HOUSE OF COMMONS

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Russia and Ukraine border tensions, HC 1367

Wednesday 21 April 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Sarah Atherton; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Mr Mark Francois; Kevan Jones; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Foreign Affairs Committee Members present: Tom Tugendhat; Bob Seely; Henry Smith.

Questions 1-42

Witnesses

I: Sarah Lain, Associate Fellow, RUSI; Henry Boyd, Research Fellow for Defence and Military Analysis, IISS

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah Lain and Henry Boyd.

Chair: Welcome to this extraordinary meeting of the Defence Select Committee, where we will be looking at the significant build-up of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border. We will consider the Russian tactical and strategic intentions, the implications for Ukraine and how the West, NATO and indeed Britain should or might respond.

By way of setting the scene, over the last few weeks Russia has been moving tanks, artillery pieces and troops into southern Crimea and towards eastern Ukraine, confirmed by satellite images. Troop trains have been bringing in personnel and material to the zone relentlessly. Additionally, we have seen tank-landing ships sailing through the Bosphorus Strait into the Black Sea.

This is a build-up not seen since 2014 and the invasion of Crimea. Understandably, the Ukrainian President Zelensky is feeling very nervous indeed, anticipating another invasion. It is unclear what President Putin's intentions are. Perhaps we will learn more as he gives his state-of-the-union address to the Russian Parliament today; until then, we are going to lean on two experts in this field. I am very delighted to welcome Sarah Lain, who is the associate fellow at Rusi, and Henry Boyd, who is a research fellow for defence and military analysis at IISS. Thank you very much indeed for your time.

I should also mention that we have three members of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee joining us here today: Tom Tugendhat, Bob Seely and Henry Smith. You are most welcome indeed. This is going to be a productive and interesting morning.

Q1 **Stuart Anderson:** Welcome, everyone. We are looking at the build-up on the border at the moment of Russian troops. Do you think it is plausible that this could just be a training exercise?

Sarah Lain: Thank you very much and thanks for the opportunity to participate today. This is certainly not the first time since 2014 that the Russians have, post exercises, built up near the border in order to pressure the Ukrainian Government and also western allies. However, given the size of this and the fact that there seems to be some form of military camp being set up in Voronezh, which borders Ukrainian territory, and also the movement of some equipment and personnel from other military districts, it is a concern.

I will defer on military specifics to my colleague, Henry, but this has not been seen since 2014-15. It is a big concern. I still think it is mainly aimed at pressuring, sabre rattling and military diplomacy in some ways, but the fact that there is this movement of equipment and the biggest build-up since 2014 means it is still worth considering that this could be far more than a military exercise or just pressuring the Ukrainian Government.

Q2 **Stuart Anderson:** Henry, I would be keen to understand your views.

Henry Boyd: The points Sarah made are all entirely valid here. One key thing we should bear in mind is that we probably need to get away from potentially thinking of this as a binary: it is either an exercise or operational deployment. Historically, Russia, and in the past the Soviet Union, has on multiple occasions moved from an exercise posture to an operational posture. It does not see the two as entirely separate in the way that a western military exercise is an exercise; if we intend to conduct an operation later on, we will do that separately. For Russia, there is an entirely plausible narrative that says this is simultaneously an exercise to demonstrate internally that Russia can do what it wants to do in terms of military posture in Ukraine; secondly, an exercise in coercion to bring Ukrainian policy into a more Russia-friendly posture; and, thirdly, it gives the Russians a backstop military option should they need it under the circumstances. Unfortunately, the posture they have put is that it is potentially all three at once, which is perhaps not a reassuring answer.

On the primarily exercise front, the deployment so far has been concentrated on four established Russian training areas: Klintsy, in the Bryansk oblast; Pogonovo, south of Voronezh; and a couple of areas in the Crimea, Angarsky and Opuk. At the same time you can point to two or three elements where the NATO and US wariness builds out of. One of those is the two battalion tactical groups of the 7th Air Assault Division that were deployed to Crimea last month to participate in exercises then. They then stayed in Crimea. They did not return to their normal barracks, and in fact further battalion tactical groups had arrived in Crimea by the end of March as well, at the end of that.

The other thing that is worth noting is that this build-up is conducted across multiple military districts. Although it is primarily drawing from the Southern Military District in Russia, we have also seen elements of the 41st Army from the Central Military District and from the 76th Air Assault Division, which is traditionally based at Pskov on the Baltic states' border. That is slightly unusual for a Russian exercise outside the big four annual Zapad and Vostok exercise series, where you would more commonly see a multi-military region build-up take place. Those are the two factors of weight. Where we get concerned is not just the size of this build-up but exactly what it involves.

The other thing I would probably raise is there are a lot of different figures floating around for the exact size of the overall Russian force, which is not necessarily correlated with the level of build-up. Probably the best figures I have seen so far are something along the lines of before the build-up the existing Russian presence in the relevant border oblasts with Ukraine and the Crimea itself totalled just short of 90,000 personnel, with about 28 battalion tactical groups available from that. Currently, the lowest estimate that I have seen is that the troop strength is north of 100,000 now, somewhere around 105,000 or 106,000. The battalion tactical group number has increased to 48. The Ukrainians expect the

total number by the end of the month to build to something like 110,000 or 120,000, depending on which Ukrainian Government official you ask, with about 56 battalion tactical groups.

The overall personnel number build-up is relatively small in comparison with the existing force level there, but the total number of battalion tactical groups, which is a key metric of Russia's ground manoeuvre capability, will have doubled by the end of the month. It has already increased by a factor of more than 50%. That is where we see the real concern in terms of the size of the Russian build-up as opposed to just looking at a generic total personnel figure.

Q3 **Stuart Anderson:** Could I ask what those numbers look like compared with historical Russian training exercises in the region?

Henry Boyd: If we are looking at the existing build-up of being something around 15,000 to 20,000 so far, the Russians had a battalion tactical exercise across the southern military district at the end of last year that was about 10,000 personnel. The figures Russia will officially give for its exercises are usually very high.

If you look particularly at its annual large military region-scale exercises, they will involve hundreds of thousands of personnel nominally, but it will not usually involve those personnel being deployed long distances from their bases, so separate training areas. The actual number on deployment will usually be much smaller than that. Looking at the overall number, it is higher than equivalent exercises we have seen in the past, but not huge orders of magnitude higher. It is a larger mobilisation than you might have been expecting to see given historical levels of activity for this kind of exercise, but not the sense of a full-scale mobilisation of every available unit Russia would have to throw at this problem.

Chair: Just to explore the troop strength and force levels, Voronezh was mentioned already as a base or a township that has been expanded into a massive garrison. Can you give us an indication as to Russian capability? I am reflecting on a visit I made to Georgia just after their invasion in South Ossetia. They had actually advanced and then pulled back a bit to take that particular district, but when they did the invasion, they actually broke into the quartermasters' stores of many of the Georgian garrisons and stole the uniforms, dumped their own ones and left them there—I was able to see that myself—such was the standards that they had themselves. Have today's Russian armed forces learned from that? Are we dealing with Russian capabilities or is it like in the Soviet era, where it is simply just mass?

Henry Boyd: The Russian military modernisation programmes finally kicked into serious gear between 2011 and 2012, especially with a firmer grip from the Kremlin with the appointment of Sergey Shoygu as Defence Minister and Valery Gerasimov as head of the Russian armed forces. That has seen, if not a complete reaching of Russian objectives in that period, a first Russian state armament programme and modernisation

programme that really, in the post-Cold War era, delivered on effective capability improvements. The Russian armed forces you are looking at today are some distance away from their capability problems they demonstrated in 2008 in Georgia.

