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WEBINAR

EUROPEAN SECURITY AT THE CROSSROADS:
RUSSIA, NATO'S HAGUE SUMMIT, AND BRITAIN'S STRATEGIC DEFENCE REVIEW

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PANEL DISCUSSION:

MODERATOR: MICHAEL E. O'HANLON

Philip H. Knight Chair in Defense and Strategy, Senior Fellow and Director, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology, The Brookings Institution

FIONA HILL

Senior Fellow, Center on the United States and Europe, The Brookings Institution

THE RT. HON. LORD GEORGE ROBERTSON OF PORT ELLEN

Former Secretary General, 1999-2003, NATO

Member, House of Lords of the United Kingdom

THOMAS WRIGHT

Senior Fellow, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology,
The Brookings Institution

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O'HANLON: Greetings, everyone. Good morning, good afternoon, wherever you may be. Thank you for joining us. I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Brookings Institution. I have a distinct honor and privilege today to be moderating a panel to discuss European security, focusing on the United Kingdom's recent strategic defense review. And we have two of the three chief authors of that report with us today. And I'll introduce them in just a moment, as well as my colleague Tom Wright, who will, along with myself, join the conversation in a broader discussion of European security will begin, as I say, with the United Kingdom's recent release of its strategic defense review, a major and historic study, really, that looks to take stock of where the United Kingdom is and where European security and global security are at this point in world history and decide how the United Kingdoms should best respond to the challenge before us. The timing is excellent for a number of reasons, including that next week NATO will convene at The Hague for an annual summit. And of course, the moment is very important in regard to how NATO is planning its own forces, how NATO's trying to address the burden sharing question, as well as challenges from new technologies and not least Vladimir Putin's Russia.

So let me begin with a little bit of an introduction and then explain how we'll proceed and then turn some questions over to the panelists. We are truly honored today to have Lord George Robertson join us. He hails from Scotland and hence is Lord Robertson of Port Ellen. He was a member of parliament in the United Kingdom. He was secretary of state for defense under Tony Blair. He became NATO secretary general thereafter, and he has been a major force in intellectual and strategic circles ever since on matters concerning British, European, and NATO and world security. So we're truly honored to have George Robertson with us today. One of his co-authors on this UK strategic defense review acting in her own capacity in that role was our great Fiona Hill, my colleague and Tom's colleague at Brookings, where she is a senior fellow. Again, she'll be speaking today in her own capacity. And in the review itself, she was acting beyond the bounds of her Brookings role. So just to underscore the independence. We'll hear general commentary about the review, but also critique of where we stand in European security, the work that's still going to have to be done even with this excellent review pointing some ways forward for Britain. So this is not meant to be simply a promulgation of its findings, but to use that report as a way to tee up a broader discussion of where we are in security in Europe today. And Tom Wright, my very good friend and excellent colleague who had been on the National Security Council for President Biden, but has since returned to Brookings, author of "By All Means Short of War," and columnist for the Atlantic, a prolific writer in many, many fora and many ways and delighted to have him.

So what we'll do today, I'm gonna stop here in a moment and turn things over first to Lord Robertson, then to Fiona, and then to Tom, as they each highlight the two or three most important things they would want people to take away from the UK strategic review. So we'll begin there. And then we'll go for a second round talking about perhaps points in the review that are often

overlooked or points of concern. Challenges of implementation, sort of the second order discussion of the review. And then naturally into a third round where we situate this review in broader NATO and European security policy. So let me just, before turning the floor to Lord Robertson first, let me remind folks you can find this review on the web under UK strategic defense review. And I think I'm not going to say too much to let the panelists do the discussion of what's in the review. But just one or two words from me as I read it, I'm struck that the emphasis is on quality and modernization and technology more than on the size of the British defense establishment. There is not a call for a big expansion. There is a call for more resources. And Fiona and Lord Robertson actually in their preface, their own personal preface with General Richard Barron's, talk about the desire to keep pushing the British Defense it upward, although that would be a gradual ongoing process. And so these are some of the big themes. There's an emphasis on cyber, an emphasis on surface to surface precision missiles, an emphasis on drones and robotics, modernizing the British forces more quickly based on lessons we're learning from the Ukraine battlefield and beyond. So again, I think if there's one overall theme that jumps out at me, it's the emphasis on quality and technology rather than size. But let me now let the panelists give you the real deal. Lord Robertson, thank you for joining us and over to you.

ROBERTSON: Thank you, Mike. And it's difficult to sum up 43,000 words and 143 pages of a strategic defense review. But as I've been going around in the aftermath of publication, it's to say to the British people, you are not safe. You are not saved. There are some threshold threats to you. Undersea cables, fuel pipelines, critical national infrastructure on a knife edge, and the possibility that the gray zone will be used to attack by people who have already declared war on the west. And in addition to that, in a volatile world, you have the return to great power politics with Russia solving a foreign policy issue by the use of violence. In trying to take over and subordinate a neighboring nation state. So that's visible as well. And therefore the British people, the people of the NATO countries, have to be willing to pay the premium on the insurance policy that is basically defense. None of us would do without insurance on our homes or on our cars. Why should we therefore try to penny pinch on the insurance policy? Indeed on national survival and on safety as a whole. So the review is thorough, it has been consulted to the last possible degree and it covers the whole panoply of defense for people through technology, through acquisition right through to the deployment and use of armed forces themselves. And it talks really about an all-of-nation approach involving everybody in society and not simply the people that we have. In uniform from one point or another. So harnessing the technology that we're seeing on display in Ukraine, bringing it in to part of the Ministry of Defense, rebuilding war fighting readiness. That is the only way in which we will deter adversaries and potential adversaries for the future and therefore there needs to be an accent on that. Homeland resilience, an integrated force. And the need to rebuild warfighting readiness as a deterrent against any adversaries who might seek to challenge us or the NATO alliance.

