ben?

Ben Fender: Well, it is not strictly bilateral, because there are a few more Soviet successor states that are also party to it.

Sir Alan Duncan: Originally bilateral.

Ben Fender: Yes, originally bilateral. In terms of the NPT, obviously there is a sense in which the loss of the INF treaty, if that is where we end up, is another element of a worsening security environment generally and one that perhaps makes it harder to go as far as countries like the UK would like in terms of disarmament. I think what that says for the NPT is that ahead of the next review conference we all need to redouble our efforts on all pillars of the NPT—whether that is proliferation, and the challenges brought by Iran and North Korea, or disarmament.

The other thing that I would pull out in an NPT context is that the collapse of the INF, if that is where we end up, surely underlines the crucial importance of verification of treaties. In terms of what the UK has been working on in an NPT context, we have been one of the leaders, as you will know, in trying to work out what verification would look like in a nuclear disarmament context; I am sure that we will be briefing on that at the next review conference. I know it is a slightly indirect connection, but I think it shows the value of that, because if there were ever progress in that direction, verification would be a critical element of it. That is very much a lesson of the INF scenario.

Q146 **Chair:** In the high-calibre written evidence that has been submitted to this inquiry, it has been pointed out that there are quite detailed verification machinery arrangements in place for mutual inspections involving the INF treaty. I am not clear on how regularly they have been used in recent years and whether or not those aspects of the treaty superstructure could be used to try to put Russia on the spot, rather than a precipitate withdrawal from the treaty taking place.

Ben Fender: You are testing my knowledge of articles 11 and 12 of the treaty beyond where I think it goes, but as I understand it, the treaty provisions were for the destruction of all intermediate-range ground-launched missiles, and then some verification processes that existed while that elimination process was going on and for a period thereafter. What there is today under the treaty is something called the special verification commission, which is the group of states parties that can be summoned by one of the states parties and to which they can raise their concerns about non-compliance. The Americans have done that multiple times.

Chair: And what has happened? Has Russia come to those sessions and denied everything? Do we know what has happened about that? I am not trying to put you on the spot—if you want to write to us afterwards, that is fine—but I am concluding this session where we began, which is with the importance of making sure, if we are not going to be wrong-footed on



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this matter, that Russia answers in a public forum the charges that have been raised, so that the world can see who is responsible for the abrogation of this treaty if, sadly, that has to happen.

Sir Alan Duncan: May I assure you, Chair, that that message from you has been received loud and clear, and that we will relay it as appropriate? We are very grateful for the observation and suggestion, and indeed for the opportunity to appear before your Committee today.

Chair: Thank you both for coming.