Even back in 2014 at the start of the Ukrainian crisis, both in the Crimea and Donbass we saw the difference in Russia's capability to mobilise forces to achieve essentially discrete military operational aims with them where necessary, both in support of the nominally separate forces in Donetsk and Luhansk, but also when Russia intervened in-person, as it were.

There is that level of increased confidence in the effectiveness of the modernised equipment they put in place. Even if the T-14 tank version of the Armata universal combat platform is not in operational service, the interim upgrade to their existing main battle tank and armoured fighting vehicle fleet and the upgrade to their artillery forces in particular have given Russian senior leadership increased confidence about the effectiveness of their military tools.

The growth in professional contractor personnel numbers over the last decade has also led to a significant improvement in available Russian ground force deployability. We should not overlook, particularly on the air side, the success in recapitalising the legacy Soviet air force into what is now a more recognisably modern Russian air force capability, which we have seen demonstrated in Syria.

Q4 **Chair:** Just to match up the balance here, have the Ukrainian forces gone through a similar modernisation programme, or has that yet to happen?

Henry Boyd: Ukraine really went into 2014 at a very low military ebb. If Russia had really struggled to modernise a post-Soviet military in the lost decade of the 1990s and the early 2000s, Ukraine had not even managed to get to that level of an increasing emphasis on essentially funding the military by centrally selling surplus armoured fighting vehicle artillery systems around the world. It was seen as a very low priority by Ukrainian leadership in the post-Cold War era. The prospect of a military confrontation either with Russia or the West was just not seen as realistic.

Post 2014 Ukraine has made serious efforts to address some of those aspects. Even on relative terms, the funding level vis-à-vis the Russians is starting from a lower ebb. Having less resourcing to play with has restricted what they can do. You can see particularly lopsided evidence in terms of the focus on land domain forces, which has led to some reasonable improvements in terms of their operational capabilities.

There are still some questions about officer standards and leadership. There are question marks about the removal and placing from 2014 and 2015 of placeholder officers who were seen as not up to the job, who may now have returned to service in places. I defer to Sarah on the

internal question marks about that, but the real weakness in the Ukrainian armed forces still lie in the non-land domain aspects, like the Ukrainian air force.

The navy took a significant hit in 2014. Although it has made some attempt to recover, it really started from a very low base. In areas such as information operations and when we talk about space and cyber being domains, Ukraine is still focused on land and has very vestigial capabilities in other areas, which plays into the interesting imbalance between the Ukrainians and the Russians. It is a non-traditional Russian strength in a conflict, having its air force be actually superior to its opponent in all aspects at this point in time.

Q5 **Bob Seely:** I have a couple of questions. Henry, you talk about Ukraine defence being a low priority. People studying Ukraine—Sarah may want to come in on this—would slightly reorientate that answer to say that actually stripping out elements of Ukrainian statehood, including defence, was part of the Yanukovych regime's non-disclosed policies. It was a deliberate ploy, was it not? There was a Russian in charge of the Ukrainian secret service and the Ukrainian military during the Yanukovych regime, so actually Ukraine was stripped out almost as a deliberate policy by Russia and stripped out certainly in the area of defence. Do you think that is a fair comment?

Henry Boyd: I can give quite a quick response, but Sarah is better placed than I am to speak to the internal workings of Ukrainian politics, certainly historically. You do not necessarily have to look for a Russian-led conspiracy in terms of looking at post-Soviet states. The level of military capability Ukraine inherited from the Soviet Union is basically unsustainable, given the economic situation in Ukraine in the post-Cold War. The same applies to lots of other post-Soviet states, without speaking to the politics.

Sarah Lain: There has been an inherent issue of corruption throughout, particularly in the defence sector, which remains a problem, although since 2014 Ukraine has done a lot with NATO itself and with NATO member support. This has been the whole reorientation of the Ukrainian military, apart from learning a lot from 2014, where simply the bar was so low in terms of what they were fighting with.

As mentioned, Ukraine's navy took a massive hit. They basically did not have a navy, which is why I would be more concerned in some ways about what is happening around the Sea of Azov, the Black Sea and Crimea. Allies, particularly the UK, are trying to help Ukraine build that up, but that was a huge weakness. You are talking about in 2014 soldiers turning up in trainers because they did not really have any equipment or uniform. Ukraine was also really relying on these volunteer battalions that came out and fought very strongly. That has all been integrated into the systems and the defence structure, whether that is the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the Ministry of Defence.

Whether it was the Yanukovych approach or not, the point is that it really was in a pretty poor state when things happened in 2014. Mass corruption had also really damaged that and continues to do so, but Ukrainian capabilities have certainly improved, and Russia has also learned from 2014. One thing I would add on Russian capabilities is that electronic warfare is something they have used a lot in the Donbass.

Q6 **Bob Seely:** Just on that point about Ukrainian capabilities, absolutely, it was pretty much non-existent in 2014. We know about the importance of the volunteer groups. The volunteer groups certainly see themselves as people who saved Ukraine or large chunks of it. How much has Ukraine learned, not only in the sense of modernising in the past few years and actually having a recognisable competent or semi-competent military, but, for example, from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict? How much do you think the Ukrainians are learning to use asymmetric tactics and anti-tank drones, potentially, to deal with a conventional invasion, or do you think the Ukrainians are thinking very much in conventional terms to deal with a conventional invasion?

Sarah Lain: They have learned in terms of the full-spectrum approach that Russia uses, as have we all.

Without being a technical military expert, I have focused mainly on the Donbass for the last three and a half years in Ukraine, and the thing with the approach is that since 2014-15 it has not been tested in the same way. Since the Minsk agreements, there has not been this massive threat necessarily. It is always there and Ukrainians want to be prepared, but this is where the simmering conflict along the frontline has really been the main thing that they are fighting. There have been some flare-ups. There was Avdiivka in 2017. There was the Kerch Strait incident in 2018, which had an impact in Donbass. This is why everyone is watching so closely right now, because this seems unusual in Russia's posturing and the build-up. Certainly, Ukraine's capabilities will be not just focused on conventional, but it is whether you can be a real match for Russia.

If they really want to do what they did in 2014 in a bigger way, they probably could, but one thing also is they did not succeed in everything they wanted to in 2014. That is what I mean when I say the Russians have learned. They wanted to go further and they were pushed back, whether that was because the signing of the Minsk agreements meant that they felt they did not need to or whether they were a little surprised at particularly the battalions that could really fight back and then all the western support that came in. It came very late in the game, but lethal weapons supplied by the US, with the Javelin missiles, were a gamechanger. Whether that would now be more of deterrent to Russia with tanks crossing the border or whether they do not really pay attention to that is difficult to know, because it has not really been tested yet. It is quite hard to tell, but certainly the preparation is for the full-spectrum approach.

Q7 **John Spellar:** The Russians have form in these exercises, not only on

the border with Ukraine but also previously with the Baltic states. Clearly, we need to be learning from that, but the particular issue that I wanted to raise is whether the recent fighting between these Russian-backed separatists or irregulars and Ukrainian forces on the border signify a new escalation in the conflict or whether it is just local friction.

