



Joint Committee
on the National
Security Strategy

21 May 2026

Alistair Carns MP
Minister for the Armed Forces
Ministry of Defence

[By email]

Dear Minister Carns,

Thank you for giving evidence to the Committee on 18 May 2026. We are grateful for your engagement and we commend some of the progress underway in the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

We would like to examine further the question of force availability to protect multiple underwater infrastructure sites in a security crisis. We appreciate the need to avoid undermining deterrence or exposing security vulnerabilities in public. However, we also note the need to ensure that wider government departments and, critically, industry are preparing adequately for a security crisis. The impetus for this is lessened if the Ministry of Defence is overly reluctant to discuss the realistic limits of allied maritime capability to defend sites in the scenarios we considered, and the implications for cable vulnerabilities.

In our evidence session you stated for example that NATO or the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) hold a significant advantage over the Russian Navy on “force ratio match”, where this relates to Russia’s “very specific, sophisticated capabilities to attack our undersea cables”.¹ This is of course accurate for a standard side-by-side comparison of high-end platforms, capabilities and, to an extent, strategic effect.²

But that is not the focus of our concern. We are seeking to highlight questions about the ability of the UK, JEF or NATO to protect underwater infrastructure from the damage that can be inflicted using unsophisticated non-military vessels such as trawlers and tankers (including those operating under the so-called shadow fleet) in crisis conditions where the allied fleet will have extensive other taskings. (We are sending a private letter setting out further detail on this issue, and why physical interdiction matters more than simply monitoring key sites). Questions about force availability are also becoming more urgent given the trends towards a growing US focus on the Indo-Pacific.

Relatedly, we have further questions relating to fleet readiness and your statements on it being “exceptionally operational”.³ We would value additional detail on plans to improve short notice operational readiness—particularly following recent the illustration of the UK’s limited assets to deploy

¹ [Q16](#)

² IISS, [Military Balance](#), 2026

³ [Q16](#)



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during the Iran crisis; as well as longstanding issues around vessel repair timelines, and the availability of the submarine fleet for long-duration deployments.⁴

We are grateful for your agreement to arrange a briefing in the Ministry of Defence, where we could discuss these and related issues with your team in greater detail. My team will be in touch regarding the details.

Best wishes,

Matt Western MP
Chair, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

⁴ Navy Lookout, "[Britain wakes up to the condition of its Navy](#)", 5 March 2026