O'HANLON: Thank you, and that's an excellent framing, especially from the big picture strategic perspective. Fiona, over to you for your two or three most important points, please.

HILL: Thank you so much, Mike. I just want to make sure that everyone can hear me okay. Can you give me a thumbs up? Yes, thank you. Because I've found myself in a strange location for this webinar, which wasn't intended. But actually, that in a way is very appropriate for the review itself, because what we were looking at in the review was the fact that the United Kingdom, like many other European nations, and in fact, also the United States, was postured for a very different environment. In the post-Cold War world, we didn't anticipate that we would be dealing again with major state conflict and especially a full-on land war on the European continent, which is of course what we have in the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is the largest military operation in Europe since World War II, a phenomenon we thought that we never would see again. And so the United Kingdom's armed forces were very much postured, as George has already essentially laid out. For expeditionary overseas operations, and overseas meaning even beyond Europe, beyond the idea that there might be some kind of intervention of the kind and nature that we saw in the 1990s in the Balkans, for example. So again, there wasn't an expectation that the country would have to be ready for the kinds of circumstances that we're dealing with now.

And of course, it isn't just about Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It's also how we see the larger strategic developments I mean, we're of course now on what looks like the verge of, and we're already in the middle of it, a major conflict between Iran and Israel. The Middle East has been in turmoil for a large period. We have wars in Africa and elsewhere, and now we're definitely in a situation in which we can expect conflicts to keep increasing unless we can find some recipe and some formula for being able to push back against these and to deter them. Also through collective action so the other important elements of this is that the report does not focus on the UK alone it looks very much at the idea of the UK working with allies including the United States but recognizing that that's has shifted quite dramatically. I think we can talk about this as we move on there is an emphasis on NATO first but thinking about building up the European pillar of NATO which is relevant for our discussion today ahead of the NATO summit of course George, Lord Robertson was NATO's secretary general back in the day, as well as defense minister of the UK. So we were thinking about it in that context.

But I think the main innovation here, beyond recognizing the need for an integrated force, the digital age that we're dealing with, and the return of major state conflict, is that the homeland of every country, the U.S. included, not just the United Kingdom, but every European country isn't as under threat and the kinds of challenges that George laid out. And Article 3, of course, of NATO necessitates NATO members being able to defend their own homeland. So that is actually a pretty

key element of this report. It's the kind of approach that we've seen other European countries like Finland, Norway, Sweden, particularly Nordic and Scandinavian or Baltic friends already pay attention to. And then it's that emphasis on uh collective security after that we haven't negated the UK's broader larger international commitments because the UK obviously has a rather unique role in having a number of overseas territories and bases but we're really in the report bringing things back to the arena that we're all talking about here which is Europe, European security, and NATO and the critical national infrastructure is a major part of this.

O'HANLON: Excellent, thank you. Tom, over to you for your two or three big picture impressions of the report before we go to another round. It gets a little more granular.

WRIGHT: Mike, thank you, and it's good to be with everyone. I'd like to commend and praise Fiona and Lord Robertson for an excellent and very timely report, which I know is a huge lift and undertaking, but I think it's incredibly important and has just become more important, I think, since you started this a while back. To me, I think the report does a great job of addressing or prescribing a pathway forward in the light of three sort of major changes. The first, as Fiona mentioned, is Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the return of a major land war to Europe, and really an intensification of strategic competition and a return of war and conflict in many parts of the world. We're in a very, very different environment than we were 10 years ago, let alone in the 1990s, and I think the report is incredibly important in dealing with that. The second issue, which I'm sure we'll talk more about, is just what we're seeing in Ukraine and in the Middle East on the changing nature of warfare. Israel's operation last week, Ukraine's spider web operation a few weeks ago, I think or just the beginning of a fundamental transformation in conflict away from. More traditional operations toward drones, toward using new technologies, including artificial intelligence to launch audacious attacks. And then the final piece, which obviously isn't a major part of the report, but I think is the backdrop, is what's happening in the United States and the U.S. sort of pulling back from European security and wanting Europe to take more of a role. So I think that's the, that's what the report, I think, is dealing with. What I liked, Mike, specifically about what it said was I think the focus on the hybrid and the focus of the whole of government, whole of society approach, understanding that the homeland or domestic, the domestic front, the home front is sort of vulnerable because of these new technologies, especially the drone piece. And then secondly, what I liked was the emphasis on more spending, obviously building up, but particularly on munitions and drones and understanding that, you know, the technologies are changing, so we can't just rely on tanks and other heavy vehicles. And we have a munitions deficit and there needs to be a buildup of the defense industrial base. So I'll leave it there, but I'm looking forward to the conversation.