Henry Boyd: I am not from a primarily political background, but it is certainly no coincidence that you see a breakdown in the previous ceasefire and an uptick in the violence in Donbass in connection both with a new US Administration but also, more primarily, with Ukrainian political action taken, with Russian-language TV programmes being closed down and action being taken by Zelensky against the leader of the opposition party. There is also a connection there with the new Russian chief negotiator for the ongoing attempt to impose some form of solution to the Donbass area. Those things, to my mind, are undoubtedly connected in some fashion.

The degree to which this will further escalate is largely connected to what Russia is aiming to achieve with its mobilisation here. The local fighting there is now a second-order effect of what the wider geopolitical resolution to this current build-up has become. If, essentially, Russia feels that it has achieved its aims and it achieves some form of compellence—"compromise" is the wrong word—in Ukrainian policy terms, whether that is a commitment for the Ukrainians to negotiate directly with LPR and DPR forces and leaders, which they have been reluctant to do, or a winding back of Zelensky's recent actions that are perceived to be hostile to Russian interests in Ukraine, then we might well see a simmering down again of the direct hostilities in the area and a return to a focus again more on negotiated solutions. On the other hand, the real escalatory scenario is Russian indirect or direct action against Ukraine more generally.

One point I would just make in terms of the importance of Donbass in this particular aspect is it has been notable in the Russian build-up so far that none of the reinforcements have gone to areas in the Rostov oblast, on the Russian side of the border from the Luhansk and Donetsk areas of Ukraine. Of the 20 battalion tactical groups that have gone in as reinforcements so far, 14 have gone to Crimea and the other six have gone to either Klintsy or Pogonovo, near Voronezh. The way Russia has postured its additional reinforcements so far sets perhaps a different picture to the 2014 build-up, where the majority of Russian forces were pushed into places like Novocherkassk, near to the border areas there, and camps were established at that point.

That is not to say that that necessarily deprives them of the ability to act in eastern Ukraine. Part of it that is worth noting is that that area was the strongest-held area of existing Russian forces at normal bases. The 150th Motor Rifle Division, either by its own strength or by reinforcement, was pretty much at full establishment strength of contract personnel available to go by the end of March, but it is notable that, while we are seeing this

build-up, we are not seeing the bulk of the build-up, or even very much of the build-up at all, happening in areas that would indicate that a primary focus of Russian military action is likely to be those areas so far.

Sarah Lain: The reason this is looking like an escalation or a breakdown of something on the frontline in eastern Ukraine is because there were a rather effective ceasefire and additional measures agreed in July 2020 in the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group, which I saw as being a concession from the Ukrainian side in many ways, because they did the agreement based on the fact that it was agreed almost directly with the leaders of the Russian-backed separatists. The Ukrainians always want these to be with Russia mentioned in them as a conflict party. Russia refused, but Zelensky's chief of staff, Yermak, signed it anyway.

This was effective for a few months. The issue was that there was nothing else moving in terms of the political settlement. There was nothing additional. For me, it felt inevitable that this was going to start breaking down at some point, because how can you keep sides restrained from shooting at each other when there is nothing else happening and no form of demilitarisation, disengagement or political settlement? That is one factor as to why you are starting to see an uptick in ceasefire violations.

I would caveat that, from the OSCE SMM reports, although the uptick is growing, as in it is getting more serious, the ceasefire violations fluctuate on a day-to-day basis, so one day it might be 51 ceasefire violations in the Donetsk region and in the next day it is 900. It is still very serious and significant, but on many days it is still below the average number of ceasefire violations from this time last year, which is still before the additional measures were signed and came into force. From a practical level, that is also why this situation is deteriorating.

I would endorse the point that there has been great disappointment from the Kremlin in Zelensky himself. He came in on a very pro-peace policy. He did not realise himself how difficult some of the nuances in Minsk were, and particularly the political red lines that each side has in terms of settlement. The Kremlin has been disappointed that Zelensky has not come in and done more on Minsk implementation.

As mentioned, the Medvedchuk sanctions against Putin's friend, who was trying to be also an interlocutor on the Donbass, did annoy the Kremlin, but their response was relatively muted. They should be aware by now that Medvedchuk himself is a very toxic figure for many Ukrainians in Ukraine, so he is not this saviour of the Donbass that maybe at some point they thought he might be. The tensions have risen, certainly, between Ukraine and Russia. It is still difficult to see a specific trigger that would make Russia suddenly do this build-up. That, over a period of time, has deteriorated.

To go to the point of whether this is an escalation on the frontline, it is worsening and it is deteriorating, but there is not one single big

escalation and there has not been for a long time. It tends to be localised areas where the forces are very close together. Overall, it seems like there has been more provocative behaviour from the Russian-backed separatists. They are the ones that started with the rhetoric of Ukraine being about to attack, which there was not much evidence of. They are the ones also with the snipers, particularly on the ground, and upping the use of snipers as opposed to the Ukrainians.

This seems engineered at times, in a certain way, and we all know that Russia needs that pretext. We have heard the 2014-era-type language of, "If something happens, we are going to have to go in and protect our people in eastern Ukraine". Russia is hedging on a number of different levels on this and it gives them options. If it means that they do not want to escalate, they can turn the dial down. If they do want it to escalate, they can turn it up, but on the frontline itself part of that was the natural manifestation of the failure of the Minsk process to do any more beyond the additional measures.

Q8 **John Spellar:** In your assessment, are the separatists trying to drag Russia deeper into this, or is the Russian state, the FSB, the military command or whoever winding them up in order to create the preconditions for them to intervene?

Sarah Lain: The Russian-backed separatists cannot be fully independent on military matters. I saw this as a co-ordinated effort in terms of the rhetoric at least. It was the so-called Donetsk People's Republic in particular that was saying Ukraine is posturing to attack and moving heavy weaponry, and then you saw this echoed in Moscow particularly, saying Ukraine is planning an offensive. Now that has expanded to, "NATO is acting aggressively, particularly in the Black Sea", so that adds to this, "Whatever happens, we have built this narrative that we are not at fault and we are just defending ourselves", which is obviously very useful for the Russians.

The separatists often speak about how they would like to be part of Russia, absorbed into Russia or at least get closer to Russia. Russia has been clear at times, Putin's press secretary Peskov in particular, that they do not plan to annex these territories. Whether that calculation has changed remains to be seen. I am sceptical that they would want to annex or absorb these territories, because that would mean the Minsk process is completely dead, as are the agreements, but the rhetoric from the ground is very pro-Russian from the leadership of the so-called republics. I do not see the idea that they would be able to drag Russia into anything. They are not that independent.

Q9 **Chair:** Is the Wagner Group something we should be concerned about? Is it relevant here, as we have seen in Africa?

Henry Boyd: Essentially, by sponsoring, for want of a better term, the separatists forces in Luhansk and Donetsk already, Russia does not

necessarily have a need for a proxy non-Russian-armed-forces force to pursue Russian interests in those areas.

The scale of the challenge and problem is one that means, if the situation on the ground remains not in Russia's interests, it is going to take a more obvious full state threat. The smaller-scale Wagner deployments elsewhere, which have proven very useful in terms of providing Russia capability to act, are not necessarily as relevant in this situation, either in terms of any immediate fighting in Luhansk and Donetsk or a wider attempt to bring compellence to the Ukrainian state as a whole.

The reason we are talking about this is primarily because of the large scale of the Russian conventional military build-up. Russia has proven quite adept in the past at plausible deniability, or implausible deniability in some ways—just denying the obvious. I do not see the need to necessarily put forward a PMC to act on their behalf, even at the limited capacity they would have to do so, plus it would take away from their capacity to act elsewhere. In this case, we really are looking at something that is potentially a different order of magnitude, which is the real concern.

