

Lord Howell of Guildford 30.06.23

(Con)

*Failings in the Government's Integrated Reviews of Foreign and Defence Policy. How to put the autocracies on the defensive.*

My Lords, it is an honour and a pleasure to be at the end of the Back-Bench contributions to this very important debate and to have listened to the extremely powerful speeches and the undercurrent of worry and discontent that has run through almost all of them. This report from the International Relations and Defence Committee has given us the chance to examine both the two integrated review papers from the Government on foreign policy and the last defence Command Paper. As the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, said, we are waiting for the next one, although the report was published before the second, so-called "refreshed", integrated review.

I give all credit to the committee, which the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, and I were proud to help instigate and set up seven years ago. It has proved its worth. I also give all credit to my noble friend Lady Anelay, my successor as chair, for her highly successful chairmanship and for securing and opening this debate, which she did with great appeal and effect.

The two integrated review papers of 2021 and 2023 have been curiously undiscussed. This debate has made it pretty clear why that is so: we have not had the chance or an opportunity, and in a way they have almost fallen outside and behind the rapid pace of events. "Integration" was the right concept in both papers, not least since today's adversaries are weaponising nearly every aspect of daily life, far outside the military zone and far into areas which have never before been touched by warfare, defence or external security. The papers were right to avoid calling it a plan or strategy, because we all remember General von Moltke's classic remark that no strategy or plan ever survives first contact with the enemy, so flexibility and uncertainty are understandable.

However, I share some of the committee's scepticism and disappointment when it spoke in its report of a lack of focus in these integrated reviews and said that there was a lack of priorities, in both the 2021 and 2023 versions. In fact, I would go further in three respects. First, both reviews continue to underestimate the evolving power of new international networks. Yes, of course they mention ASEAN, the five-power defence pact Five Eyes and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which have been mentioned in the debate. We also have the AUKUS plans with the Australians and Americans to build submarines that are nuclear-powered, but not equipped with nuclear weapons. We are also

engaged in an enormous project with Japan for the next combat air programme, and a lot of other things go in with that which to me are extremely welcome.

All that is so, but there are huge changes in the Middle East. The role of China there is growing all the time, and for instance there is Israel's move closer to the Saudis and the new Saudi-Iranian rapport, which may or may not come to something. None of that comes into the integrated reviews at all, as the present chairman of the committee, my noble friend Lord Ashton, pointed out in his reply to the Government's comment and as my noble friend Lady Anelay mentioned in her opening speech. Nor does the African Union seeking to join the G20, which is an enormous change in world affairs, feature at all.

There was no more than a passing reference to the biggest network of all: the modern Commonwealth, which could well prove our gateway to Asia's and Africa's vast new markets, where all the growth is going to be. It could be one of our greatest assets in the changed world, as a bulwark against the Chinese expansionism and maritime intrusions which have been referred to. None of that gets mentioned in these documents at all. Indeed, some of us have suggested that the 56-nation network which is the Commonwealth, with several more countries interested in joining it, could become a sort of safe haven from a divided world as the great powers slug out their 20th-century quarrels and ideological conflicts, which are less and less relevant to the problems that these nations face. That is my first concern.

Secondly, both documents shy away from our changing relationship with a changing USA. We remain, of course, the closest partners and friends but they are not our bosses; they are our partners and we work with them. We are in no way the puppets of Washington, nor should we be. That relationship needs much more careful updating than merely repeating the hopes of the previous century, and that updating is long overdue. Why is this crucial? Because the majority of independent nations, many in the Commonwealth, which have been called by many commentators the neo-non-aligned—quite different from the Bandung non-aligned of the previous century—are watching to see where we, the British, stand. They want neither Chinese hegemony nor American puppetdom. Of course, they are quite ready to take what they can from both, and rightly so, to preserve their independence in this new age.

Thirdly, eyes are understandably on Ukraine and the hideous but conventional war there, which some experts said would never happen—but it has—and on NATO and its need for solidarity and expansion. But eyes should also be, and are not enough, on what might be called the

autocracies' other wars, as China, followed to a more violent extent by Russia, is quietly hoovering up the developing world and large parts of the Sahel and central Africa, including numerous smaller Commonwealth islands in the south seas and the Caribbean, and African coastal states, while we sit watching, seemingly unaware of what is happening, to judge by the reviews. We should be thinking about how to put the autocracies on the defensive; yet instead, they appear to be turning the Commonwealth network, the chain of what should be bastions of liberty and freedom, the other way around, using them as their advance points of intrusion into the rest of the world.

The late Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the much underestimated former UN Secretary-General, once said, and repeated to me, that "Everyone must have a country to love and believe in". Well, we love our country and believe in its future, in utterly transformed conditions, with much more rapid change to come immediately ahead. Nothing like enough of that comes through in either of the government documents looked at in this excellent report. We need to do much more thinking and to be less confined in silos, and a much deeper effect needs to be achieved. Like others, I look forward to hearing what our Front-Bench sages have to say on that.

1.16pm