O'HANLON: Excellent, thank you all. So let me now pose a question that asks you to dig down maybe one or two levels below the broad framing and look at some of the specifics that you

recommend in the report. And if I could just sort of set the table with a couple of numbers that many viewers will be familiar with, but others may not be. Today's British Armed Forces are in the ballpark of 135,000 active-duty personnel across all the services and then another 35,000 or so reservists of one type or another. Means it's a pretty small military, certainly by comparison even with Britain, excuse me, with France and Germany or with Britain's past, and only one-tenth the size of the American military even though Britain has one-fifth the population of the United States. And so that's just to set the table on where we are as a starting point. And the British defense budget is about 2.3% of gross domestic product, about 1% less than the United States and also quite a bit less than NATO appears poised to recommend or to require at its summit next week. And so those are some of the big picture numbers that folks may wanna have and that they're sort of working memory as we have this discussion. But the question I would wanna put to you all is out of the various specific recommendations in the report, what jumps out at you the most in terms of specific areas of investment, specific areas, of effort. I mentioned surface-to-surface missiles. Putting drones on aircraft carriers, trying to make the army more lethal but not make it bigger. These are some of the ideas that jumped out at me. I wondered which ones you considered to be the most important. Again, starting, if I could, with you, Lord Robertson.

ROBERTSON: I think the points that you make are very valid, and I find it difficult, you know, people have said, what's the most important recommendation? to me. Well, they all knit together and that's the benefit of the whole report that we sought to do this comprehensively. From bottom up we were going to look at what the three services did alongside the defense reform proposals which would give real power and money to the chief of the defense staff who ceases to be a chairman of the of the chiefs like the American model and becomes much more and directly responsible and if anything that and the uh and the integrated force are the key elements here. They link up with the digital backbone that is going to be required for the future. It learns lessons from Ukraine but doesn't take it as more than an indication of the future war. But the whole principle about rebuilding war fighting through NATO plus, the integrated force, the national armaments director connecting to industry, all of these component parts. In building deterrence, which is the absolute requirement in a complicated world where you do not know where your enemy is going to come to. Rebuilding deterrence that we gave up at the end of the Cold War is the principal priority of this review and personally I hold it as being a real priority as well.

O'HANLON: Before I go to Fiona with the same question, could I ask you, Lord Robertson, for just a little more detail? You being Scottish, of course, makes this more appropriate even to ask about the nuclear and submarine emphasis in the report, which I did think was striking. It was prominent. It was interesting. It seemed like you had identified a priority in that area. And the related question is what fraction of the British defense budget is devoted to the nuclear component of the armed forces. If I could press you on that a little bit, please.

ROBERTSON: Yeah, well, I hope that your viewers don't need simultaneous translation because I come from Scotland. And anyway, Fiona comes from the northeast of England. So we've both got impenetrable accents for a lot of Americans who I find don't really speak proper English. Anyway, I visited Louisiana to see my sister once and I got a distinct impression that that was a very foreign language that they were using. No, the point you make is right. Our nuclear deterrent is very important. It's very important in the Kremlin, I can tell you, because they consider it to be one of the most important proponents of Britain's defense contribution. But it takes up nearly 20% of the budget. That's a big chunk out of the budget and it's not counted against NATO as a defense planning but it's still there and it's committed to NATO unlike other nuclear forces so it performs a contribution to the nuclear umbrella for the rest of Europe. But it does in many ways crowd out conventional defense of the country and therefore although we are committed to it and to the succession to the dreadnought summaries that are being built at the moment. We are very conscious of the need to bolster conventional defense. But the fact is that, you know, the United Kingdom is an island. We are surrounded by water. The bulk of the cables coming across the Atlantic land in the United Kingdom before they go in to the rest of Europe. So we have a primary responsibility for the North Atlantic, for the high north, even for the Arctic now in terms of security priorities. And therefore the submarine force is going to be increasingly important. People have pointed out the fact that the Russians have been placing sensors on the seabed and we've already seen these shadowy cargo vessels dragging their anchors in the area where cables are being laid. So there is a priority built into the review, in terms of the war-fighting readiness, making sure that Britain has got that absolutely right.

O'HANLON: Thank you very much. Fiona, over to you for some of the specifics that you consider the most important in the report.

HILL: Well, I think that George has highlighted the main one of the importance of the integration of the force, which was something that had been underway for a while, but that the Strategic Defense Review gave a special impetus to creating a clear line, not just of command, but of decision-making, which is very important, setting up of a Strategic Military Headquarters, as George mentioned, the National Armaments Director, who will be able to make key procurement decisions. But one of the things that actually shocked all of us the most, was how long it took from a request for proposal for a project to the actual implementation of a project, from innovation all the way through to application, a minimum of six years in some cases, which was a little startling. And of course we've seen from the battlefield in Ukraine that you need six minutes, six days, six weeks to be able to turn things around and again, Ukraine is the last war in many respects when you start looking at these kinds of issues, but you know that you have to be as adaptable as possible and to keep up with the pace of innovation, which is not just coming, of course, from Russia, because

Russia is also picking up on innovation from Iran and from China and, you know, from all other countries, but that, you know a country has to be able to make decisions and be decisive about the implementation to be to shrink those timelines. That was really very important.