Q10 **Mr Francois:** Good morning. As is evident from your testimony already, this is a highly complex situation, but forgive me if I ask you the 64,000-rouble question. Do you believe that this activity that we are seeing on the border is a presage to a major military attack on Ukraine, with the possible aim of annexing the Donbass in the way that Russia has already effectively annexed the Crimea? Do you think they are going to attack them militarily or not?

Henry Boyd: At present I would judge it to be unlikely but not implausible, which is not a terribly reassuring statement to make in the circumstances, given the potential consequences. Even if it is unlikely, the fact that it is just plausible that we might see a full-scale Russian military action against Ukraine is of concern.

Q11 **Mr Francois:** How likely is it on a scale of one to 10?

Henry Boyd: Intelligence people do not like to be drawn like that, but I would put it between three and four, maybe, which perhaps in other walks of life would be seen as a sufficiently low possibility not to be concerning, but given the circumstance we are talking about, the fact that it is still not implausible to me means it is worth being concerned about what is going on. NATO, western militaries and western leadership in political terms are not over-egging the pudding here by raising this issue and raising their concerns about this issue.

Like I say, if you look at some aspects of the way Russia has not withdrawn from previous exercises last month and from these areas, there are valid concerns to be raised about the potential underlying nature of Russia's action here.

I am inclined to agree with Sarah. I am very sceptical that actual annexation would be in Russia's perceived interests in this action. They have a lot of mileage from having an ongoing Ukrainian "civil war" in areas of Ukraine. As in Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan, Russia's preference for frozen conflicts and areas of territorial dispute in its near abroad is well established. They see the continuance of that as being a useful way of, essentially, making NATO membership for Ukraine a distant possibility, which is a key policy objective and a red line for Russia.

These are still economically relatively difficult areas to sustain. Taking them under full Russian ownership removes their ability to essentially ratchet up pressure on Ukraine where it wants to, but also does not necessarily add a great deal of strategic capability to Russia. The Crimea was a different case in point. Crimea occupies a very clear strategic logic in Russian military thinking. Its geographical position is almost ideal to provide Russia with the potential capability to deny Black Sea access or at least really hold NATO maritime assets at risk should they enter the Black Sea.

If you do a really quick measuring circle of the range at which you would have to fire a Tomahawk cruise missile from the Black Sea to hit Moscow, it is about 1,500 kilometres. That basically means getting inside the Black Sea from the south. Russia is very well aware of that and historically has been very concerned about not necessarily the conventional strike capability, but the conventional and/or nuclear strike capability of NATO's maritime assets. Crimea is very much seen in that context. It is the central bastion of Russian strategic security from the southern reaches of NATO, which is why full-on Russian ownership made much more sense than the prolonged internal interknitting struggle within Ukraine for a wider political settlement.

Q12 **Mr Francois:** Logic suggests that if there is, in your view, a 30% to 40% possibility of a military attack on Ukraine, it would be silly to rule that out, so you have sounded us a warning. Sarah, 30% to 40%—as someone once said, higher or lower?

Sarah Lain: The minute everyone starts saying Russia will not be doing something that is when Russia uses that against them and potentially does it, so I would agree; it may be even less. I am focusing more on eastern Ukraine. As I say, I would be a bit more worried about Crimea, because there is a lot more going on in terms of less reinforcement from the Ukrainian side and more in the Black Sea. As we have mentioned, there is huge NATO presence and activity. That is an area of concern.

Again, in terms of whether that overspills into military action, I do not necessarily see the reason. This is the key point to me: if Russia was to attack and annex these territories, I do not really understand what they gain politically. By pressuring Ukraine and reminding everyone, "We can switch this on and off whenever we want. Remember 2014 and how horrendous that all was", the aim, to me, is more, "Can you do more on

implementing Minsk?" Russia wants that, because the whole crux of the Minsk agreements is that Ukraine reabsorbs these republics into the Ukrainian state and pays for them. They have special status, so degrees of special rights. They are close to Russia. Russia has a constant thorn in Ukraine's side, but in a united Ukraine in theory, and that suits Russia, because that allows them to put pressure on Ukraine.

It would permanently, in their eyes, prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and probably the EU, so that serves more in their favour than actually physically annexing these republics, whereby Ukraine says, "We cannot implement Minsk now because these territories are part of Russia. You have absorbed them. Therefore, sanctions will potentially stay on Russia forever, because at least EU sanctions are linked to Minsk implementation". EU unity on sanctions is a separate issue. Maybe that would all fall apart. In some ways, it does Ukraine a favour by annexing these territories, because then Ukraine does not have to deal with them or do this dance every two weeks in Minsk, or virtually at the moment, where they are talking about how you reabsorb these territories constitutionally into Ukraine.

Russia can act opportunistically, and Ukraine is a very emotional topic for Russia. We saw that in 2014. They do not necessarily always act in a way that we would view as rational or based on complete common sense when there is an interest at stake, but politically I just do not necessarily see the benefit for Russia right now of invading and then annexing, or even just attacking again on a mass scale. The frontline confrontation is important, and then also this constant pressure on Ukraine and its western partners makes more sense.

Q13 **Mr Francois:** I would summarise what you have said as, "The threat is enough". Henry, the Chair has already asked you about relative upgrades of equipment in both armies. It is evident from your answer that the Russians have undertaken a serious upgrade of their military capability in the last decade or so, and the Ukrainians perhaps less so. The Russian army has historically regarded artillery as the god of war. To what extent do the Russians have the ability to simply outgun the Ukrainians in artillery and rocket systems if it actually came to a hot conflict?

Henry Boyd: That point is very well made. Artillery is a central plank of both Russia's ground force capability, but also their overall military theory of victory. Victory through firepower is still an effective legacy of Soviet military doctrine in Russian thinking right now.

It has been an area that has not been as flashily advertised as some of Russia's armoured fighting vehicle plans, but artillery has been very quietly, partly technically but also doctrinally, thought through, in terms of this concept of reconnaissance strike in Russian thinking and how the use of artillery can be best enabled in the modern conflict and how to direct counter-battery fire but also using artillery to catch manoeuvre formations in build-up and to exploit the time and space necessary to mass military force under a more conventional 20th-century idea.

The Russians really did demonstrate the effectiveness of this, both in the indirect cross-border fire intervention in 2014, but also following up in subsequent support for direct Russian operations. Although Ukraine has tried to get better at understanding how to counter this, Russia still has an overmatch in terms of the numerical capabilities it can bring to bear on this, but also the sophisticated of its doctrine, its training and its concepts for that as well.

Q14 **Mr Francois:** One of the challenges we always have in these things is that we always have limited time. At the risk of putting words in your mouth, is it fair to say that in those sorts of systems, they outmatch the Ukrainians both in quality and quantity?

Henry Boyd: Yes.

Mr Francois: That is what I was aiming at. Thank you very much, sir. Apologies for cutting you off slightly.

Q15 **Chair:** Can I just pursue what Mark was asking a bit further, because it is quite interesting from a tactical perspective? Could you say, Henry, what the troop build-up is in Crimea itself as opposed to in mainland Russia?

Henry Boyd: The latest estimates I have seen are that approximately two thirds of the reinforcements Russia has put into theatre have gone to the Crimea. Two of the four training grounds they are using as part of this exercise series are in southern Crimea, one on the Kerch peninsula and one further to the west, south of Simferopol.

