

BARONESS GOLDIE DL
MINISTER OF STATE IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS

4/8/1/1/ap

29 September 2023

Dear Julie,

During the Lord Soames debate on the role of the Armed Forces and the UK's Defence Policy on 7th September 2023, you raised a number of questions which I will take in turn.

You raised a question regarding a recent news report into attempted Chinese hacking. The Department does not comment on the specific detail of security matters of this kind, but the data breach you referred to relates to a third-party contractor which provided security fencing to a limited number of military sites, as well as other government departments. There was no breach of MOD systems and we remain confident in the security of our military estate.

You raised a broader question regarding Defence's relations with China. The recently published Integrated Review Refresh 2023 (IRR) defines China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as *an epoch-defining and systemic challenge with implications for almost every area of government policy and the everyday lives of British people*. In responding to this challenge, the UK will strengthen our national security protections, align and cooperate with our partners, and engage where it is consistent with our interests.

The UK policy towards China will be anchored in our core national interests and our higher interest in an open and stable international order, based on the UN Charter and international law. Where it is consistent with these interests, we will engage constructively with the Chinese government, business and people and cooperate on shared priorities. But wherever the CCP's actions and stated intent threaten the UK's interests, we will take swift and robust action to protect them.

You raised a further question regarding Defence's response to the cyber threats. We now face a much broader range of strategic risks and pathways to escalation, driven in part by rapid developments in science and technology, and by expanding competition in the newer domains of space and cyber. Defence will be a global leader in cyber, ready to compete constantly, and fight when the threshold of armed conflict is exceeded, while remaining resilient to cyber threats.

This work is led by the National Cyber Force (NCF), which is a partnership between Defence and intelligence – including the MOD, GCHQ, SIS and Dstl – which carries out cyber operations on a daily basis to protect against threats to the UK, further the UK's foreign policy, support military operations, and prevent serious crime.

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You also raised a question regarding Defence spending. At the 2020 Spending Review, Defence received an uplift of £24bn in cash terms over 4 years – the biggest defence investment since the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, Defence has received an extra £11 billion over the next 5 years to improve the resilience and readiness of the country's forces.

This commitment cemented the UK's leadership in NATO and the Defence core budget is expected to grow to 2.25% GDP in 2024, exceeding the NATO target. The IRR has gone further by setting out the government's aspiration over the longer-term to invest 2.5% of GDP on defence, as the fiscal and economic circumstances allow.

You raised a further question regarding Defence's support to improve accommodation for service personnel. The provision of service accommodation is essential for the operational effectiveness of the Armed Forces and a key component of the offer we provide to our people. We are already scheduled to spend £1.73bn over the next ten years, but in recognition of the need for rapid improvements, we will inject a further £400 million over the next two years alone to provide the modern accommodation that our service families deserve.

Further, you raised the importance of the credibility of our conventional weapons. The deterrent effect of UK Defence comes not just from our nuclear capabilities, but also from the credibility of our conventional warfighting capabilities across all domains. As set out in the IRR and Defence Command Paper 2023, these forces must be sufficiently capable to deter potential adversaries from engaging in conflict, and to fight and win if deterrence fails. It is these credible warfighting capabilities that also make the UK a reliable and highly capable ally within NATO. We will therefore address shortfalls in capabilities where a less contested and less volatile world meant we were able to take greater risk. We will invest an additional £2.5 billion in our munitions and stockpiles, on top of the increased investment committed at the Autumn Statement. We will invest in such capabilities as complex weapons, general munitions, and operational spares stocks to meet the needs of sustained operation.

However, the foundation of our integrated approach to deterrence and defence remains having a credible, independent UK nuclear deterrent, assigned to the defence of NATO. That is why the Government has committed to a once-in-two-generations programme to modernise our nuclear forces.

Finally, you asked about the recruitment of the Army Reserves. I answered this in the Chamber, but for the sake of completeness in my response to you I will reiterate that the Army is continuing to implement Future Soldier which will see a Whole Force of over 100,000 comprising 73,000 Regulars and 30,100 Reserves.

How they are used, not what number they total, will define our success. Plans are underway to combine improved inflow and improved retention to address and maintain resilient growth and we will of course draw on the bold recommendations of the Haythornthwaite Review. I hope this explains the position.

I am placing a copy of this letter in the Library of the House.

*Yours sincerely,
Annabel Selous*

BARONESS GOLDIE DL