But I think the other crucial element about this is the whole of society approach to this. And we heard time and time again, including from citizens panels that we set up, that we randomly selected and polling that we did at a national level – which is unprecedented in this kind of report – that people thought that they were under ensured, you know in the sense that George was talking about that they weren't really prepared for any eventuality. They also understood that the threat was changing and that the United Kingdom was vulnerable, especially when it came to critical national infrastructure. They might not be quite so convinced of you know some of the larger threats; I mean there's lots of debates about that no matter where you are, but they definitely saw the risk of sabotage, because I mean there's been many incidents in the United Kingdom including the use of polonium against Alexander Litvinenko, a weapons-grade nerve agent against the Skripals in Salisbury, you know Novichok, I mean people are very well aware of all of these. They're aware of the cyber intrusions and threats, they were aware in fact of sabotage operations, of blowing up warehouses. And they are increasingly aware of the nature of the threats that George laid out to undersea cables, satellite jamming, GPS, and also to critical fuel lines. One pipeline from Norway brings 70% of UK gas, for example, and that really does concentrate the mind for people. So there was a kind of sense of our engagement with the population and also there was an enormous group of people involved in this, just to be clear, and what was also unprecedented was, we threw out submissions to the public to ask them to get their reactions to the propositions that were posted out on the Ministry of Defense website. And we got kind of 8,000 responses from individuals and groups. And I think it was like 14,000 in terms of all kinds of different elements that we sifted through to see what people were most concerned about. And that really did underscore that everyone has a role to play in defense. It's all about a mindset. We need to have a national dialogue about this. And the watchword became resilience, a desire for the United Kingdom to be more resilient. It's not just about fighting a war but about having that adaptability and that ability to be able to change course, depending on the kind of challenges that are thrown your way. And again, getting back to what George said, having an integrated force, having common platforms that everyone can have access to, irrespective of which service they're in. Which means that you can integrate the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force more clearly and have common training across different platforms, especially in the digital realm, for data analysis and targeting, for example, becomes more and more important. But people in the UK, insofar as we were able to consult, obviously want to have a bigger say in that whole thinking about UK defense, so I think that was a very important breakthrough.

O'HANLON: Can I follow up with one question for you before going to Tom on that same theme? You talk about whole of society, but we also know that the British military is very small. Most people, like here in the United States, are not in the military. And I don't think you're calling for a big expansion of the British armed forces, nor are you calling for return to conscription. So do you feel that you're going to be able to elicit greater participation from that society in recruiting and you know, just even meeting the goals that, you know, even with a relatively modest force, Britain has not been quite meeting its goals for recruiting, as I understand it? How are you hoping to solve that problem?

HILL: Well, for people who've got a chance to read the report, and it's not as daunting as it appears, by the way, it's actually written in nice manageable chunks, you'll see a whole section about reserves, both the strategic reserve of people who previously served and depending on the timeline past their retirement from the active forces, but also the idea of a broader set of reserves that might be more civilian reserves in order to look after critical national infrastructure, for example, engineers, software specialists, for example. I mean that already happens in real life; if you think about in the United States the first line of defense for cyber is often Microsoft and other big corporations are all of us you know here in our workplaces you know being alert and attentive to any kind of signs of a cyber intrusion. We also were thinking about cadets and expanding the groups of younger people who might be interested in the military and in the training that it offers in schools, for example. Putting more of an emphasis on upskilling and training in schools, which is already part of a major debate in the UK. So this would involve the defense sector working not just with the private sector on thinking of the kind of skills that you need for this modern age, but also the Department of Education, across the board with various other ministries, and thinking through how Britain needs to posture itself. To give everyone some kind of role. The UK has a very long tradition of voluntary service, by the way. And also, you know, that is a way of encouraging civil society, that kind of civic participation and kind of thinking about how you can contribute to making the UK more resilient. So we've covered a number of issues. Obviously, the Ministry of Defense is not in charge of all of those. And part of the importance of the rollout of the report, and George was doing a lot of that. From the House of Lords was engaging across Whitehall with all of the other departments and ministers, not just the Chancery and Number 10, for example, on thinking in ways in which the Ministry of Defense could be working with them more closely, you know, transportation, education, health services, because military medicine depends heavily on the National Health Service, for examples, and all of these had to be considered.

O'HANLON: Thank you, Fiona. Tom, over to you for your takeaways and big picture observations, but also again, one level down of granularity from the original intervention.

WRIGHT: Yeah, and thanks, Mike. I mean, one prism through which I've sort of looked at this has just been through the prism of, you know, working on assistance to Ukraine over the last three years, very closely with the UK, obviously on that. And one of the things that I think is a core sort of takeaway is just that we didn't have enough stuff, the way in which munitions were expended in that conflict was more rapid, I think, than anyone anticipated. And so I do think that we collectively, individually and collectively, have a lot to do on rebuilding our defense industrial base and increasing our stockpiles of munitions. And so if we do need them in the future. That we have a good buffer and then we're able to reconstitute that over time. And the report does talk about munitions. It provides, I think, for 7,000 new long-range missiles, which I think the UK, obviously through Storm Shadow, the provision of that to Ukraine, I think, has helped significantly. But again, there have been limitations on numbers, just as we have had limitations on our own. Stock. So, you know, munitions and long range doesn't usually get a huge amount sort of of attention. But I think it is an intrinsically important part of to turn. So I was pleased to see that highlighted. And then I just think the report is really ahead of the curve in terms of understanding, you the new way of war, the transitions that we're seeing, and the importance are really fully integrating. You know, AI systems and drones and the like into, into their plan. So I think it's, it makes some very good progress there. And the final thing, just somewhat Lord Robertson said about the, about the nuclear triad. I think, you know in the past, I think the UK was sometimes criticized for spending so much in that. And you know some people here would say, well, the US provides for that. So you don't need to. Focus that much on that. You need to focus on the conventional. I think when we see these major changes here in the US with the Trump administration, they haven't pulled back from extended deterrents, of course, but the direction of travel I think raises, you know, concerns. So I think France and the UK sort of investing in their own deterrent and then maybe thinking about the broader role that that will play in Europe is very important as well.