It has been interesting looking at quite how high a proportion of just the land force build-up has been there. The maritime build-up has been concentrated on Crimea for very obvious reasons, with the Sea of Azov. It is interesting how large a percentage of the land force exercise has been devoted there, given the limited opportunities you would have for a large-scale manoeuvre operation out of Crimea directly over the Perekop Isthmus land bridge there.

Yes, Russia has built up its amphibious forces as well, but Russia's amphibious forces generally are relatively limited. You simply could not amphibiously operate all of the forces they have deployed in the Crimea in a single operation, so it is interesting quite how much force they have put into place there, also for an area that is not necessarily that threatened by Ukrainian counteraction, either from an offensive or defensive posture. Back to Sarah's point, quite what the military or political logic gained would be, given where they have postured their military, is a question worth raising.

Q16 **Chair:** That is very helpful. Two thirds of Russian forces have packed themselves into the Crimea. If I wanted to be a provocative, steely-eyed missile man, I could just take out the two bridge systems that connect Crimea to the mainland. Would that not put a massive, great big hurdle in the way of Russia's intentions to invade eastern Ukraine?

Henry Boyd: As a quick point of clarification, it is two thirds of the additional forces Russia has put into theatre, so not necessarily two thirds of their overall force posture. The limited ingress and egress routes from the Crimea do raise questions about the suitability for a major jumping-off point for a two-division-plus-size organisation. Even if those bridges remain intact and survive, it is a restricted supply line.

Military operations over an extended period of time, even using—*[Inaudible]*—munitions consume an awful lot, at the scale we are talking about, in terms of supply and cost. It is interesting to note that one of the things we really have not seen is the scale of logistic and supply reinforcement you might expect with this kind of aspect. Also, the restriction there means it is going to be more challenging if Russia wanted to quickly redeploy its forces out of the Crimean training areas to elsewhere on the border for an operation there. It is more difficult doing that from Crimea than it would be from training grounds elsewhere, simply because, yes, you are going to have to ship them all back through a very limited number of ingress and egress routes and transport areas.

Chair: I know NATO operations listen carefully to our deliberations here, so maybe they are taking note. Let us move on to what we think Putin is up to.

Q17 **Tom Tugendhat:** Thank you, Chair; it is very kind of you to host us today. I am wondering really about the wider context. Perhaps I could ask Sarah for your perspective on this, because this is clearly not just a military operation but is supposed to fit in within a wider diplomatic field. May I ask a broad question: what do you think he is trying to achieve?

Sarah Lain: That is the key question. As I say, a lot of this is trying to pressure Ukraine. The Kremlin has been frustrated by President Zelensky's seeming inaction and then some of the moves, for example the sanctions against Medvedchuk, although, as I say, I think that is being inflated, particularly by some Russian analysts saying that Zelensky has suddenly pivoted to an anti-Russian or hostile approach. I do not endorse that view.

There was some quiet optimism that Zelensky, who is a non-politician pro-peace Russian speaker, comes in and starts doing a lot of the low-hanging fruit in the Donbass in terms of some humanitarian moves and some disengagement. He has agreed things that his predecessor absolutely would not agree to. As usual, on the political steps, i.e. implementation of special status and elements of the Minsk agreements, they hit the exact same problems that they did under Poroshenko, which is that Zelensky cannot sell the idea very easily back home that you are giving special status to a region that is pro-Russian or at least run by pro-Russians. There is frustration there.

This is also about the Biden Administration. I do not want to overstate that. Some do not think this was necessarily about messaging to the Biden Administration, but clearly Putin is a person who wants the respect

that he thinks he deserves on the international stage. Biden came in and clearly other parts of the world might have taken priority over Russia. He was not the central priority, certainly, for the Biden Administration at the beginning. Ukraine was not as big a priority for the Biden Administration.

Bringing this back on to the agenda, Putin is seemingly very pleased he has a potential summit invitation with President Biden. That came hand in hand with new American sanctions, which the Russians will have seen as hostile, but they were coming anyway, so they were to be expected. The fact that Putin has potentially agreed to attend this online climate meeting that the Americans are running shows that this is also about testing in some ways how America is viewing Russia in the grand scheme of things.

Biden, in my view, wants to have a working relationship with Russia, but this is more about strategic stability and the bigger picture; arms control is the priority, not Ukraine. The summit, if they have one, between Biden and Putin will not be focused on Ukraine, but Ukraine is a good tool for Russia, particularly given it is in Europe and is still a hot conflict in Europe, to get the attention.

It seems like Russia is retrospectively fitting this narrative, to a certain degree, that this is also about NATO. As Henry mentioned, Russia views NATO as a threat to them. There is a mixture of very conveniently blaming NATO for their own problems or using NATO as a stick to get other things, but, generally, in all their strategies and doctrines NATO expansion is defined as a threat to Russia.

2014 was a lot about Russia trying to prevent Ukraine and other countries in the region thinking about NATO membership. The rhetoric around NATO membership from Zelensky has also ramped up a little bit before, but also partly in response to what is going on at the moment. Zelensky is lobbying NATO itself, France, the UK and the US to give MAP to Ukraine, which is unlikely, but that is a red rag to a bull to Russia. It is also about trying to deter some of that support to Ukraine, at least in theory, in future. Overall, again, I do not see one particular trigger that has made Russia react this way. This is about giving Russia some options and reminding everyone that they need to be taken seriously, particularly by the US.

Q18 **Tom Tugendhat:** You have covered an awful lot of ground there. How much of it do you think is looking at the wider world and seeing the US pull out from Afghanistan and the different ways in which we have reacted to Georgia and Georgia's own internal politics, and just effectively trying to stir the pot rather than wait for opportunities?

Sarah Lain: That is possible. Given the Russia-Ukraine relationship, I am not exactly sure that stirring the pot would necessarily get Russia what it wants. At the same time, what would support that point is there has not necessarily been a clear ask from Russia.

One thing to point out is that all of this activity is quite visible. They are not doing things in a way that is trying to be hidden. They refused to engage when Ukraine, through the OSCE, asked for more information about the military activity under the Vienna Document, but Russia does not co-operate on things like that. At the moment it seems that is their approach to things.

Just stirring the pot is always possible and that is a Russian approach, but politically, in terms of what the aim of that is, this is quite specific to the Ukrainian context. Also, the geographical location of Ukraine lends itself to both Crimea and the east. At the same time, it is in the bigger picture of Russia-US and Russia-West relations, but there are two levels there. Often it gets too much about the broader geopolitical picture, forgetting some of the details and the dynamics on the ground. Part of Russia's tactic is stirring the pot, so that is just one tool it might use in a broader attention-grabbing approach to try to remind everyone that Russia's position needs to be taken seriously.

Q19 **Tom Tugendhat:** Perhaps, Henry, I could turn to you to ask a little about the granularity as well. Clearly, from a diplomatic point of view, one of the major connections between Ukraine and Europe that Russia has been attempting to undermine in different ways is the energy connection. This is where Nord Stream 2 comes in. How connected is the ability for Nord Stream 2 to open within a year to any of this activity? Do they feel that they have it home and dry, and therefore they can afford to do what they wish, or is this going to hold them off, because actually it is not quite done yet?