O'HANLON: Well, that's a great jumping off point for my next question. And maybe we could go reverse order on this one if you don't mind. But I'd like to ask you all to situate this strategic defense review from the UK in the context of broader NATO planning as we approach the Hague summit, but more generally as we have very fundamental conversations about how much of the burden of defending Europe, Europeans and Canadians perhaps should bear. And as we think about what percent of GDP of each country should be devoted to the military. And, you know, one just simple quantitative way to spark the conversation is to note that your review, Lord Robertson and Fiona, is calling for Britain to reach 2.5% of GDP in the near term and then perhaps in the next Parliament when conditions allow 3.0%, which is still going to be short of what appears to be NATO's goal of 3.5% that we expect to have formally announced next week. And granted, you know, there's always a distance between pledges and aspirations on the one hand and action on the other. And so just seeing an upward movement is going to be good news. But my question is, do you anticipate any kind of tension as Britain is laying out this big vision for defense, but still

falling short of what appear to be the new NATO targets? And if I could add one more point, and then I'll just turn it back to you all, starting with Tom. Paul Stares and I, he's at the Council on Foreign Relations, we wrote a report trying to estimate how much deployable conventional force European nations ideally might have to help protect the Baltic states and other parts of NATO's Eastern Plank. And we estimated something in the vicinity of 12 brigades from all of Europe, all of Western Europe, combined with associated air power. But the Atlantic Council has estimated that right now, Europe could probably only provide about four brigades to the Baltic States in timely fashion. And so I wondered if we need to ask NATO to even think bigger about 3.5% of GDP, but also about projectable conventional forces for the Eastern Plank. And that's just meant as a provocation to all of you to try to situate this report in the broader context of fundamentals of European security. Tom, do you mind beginning with that question, please?

WRIGHT: Yeah, I'll let Lord Robertson and Fiona deal with the UK specific spending question part. But I would just say, look, I think we're at a moment where everyone sort of agrees in Europe that Europe needs to do more. There's commitment to those larger, you know, and spending numbers the time frame shifts a little bit but you know there is broad commitment. And to that, that, and there's a willingness to engage with the Trump administration on how to make this work. And they're very keen to keep the U S involved. So I think that is, you know, that that is sort of the, you know, just as a level set, I think everyone is sort of on board, generally speaking, with that. And the summit probably will, will certainly amplify all of that next week and it will hopefully go fairly positively. But I think it gets much more difficult from there, right? Because firstly, even if you spend quite a lot, there's just an enormous amount of room to make up. And if you just look at the defense industrial base side, Europe doesn't have the capacity to be able to do the type of things, Mike, that you were mentioning, and being able to deploy brigades to the Baltics in a short period of time. And these are very politically difficult questions, you know, and I don't think in the United States or in Europe, there is sort of the level of urgency that we would have here in this panel or people would have in the foreign policy, national security community overall. And so asking people to endorse, you now, in some cases, not quite a doubling of defense spending, but very significant sort of increases, I think is going to be politically hard. It's important and necessary. But it will be very politically difficult. And then we are likely to see just a continued deterioration in the security environment, which may obviously add impetus to those efforts, but will also create daily challenges for the governments to respond to that will complicate their longer-term plans. So I think it's going to be a pretty bumpy road. That's why I really hope. That the United States remains fully engaged in Europe and views this as a glide path to try to get Europe in a more self-reliant position. But I don't think we know that with confidence at the moment given where things are here.

O'HANLON: Thank you. Fiona, same set of questions to you, if I could, to put this UK review in broader context.

HILL: Well, I think that in actual fact, there is a sense of urgency, particularly in some quarters about all of these issues, beyond, you know, kind of all of us, and that was reflected in many of the interactions that we as the review team had with counterparts across Europe. You already see, in fact, three NATO members, the UK, Germany, and Canada, forward deployed in the Baltic states, for example, and, you know, discussions about how that can be backed up, you know, in terms of perhaps even the forward deployment of more equipment in Europe from countries that may be far away because, I mean, obviously, you know, the UK also has a rapid reaction force, which it's talking about building up more. In fact, that's part of the review, you know, with France, but, you know, getting, moving equipment and people from Britain isn't as rapid as one might want if the problem is way over on the eastern flank. So there's all kinds of discussions about, you know, how you could resolve that and already prefigure it. There are countries like Poland that are already approaching 5%, 4.7, maybe look more than that now of GDP and defense spending because of a sense of urgency. Obviously Finland, Sweden and Norway have been revisiting all of their resilience and defense plans. The Baltic states are doing the same because the closer you are to Russia, the more sense of emergency that you have. And also seeing Ukraine as the front line for their own defense, not just. Know, kind of how they defend their own territory.

So there are countries that are already deeply engaged in thinking about this, and the United Kingdom has a leadership role in a sub-NATO regional military configuration, the Joint Expeditionary Force, the JEF, which is the Nordic, Baltic countries, and the United Kingdom, and there's been a series of summits on the JEF space, discussing all of these issues. And there are lots of initiatives now because I think you know what Thomas said and George, I'm sure, will pick this up in more detail about the public side of spending is an obvious constraint but one of the big issues in the report was how to reinvigorate and re-encapsulate and refocus and reframe the public-private relationships and how to have a different relationship with industry. And also the private sector in terms of private capital, discussions about creating defense banks or defense funds for example. Those accidents in Europe right now the Scandinavian countries for example have a lot of wherewithal to set up funds, private funds that could be an invested in the defense sector. I mean it's, it's likely of course that U.S. firms will, defense firms will want to participate in these kinds of funds too, I mean we shouldn't obviously rule those out. So there's a lot of discussion about how to address this very issue that Tom quite rightly underscores. So it's not that I'm wildly optimistic, but I'm a bit more hopeful that action is being taken and we could see signs of that as we were moving through with the review. And of course, it's the UK government that made the decision to increase the defense spending to 2.5% and 3%. As we were doing the report, George will tell you about the frame that we were given, which had a lot of constraints, but because of an increasing sense of urgency, the UK government literally already bit the bullet and is

engaged in much more discussions with its European counterparts. But I'll turn it over to George to give a little more detail on those points.

O'HANLON: Lord Robertson, over to you, please.

ROBERTSON: The whole question about money and the proportion of GNP, the respective defense is undoubtedly going to be one of the central issues at the Hague summit. But actually, what matters is what the money buys. There are budgets that are 30% based on pensions, and that doesn't translate into capabilities. So readiness and equipment as a proportion of the budget have been broadened, you know, over the years by Stoltenberg and others. And I know that Mark Rutte is going to demand much more quality of output than simply the inputs that are dictated by the amount of money spent. What I would worry about is lip service being paid to certain proportions and certain percentage. I know how difficult it was for Fiona and I to get to the point where our minister of finance, the chancellor of the Exchequer, agreed to 2.5%, so that's up 0.2% in the year after next, and then 3% from the next parliament. That was a Herculean task to do it, and it allowed us to finance the defense review as a whole. So what are countries like Canada gonna do? Portugal, Spain, Italy? All of them are not even up to the 2% level that was dictated by the Wales summit 11 years ago. How are they going to get to the figures? And there's a great danger that a target is established and lip service is paid to it without it actually turning into real and genuine capabilities. It's outputs that matter much more than inputs.

The worry will be that the Hague will be dominated by the American approach and the Donald Trump approach to the alliance as a whole. And he's only going to support countries that are actually spending the same money as that. And actually the three and a half plus one and a half that's now being mooted is actually in excess of what America has spent at the present moment. So that there's a degree of unreality, sometimes about the figures that are that are involved in it. And I hope, therefore, that Donald Trump, you know, and I share three things with Donald Trump: we both have Scottish mothers, we were both born in 1946, and we both play golf. I don't kid anybody on about my handicap, but you know I hope that he recognizes that NATO is a huge bargain for the United States of America. Because of the imbalance in NATO, it gives a leadership role to the United States that it wouldn't otherwise have. And the 500 million a year that is spent by the European countries on defense magnifies the amount of money that America spends on defense. And by having disproportionate influence around the North Atlantic table it magnifies and exaggerates the influential role that they have and no other country in the world has got 31 automatic allies sitting with you round a table every single week and I think you know most American administrations come in wanting to sort out NATO and they all when they sit around that table and look around then the number of allies who are sitting there with them I'm with them. In

times of peace and war, they realize how fortunate they are. And I think that Donald Trump may well come to that and should come to the conclusion as well.

O'HANLON: Thank you. I wondered if anybody wanted to, I'm gonna weave in a few audience questions here. I've already been doing so in fact, and I wanna thank those who have been contacting us because you've helped me frame my questions more effectively, but you can email to events at brookings.edu. Along those lines, Lord Robertson, maybe I'll begin with you to ask to specify a little further what you meant there at the end. I wonder if anyone else is sharing my hope, I don't wanna say prediction, Donald Trump is in fact starting to like NATO a little more than maybe he did six months ago, because for one thing, to give credit where credit's due, I suppose, even though I don't much like his tactics, he does seem to be pushing the burden-sharing debate forward in some sense, even if some of the numbers are unrealistic, even if there's too much fixation on percentage GDP, and even if the way in which he's threatened not to defend allies puts deterrence at risk and therefore is not something I would support. But nonetheless. Is there a possibility that we're seeing the Trump administration embrace the idea of NATO a little more than it did just before, just after Inauguration Day? If I could start with you, Lord Robertson.