Henry Boyd: I certainly would not want to profess to be in any way an expert on geoeconomics or energy politics. Russia's understanding of how international politics is supposed to work, the value Russia places upon power politics, the importance of demonstrating and getting people to understand Russia's strength and getting what Russia wants out of even non-military aspects of diplomatic relations are usually key in Russian thinking.

The Nord Stream question will not be seen as done and dusted. You have Merkel's replacement in Germany under a question mark. You have a new US Administration. Russia is still looking at how the new leadership in both countries will end up playing out, both in their relationship between each other and their relationship with Russia.

Navalny's situation really complicates that on top of everything else. Russia would have perhaps been understanding of the arms control from a power-politics point of view and emphasis from the Biden Administration, but the use of value language, calling Putin out in person and emphasising human rights, will have been a bit of a dog whistle to Russia in terms of a US Administration that is more in tune with a values-orientated approach, as opposed to a pure power-politics approach that Russia would like to see them undertake, which would involve recognising Russian interests and Russian power.

That broad context underpins both their thinking about their relationship with Germany, which is key to Nord Stream, but also their relationship with the US and with Ukraine. A big power-politics play, in terms of coercive military action designed to intimidate Ukraine, might be helpful from a Russian perspective in reminding the West of Russia's own importance and Russia's capability to be a disruptive actor should it wish to do so, thereby re-emphasising that you cannot pursue, from a Russian perspective, a values-laden campaign against Russia without consequence: "You may talk about China now being your pacing threat, but we are still capable of actions that really can more than poke at your interests should we wish to. Please bear that in mind when your rhetoric may be seen to exceed your willingness to act".

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I wonder if we can connect this idea of coercive diplomacy to coercive distraction, given what is going on in the Russian Federation today and some of the points the Russian President is making this morning—this afternoon in Moscow—at this very moment in time, in his state-of-the-union speech. For instance, there is mass unemployment in the Russian Federation, profound issues around addiction around alcohol and drugs, profound degradation of the Russian Federation's environment, the catastrophe of Covid-19 being clearly underreported, and intrinsically a failure to deliver on public services and meeting the needs of Russian citizens, where the armed forces become an easy gambit with which to distract from a lot of what is going on at home. Do you see any of that linking to the issue around not just Ukraine, but a lot of President Putin and his Government's engagement with Ukraine and the rest of the West at the moment, because, again, most parts of the Russian Federation are technically in the West?

Sarah Lain: It is an important point. Certainly, there are lots of reasons to try to distract from issues at home. Putin's Prime Minister certainly is being tasked with trying to do some form of reforms that will try to address some issues, but, as we know, Russia in the past has not been so strong on at least big economic reforms that move away from oil and gas as the main economic driver.

I am a little sceptical that this is directly linking to Ukraine in particular, purely because the popularity boost that Putin got with the annexation of Crimea was not repeated when things happened in the Donbass. The difference was that, although Russia said it was not there, regardless, Russian soldiers were coming home in body-bags, so that did not go down as well. Syria certainly did not go down as well with the population.

There is a balance here: if things are getting worse, or at least not getting better, at home, foreign adventurism or sabre rattling may show, "We are a great power. We are showing everyone we are strong", or, "Why on earth are you spending money on a military build-up?" That is the other thing: this surely is not free. This is costing them something, at a time when people are not getting a fair pension and are not able to work and earn a living wage. I do not want to rule anything out, because

a lot of stuff is linked together in terms of Russian foreign policy thinking, but it is not the same calculation as in 2014 necessarily.

Also, people talk about Navalny. It is a significant issue in West-Russia relations. You have seen a crackdown on Navalny's organisation. Navalny's situation is pretty horrendous in prison. At the same time, this does not resonate with your average Russian as much as many in the West think about it. There was some statistic that over 50% polled in one poll agreed with the sentencing of Navalny; it is not like every Russian person sees this as a terrible violation of someone's human rights. There is regional variation. Russia is a huge country and different regions are struggling more than others.

Putin is very aware that his popularity is not what it once was. Even though we know elections are not necessarily free and fair, he does care about those ratings, so he will be thinking about that and how to boost them. I do see that the levels of paranoia within the state system have increased, particularly around the security side of the Kremlin, which has always been harder-line and more hawkish. That level of paranoia, particularly towards the opposition, is stronger. Crackdowns are harder, which also goes to this issue of legacy, so what comes after Putin, how long Putin will last and then the potential internal fighting that might take place should there be a transition.

Q20 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** On the point you made about this neurosis within the system, there would be some who say that in the pre-Federation days, in terms of the Soviet Union, at least there were pressure gauges in which different elements of the state could relieve that pressure and that is one of the main elements that is missing in the Russian Federation today. That neurosis is unchallenged in many ways, which even the old communist system was able to hold in check.

Sarah Lain: There are still some more liberal-minded people in the Government trying to do their work in terms of financial policy, the central bank and other things, but there seems to be a hardening within at least what they call the siloviki, which is the security apparatus around Putin. There is thinking ahead and wondering how this transition works, because if it is not done smoothly, that could cause huge issues within the leadership. It is not that this has turned into a complete authoritarian regime. There are still spaces of expression, but definitely those are closing.

I forgot to mention that Putin will have been struck by Biden agreeing with the fact that he thinks he is a killer. Nord Stream 2 is a big issue. It can be built, but it is whether it can operate due to US sanctions, and maybe that was signalling pre-sanction issuing: "Do not hit Nord Stream 2 too hard". There were some provisions for energy in the recent sanctions from the US, but it was not specific to Nord Stream 2, so Russia may see that as a slight win for them; I do not know. There are a lot of factors in the foreign policy space that they are thinking about, but in

terms of directly linking them all to domestic issues, I am sure they play a role, but not as much as in 2014 in Ukraine.

Henry Boyd: I concur with all of what Sarah said. I would come back to the point that you do not need to look for an offstage explanation for why Russia is really keen on making a big effort. Ukraine is of huge strategic importance to Russia, both in terms of preserving a sphere of influence outside of NATO on its western border but also the role it plays in terms of providing Russian military capability from the south.

I am perfectly happy to believe in the influence of domestic politics in this particular case, but you can make an entirely plausible case simply on Ukraine's strategic importance to explain Russia's military action over the last month and a half. Whether or not the domestic situation was rosy or really dire in Russia, you may well have seen the same action being taken. Simply from a defence and foreign policy perspective, this is seen as a strategic interest by almost all of the Russian security and foreign policy apparatus.

Q21 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Can I just push this very briefly, in terms of the link between the domestic issues and agenda and the coercive diplomacy? The President has said this afternoon in Moscow that his highest priority is the existence, basically, of ethnic Russians, who are being challenged. There are 134 million Russians. I find it very bizarre that that is a minority in their own country. There seems to be a similarity going back to the Serbian-Kosovo conflict, where Serbia was really keen to hold on to Kosovo because of its historic links to the Serbian state. Is there any kind of reflection here that the Russian state sees Ukraine as the Rus and the foundation of modern Russia? Is this really also about linking that domestic agenda of expanding or reconnecting with what they think is yesterday—I would it call a "Brigadoon" version of Russia—which never existed, and reconnecting what they think is a blood-and-soil type of Russian agenda? Sarah, I saw you nodding a bit there.

Sarah Lain: Definitely, Ukraine historically for Russia has been important. At least, that was the rhetoric in 2014. Russia has said Ukraine is not necessarily a real country. It was always part of Russia. Recently, the rhetoric has ramped up, saying, "If there is a hot conflict in Ukraine, that will be the end of Ukraine. If Ukraine tries to join NATO, that will be the end of Ukraine". You get the impression that they really do not see this as a sovereign state. That has partly explained 2014.