ROBERTSON: Well, I hope so. It's as difficult now to see into the mind of Donald Trump as it is to see it into the minds of Vladimir Putin. You know, and both of these individuals are having a huge influence on our life as well. But I hope, I do hope that President Trump does begin to recognize the value that NATO is to him as well, but he has driven. European allies in combination with what Britain is doing in Ukraine to recognize that they have to do more in their own interests, in their security interests as a whole. But you know, one of the great problems, and this is the second broadcast that I've done today, you know we're talking to ourselves, the people who are watching this program are all convinced. That they all believe that we should be spending more money on defense, they all believe that that defense is the ultimate insurance policy in a world of unprecedented upheaval but that does not extend much outside that bubble. The the raw opinion is that the public opinion says yes spend more money on defense but when you then say, where's it going to come from?, that's when the consensus disappears. And the fact, the reality is that, you know, people will have to be taxed more or they will have to do without certain other elements. But that means, you know, what Fiona was saying already, that getting the message out to the general public is going to be hugely important. We had a general election campaign in the UK last year, which lasted six intensive, godforsaken weeks. And there was no mention of defense at all. That was followed by a leadership contest in the Conservative Party, and defense wasn't mentioned at all. Now everybody's talking about it, and yet the trade-offs that would be required in order to make the investment don't seem to be there as it stands at the moment. So, you know, we have to make sure that we get the message out to the wider, the wider countries in the alliance, as well as in the United States of America, that it is about their insurance. The safety of their families, their homes,

their children if we make the investment now. If you don't, you'll end up like the people in Mariupol in southeastern Ukraine, where one day you're walking in the streets quite happily and daily thinking about the cost of living and about the health of your children and the next day you are under a brutal occupation. That's the reality of today's world.

O'HANLON: Fiona, do you sense any trendline in how the Trump administration is thinking about NATO?

HILL: Sorry. Well, again, I mean, I think for all of us, it's hard to really ascertain this. And I guess we're all waiting on tenterhooks for the actual summit itself to see how this goes off, because President Trump does like to perform on these occasions. I mean he actually relishes being in these larger fora for the platform that it gives him on a whole range of other issues that are not in fact related to the issue at hand. And we saw that he blew off the G7. So. There is also a risk that given what's happening in the Middle East, he may declare NATO obsolete in that context in all seriousness and either forego coming or cut short his participation. So that's actually something I think that we should be concerned about because it's really the challenge of proving that NATO is an asset to the United States. I mean, George already laid it out, but it ought to be self-evident, but it really isn't. And that's been a problem since the first Trump administration, that the president thinks that NATO is a rip-off and that European allies are ripping off the United States. He said that over and over again. I mean he's absolutely right that European nations, the UK included, needed to step up in terms of providing for the world defense, and contributing more to a European pillar of NATO and that's absolutely you know something that is on the cards for this NATO summit. But, you know, I don't think it is the case, I mean, beyond members of Congress and the Senate as well, that a majority of people in the United States have really thought about what NATO offers for the United States. Clearer during the Cold War, but the threat environment is so much more diverse. The debates about China and Asia and the rise of China as a military and nuclear threat, the discussions of wars again in the Middle East and elsewhere, and NATO's relevance. These are all still going to go on. So I mean, I think the biggest point here is for European members of NATO and Canada, those that are committed to the collective defense that is within this alliance and that see the necessity of this to really kind of step up and to take NATO seriously in the way that we've all aligned here as well. Not to despite the United States, but in spite of some of the debates that are raging here. But the one big thing is to make sure that we don't have a rupture with the U.S. and I'm sure that this is something that Tom would talk about as well. I think for everyone, having a complete rupture with the United States is kind of a swing to the side where European and Canadian members of NATO think that it's best to move on absolutely 100% without the United States would also be a mistake.

O'HANLON: Tom, any thoughts, please?

WRIGHT: Yeah, I guess, Mike, I would like to agree with you, but I sort of don't. And, you know, I think when you look at the, it's hard to tell, of course, with the president, I think he, you know, the summit is set up for success, but a lot depends on what he will say, and he's capable of saying really anything at any given meeting in press availability. But I would like to just draw everyone's attention to one story that I thought was indicative recently, which was that the U.S. ambassador to NATO, Matt Whitaker, you know, issued a post on Twitter on X and he said, you what happens in the Indo-Pacific matters for transatlantic security, that's why NATO works with partners globally, talking about NATO engagement with Japan and South Korea. And then minutes later, the Deputy Secretary of State Landau tweeted out by accident, he obviously didn't get the memo of our deputies committee meeting on this very issue. NATO is still a solution in search of a problem. And then Landau deleted that tweet minutes later because obviously it was a private message. We saw a similar thing in the Signal chat where on the Houthi campaign the principals were basically saying, and the vice president was saying that one downside of doing the operation is it would help Europe. And they didn't want to help Europe in any way and make Europe pay for the operation. And so what I see is at all levels of the administration is just a real failure or refusal to to acknowledge that Europe is important for America's security, whether either through NATO or sort of individually. Now, I think to us, that's very obviously completely clear. Right. But when you have the deputy secretary of state saying NATO has no purpose, setting aside the fact that Russia is engaged in a major land war in Europe and NATO is important for deterrence or there were global issues to do with China. I think that's deeply concerning and I think it shows we're not out of the woods yet, even though I think we could tell a positive story about how that has gone. Very final thing I'd say just on defense spending, I think is good Europe spending more, but I would just point out that Europe spent had larger increases in defense spending under the Biden administration than in Trump's first term, right? So it's not, I think, fully connected to this. We're going to leave tough love approach. I think Europe is spending more for its own reasons. And I think there's some data to show that when you engage as real partners and allies, that they will respond positively.