There has been the analogy with Srebrenica again, which is not the first time. Dmitry Kozak, the chief negotiator for Russia on Ukraine issues, said, "If there is a bloodbath-type situation, we will have to come in and protect our people". The difference now is that Russia in 2019 started a process of passportisation for those in the so-called republics, so these are not just ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking people. A lot of them are now actual Russian citizens; they have Russian passports. Again, the pretext is all there.

The approach of Putin is to raise this issue of patriotism and that Russia is a great power and should be seen as a great power. One of the mistakes of the previous Obama Administration was to call it a regional power, which did not go down well with Putin. It is not. It is a large European power with nuclear weapons. Whether those two things are connected and that would really play with the population in terms of this particular foreign policy issue, I am not sure; I would need to see more evidence of that. There is definitely a very patriotic feeling among a large part of the population in Russia, but whether that specific issue connects enough to warrant a lot of this remains to be seen.

Q22 **Chair:** Sarah, could I ask why President Donald Trump was so wet on Russia?

Sarah Lain: There are many theories on that, but a lot of their interests and ways of doing things aligned. This idea of business and doing things that suit your own interests and your country's interests in a transactional way resonates with Russia. There is the whole issue of Russian interference in the election perhaps being more in favour of Trump as the candidate, but this goes to a broader point of what Russia wants.

Although this is slightly abstract, Russia wants the world, or at least the western world, to see their system and their way of doing things as being as legitimate as their way, so this goes back to the value-signalling, with all this talk of democratisation and Russia needing to respect human rights and release Navalny and all these sorts of things. Russia does not want to hear that. They want, as part of their power status, to have their system of doing things to be seen as legitimate, and Trump did that; he did not necessarily care about the way Russia was doing things. Where their interests aligned, he could work with them. Where they did not, he acted against that. There are other people who may think he was a Russian stooge himself.

You see it with the way Russia is trying to build relationships with other powers. It is with powers that potentially have similar systems to them and are not based on this western democratisation. This is why Russia really plays on western hypocrisy. They really like to highlight where the West has been hypocritical on human rights, democracy or other things. Part of what RT does is highlight these things. That is a big part of their strategy. Whether that is convincing people remains to be seen, but highlighting how the Russian system is not particularly something you would want to live in all the time is certainly something more that western powers could do in terms of defending themselves.

Q23 **Chair:** That is very interesting indeed. I want to get back to the direct military challenges that we face, but I have a last geopolitical aspect, and Bob wants to come in quickly as well. Anyone who has visited Kiev and had a feel for the country quickly picks up how there is an absence of state history itself. It has always been part of another country's history and, indeed, there is very much a divide between the west's rural and

agricultural approach and the east, going back to Catherine the Great's time, when there were certainly huge Russian interests and coal-mining and state enterprises that were based on digging things out of the ground and exports. It is much different from the West itself. Does that still play today, in the sense that perhaps this is all about a sphere of influence and wanting to hold on to that historical bond that they have had with the eastern part of the country?

Sarah Lain: I have just spent the last three and a half years in Kiev looking at Donbass and Russia-Ukraine relations. There is very visibly an east-west divide. Post 2014 in some ways that has become more of a divide, but in other ways it is overstated. Certainly this was not an inevitable conflict where the east would reject everything in Kiev and go to war. Without the help of an outside power, this would not necessarily have happened.

That being said, people have to acknowledge that many in the east rejected Maidan. They did not want that, and that is a legitimate view that they had. It was then fomented by Russia with propaganda saying, "These are all fascists coming to kill you, and Kiev has been taken over by a Nazi junta". That rhetoric is coming back slightly in the Russian press.

Ukraine is in Russia's sphere of influence. It wants to have a say, or at least very strong relations with Ukraine. Part of their calculation was potentially that this would all fall apart quite quickly and a Yanukovych-type person would return to power, which did not happen, which is where this backfired and Russia has not actually succeeded in a lot of its goals in Ukraine politically. If anything, it has sustained this idea, "We now need to build a nation", and Ukrainian identity has definitely come out in the past seven years, both good and bad sides of it. There is much more of an elevation of Ukrainian language, education being more in Ukrainian and stipulations for that. You can agree or disagree as to whether that is a good thing, given that, for example, Kiev is essentially a bilingual capital, of Ukrainian and Russian. Identity is being created and that has been in contrast to what has happened with Russia.

The eastern region, yes, has always been more Russian-speaking and ethnic-Russian, but right now that is divided in itself. The Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts are divided in Government-controlled territory and then pro-Russian separatist-controlled territory. There is a really interesting dynamic even in the two oblasts that are the object of this conflict, where you get some pro-Ukrainians in those two regions on both sides of the contact line. As you would expect, it is far more complicated than this idea that it is east versus west and pro-Russian versus pro-West.

Chair: That is appreciated and important to understand.

Q24 **Bob Seely:** I just want to ask two questions. You talked about battalion tactical groups, Henry. What does that contain? Is it roughly analogous with UK-type battle groups? Where do the battalion tactical groups fit into

the new brigade structure of the Russian army? Is that brigade structure evident in the military formations around Ukraine that you are seeing?

Henry Boyd: I will try to keep this as direct as possible. It is a long and slightly complex argument. Technically, a battalion tactical group has no formal fixed size or structure, but, generally, it is a good place to start to think this is a roughly analogous Russian capability to what we consider a combined arms battle group.

They were not originally necessarily intended to be this, but they have become more and more a generic measurement of Russia's ground forces because of the continuing presence of a substantial number of one-year-term conscripts. The Russian armed forces do not view these conscripts as deployable or useful for a high-intensity military operation. They are forced, thereby, to rely on their contract professional personnel.

They have chosen, since 2012 at least, not to continue to proceed with attempting to fully staff most formations with contract personnel and divide the army into a full-contract force designed to go for immediate operations and a permanent conscript force that just sits at home. They have essentially created a hybrid force, and they have returned to a divisional structure more recently since 2014. The idea is that each regiment or each of the remaining brigades is supposed to be able to concentrate its conscript personnel into one part of the force and use the rest of its force to generate two battalion tactical groups out of that size formation.

There are still a limited number of formations that were historically full-contract, so things like the naval infantry in the marines and some of the forces in the Caucasus. It is not entirely clear how much of those are still full-contract. Even things like the VDV Russian airborne forces and reaction forces are a mix of the two.

This is somewhat of a long-held debate on Russian military theory about whether Russia will ignore the regimental brigade-level command and will just deploy battalion tactical groups as independent operators. My view is that the either/or is really a non-question in a sense, and that Russia is going to bring divisional and regimental-level command, controlling battalion tactical groups. It will backfill the forward line regiments with battalion tactical groups from elsewhere within Russia, which is part of the reason you will see stuff being drawn from, say, the central military district to Voronezh. Those units are helpful in bringing the existing units in the Voronezh oblast 3rd Motor Rifle Division up to establishment strength with contract personnel, so you get a backfilled regimental divisional-style organisation for operations out of that.

Q25 **Bob Seely:** To what extent is the information that you have just given tied into the conservatives versus reformers versus innovators debate that took place in Russia from roughly 2000 until probably 2015, or is that an ongoing debate?