O'HANLON: Okay, collecting the final questions, I'm gonna do one last round if I could. And I think I can condense the various questions into two that I'll invite each one of you to answer one or both briefly. Feel free to just take one and I'll start with you, Lord Robertson. And one question has to do with how Britain does view the Indo-Pacific and the potential rivalry with China and what United States considers to be its top strategic concern. China as a so-called pacing challenge, the terms the Austin Biden Pentagon used. To what extent do you envision any greater role for Britain militarily vis-a-vis China and the Indo-Pacific? And that's one question. The other question, is there anything we should say today about Ukraine and about our collective efforts in terms of what next step is required to maximize the odds of shoring up Ukraine's security and getting. To a successful

ceasefire negotiation. So those are two very disparate questions. Feel free to just take one or the other, but go ahead, Lord Robertson, and this can be our wrap-up round, please.

ROBERTSON: Let me take Ukraine first. I think we've got to stay the course. Don't lose attention. You would notice that because the attention had moved to Iran, that Vladimir Putin launched a massive attack on Kiev last night. We've got make sure that we keep the West's attention focused there because it really, really matters. Not just to Europe, but to the world as a whole. That the Ukrainian people prevail and that Vladimir Putin is defeated.

On your first question about the Asia-Pacific, we're in a way moving away from that Asia-Pacific joke that came in the previous government's integrated review. We're still there because the AUKUS agreement applies especially with Australia, and we've got a carrier battle group out in the Red Sea at the present moment heading for that, for that region. But the American commander in the region to whom we spoke during our strategic defense review said he didn't want a permanent presence by the by the western countries in the region. What he wanted was intermittent visits to the to the region simply in order to bolster the huge American presence that was there at the moment, so our defense review is basically saying, America is inevitably going to focus on the Indo-Pacific, and that will mean they will have less attention in Europe. Therefore, Europe must do more in its own interest, and the United Kingdom has got to focus on the North Atlantic, the Atlantic bastion, and the increasing problems that are coming from the Arctic and the high north and the opening up of the northern sea passage. So there is a rebalancing that we acknowledge is taking place. But it's going to be hugely important for the future.

O'HANLON: Excellent, thank you. Fiona, over to you, please.

HILL: I was just going to suggest that Tom speaks first, because I've got a fire engine going by, so I'll let you go first.

O'HANLON: Got it. And then Fiona will help you out.

WRIGHT: So on Ukraine, I think the UK has played an incredibly important role in helping Ukraine overall in the war, but especially in the last few months. I think as the US has pulled back, I think diplomatically and militarily, I think that the UK's been really indispensable. And I think that's a great credit to successive governments. And there, but I think that will continue to be the case because the United States is not going to be, I think under the Trump administration by their own admission and statements is not going to leading, you know, in support for Ukraine. And this conflict will do more to chart the future of European security than maybe any other event that we see. And so I think it's incredibly important to maintain focus there on the Indo-Pacific. You know,

the administration is saying, you know, that Europe should just deal with Europe and the Indo-Pacific allies should just deal with the Indo-Pacific and shouldn't be involved in each other's theater. To me, that's a fundamental error because there are very important convergences of interest between the allies in both regions. Indo-Pacific allies helped Ukraine, and European allies helped the U.S. sort of compete with China, and democratic allies in the Indo-Pacific compete with China, especially on the tech side. So I take the point of permanent presence versus rotations, but I think it's very important that the UK continues to have an active interest and role in the Indo-Pacific.

O'HANLON: Excellent, and Fiona, over to you to wrap up, please.

HILL: Yes thanks and I would just endorse what George and Tom have both said and Tom's actually got a piece that's just out at Brookings about Ukraine and what needs to be done in support of it. Mike you've been writing about this recently as well but I think the main point at this stage is to deny Putin a victory, to deny the goals. That's what George means by defeating Putin, it's more defeating his ability to use force and violence. Are basically to extend Russia's control over Ukrainian territory and I think that you know the European states around Ukraine, including those of the members of the Joint Expeditionary Force that I mentioned before, the UK has played a very important leadership role, all have something to contribute here. And of course the UK takes very seriously obligations that it undertook to Ukraine back in 1994 under the Budapest Memorandum. When we pushed Ukraine to divest itself on the nuclear arsenal it inherited, we did promise Ukraine that will be there in some fashion to support them if anything untowards happened which is exactly what's happened. I think just as we finish up here that one of the key elements in supporting Ukraine is precisely the countering nuclear proliferation and as we see this conflict unfolding between Israel and Iran over Iran's nuclear arsenal thinking about the longer-term consequences of the acquisition of nuclear weapons not just by Iran but by Korea and other states that might use them. Against their neighbors, but coercive or all kinds of other purposes, I think we can see the importance just in that one element of continuing to help Ukraine hold the line. Ukraine might be in a very different position, might never have been invaded, had Ukraine been a nuclear power at the end of the 1990s. So we have to bear that in mind, and I think that that's kind of part of the reason that the UK has stepped forward as one of the permanent five nuclear powers in the UN context. UK and others have taken this responsibility very seriously.

O'HANLON: Thank you, this has been an excellent discussion. I've learned a lot and I think it's setting us up for some pretty attentive watching next week as NATO convenes at the Hague. Fingers crossed that it goes well. Also, personal note, a quick thank you to General Chris Cavoli, who I think is nearing his end of tenure as Supreme Allied Commander Europe. And I'm very happy to see that it appears the Trump administration has decided that an American should

succeed Cavoli in the longstanding tradition. But I wanna really thank all three of you, Lord Robertson, Fiona and Tom, for your expertise and your contributions today and wish everyone out there a very good rest of the week and weekend. Signing off from Brookings, thank you.

WRIGHT: Thank you.