Henry Boyd: It essentially represents a pragmatic compromise between ambition and reality. One of the things that is notable about the Russian military modernisation campaign in the last decade is their willingness essentially to step away from plans that turned out to be financially unrealistic or practically unrealistic.

They have not been able to fully professionalise the military, which was a longer-held ambition. They have accepted the continuing presence of conscripts and they have also accepted the political reality that they are going to have to be one-year conscripts and, thereby, they are not going to have a level of training that provides them with a suitable expertise in military operations.

This set-up is less than ideal, but it has been proven to work effectively in terms of the fact that Russia can quickly generate these formations. We have not yet seen them in practice have to demonstrate how this will all fit into a larger-scale operation at division-core level or perhaps even army level, which is one of the reasons that exactly how that structure works is still a live debate in Russia-watching.

It represents at least a grudging resolution of the reform ambition of the Russian armed forces versus the conservative aspect of, "We want to keep elements of the previous Soviet doctrine alive. We like how this works. We know how this works. We can depend upon it". It has allowed Russia to achieve that compromise: "We can now generate effective military capability, even given the still existing equipment issues and particularly still existing personnel and officer issues we have. We may not be able to use all of our forces, but we can use enough of them to do what we want to do".

Q26 **Stuart Anderson:** How we end up is not always how we intend to start off. You spoke about power status and posturing. What is the risk that there could be an escalation to full-scale military operations? What can we do or what can be done to prevent or to avoid that?

Sarah Lain: It is a really interesting point, because there is a contradiction in what Russia is doing, at least in Donbass. You have this big build-up. We are not entirely sure whether it is fully just posturing or whether something could happen. They have premised this on Ukraine being the one that is planning to attack. There was no evidence to suggest that Ukraine was actually planning to attack, and there are all sorts of reasons why it might be quite stupid for them to try to fully attack in the Donbass.

They would say, "We are pre-empting this. We are deterring. We are protecting ourselves and defending ourselves because our adversaries said they are going to attack". At the same time, they are doing things that seem aimed at provoking Ukraine into attacking or overreacting. Many have drawn parallels to the Georgia scenario, where Russia was active and Saakashvili reacted very much back, he claims, with the support of his western partners, which was not the case. They told him,

"Do not do this, because we will not be coming to save you", but that ended in hostilities. There is a point at which Russia might be trying to provoke Ukraine into misbehaving, essentially, further reinforcing their narrative. Then they could do something to respond.

The risk of miscalculation and the risk of overreaction is high. Actually, the Ukrainians at the moment are being relatively restrained and that may be also due to the reassurances from western partners and just the scrutiny under which this is all at the moment. That scrutiny in itself is really important. It is not to say that in itself is a deterrent, but Russia will have to think, given that the world is watching, which may be entirely what they wanted this to be about.

It depends on some of the behaviours. Crimea is slightly different, with a lot more actors, potentially, in and around the Black Sea, but the key thing is showing a bit of restraint until more becomes clear. Given, from what I understand, the way these military movements are happening, more will become clear as time goes on, because they will have to readjust and, as mentioned, the logistics stuff has not arrived as such in full force yet.

A lot of people are putting emphasis on Putin's address today to see if anything becomes clearer. That is the key point. It is about trying to support the Ukrainians in being able to defend themselves, but also showing this restraint that seems to be in answer to Russia seemingly trying to provoke something out of them.

Q27 **Stuart Anderson:** Just before I come on to Henry, is there anything that could be done that is not being done that will help de-escalate?

Sarah Lain: This is one of the hardest questions, because doing something to deter Russia simply is very difficult, because part of Russia's image is to not be seen to be being deterred, if that makes sense. Things like sanctions, for example, have an effect, and one argument is that they at least constrained some of Russia's further action in 2014, particularly after the downing of MH17 and sectoral sanctions coming in. They may have restrained a little in terms of how far they would go. I am not sure that is 100% true, but doing what is being done at the moment right now is probably the best in terms of trying to watch, reassure Ukraine and make sure there is minimal room for this miscalculation or overreaction. There is more that can be done in the broader UK-Russia or West-Russia relationship in terms of rethinking how we want to engage with Russia or not, which may be a separate question.

Henry Boyd: I would like to endorse all that Sarah said. The balance of what to do that might, in the short term, de-escalate this particular build-up is potentially problematic when put against the actions we might want to take to deter Russia from continuing this kind of behaviour. If there is too much restraint, Russia feels emboldened that this kind of action works and we will not show up if we really do get pushed on this aspect, but if you do too much you risk running into a very strong Russian red

line. I have emphasised over and over again that Russia just might feel compelled to escalate at that point anyway, because the risk is you either double down or you lose entirely. Neither of those aspects is a great pursuit for Russia. The line in between that we are trying to pursue at the moment seems reasonable. The greatest risk here is a misjudgment from one side or the other about how strongly they can push back on various aspects or push forward with various aspects. That is key.

There is a danger of then essentially trying to tie up a resolution: "We are back to negotiation. This is now done. We do not have to worry about this any more. We are back to Minsk. That is now normalised. This is a blip". There is a clear unresolved—and very difficult to resolve—issue between Ukraine's interests here and the West's interests in connection to that and how that ties to wider concepts of how European securities should work, which are concepts like, yes, we should not be invading other countries, annexing pieces of territory or fomenting revolt in each other's countries, versus a Russian interest that says, "No, we very much should reserve the right to do that where necessary, where Russia's interests are involved".

Those two are so very clearly central planks to the way European countries think about security in Europe and the way Russia thinks about security in Europe that that is going to be a long-term issue between us that needs constant management and attention to avoid it spilling out of control. This is one particular example, but it is not a blip so much as a long-standing part of relations between Russia and the West.

Q28 **Chair:** Further to Stuart's question, Henry, if you were in charge of Russian forces yourself, is there anything more that you would need to do if you were intent on invading eastern Ukraine, or is everything in place ready to go?

Henry Boyd: There is an open question about where my long-term supply and logistics build-up is going to be. Russian military action could take the form of a whole series of very small-scale cross-border artillery fire to be seen to be reacting to Ukrainian provocation in eastern Ukraine. It could take the form of a brief military raid. We are going back to the Crimea water theory of explanation, should you wish to drive a few tens of kilometres north into Ukraine, destroy the dams, re-enable the water supply there, go home and claim victory. If you are talking about a full-scale Russian military operation, then I am going to need a substantial amount of artillery ammunition and logistics support for that. If I am anticipating that, I am anticipating action across multiple aspects of Ukraine. I have built up the forces to do so.

One other thing I might be concerned about is essentially how likely I will feel the need to prepare my forces for a potential western counter-strike somewhere else, either against my forces there or something else. I have done more than enough to bring a sufficient military force simply to fight the Ukrainians. What is my calculation about the likelihood of direct western intervention in one way or another? More of my integrated air

defence system needs to be put on alert and be ready to go. How much of my air force is there to cover? How much of my naval force is scrambled and ready to go? What is the standing of other forces that are not relevant for a direct Ukraine confrontation but will need to be put on higher readiness in preparation for potential counter-strikes?

It sounds a bit alarmist, but from a Russian perspective you can get a bit paranoid about, "I think I have calculated where the West's red line is here, but I do not want to be putting all my eggs into that particular basket". I would want some level of, "What happens if I miscalculate here? What do I do then?"

Q29 **Chair:** If your objective was the Donbass region and you want to do another Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Crimea, despite all the bravado, once you took that space and held that terrain, you would anticipate that the West would not come in to challenge you. Right now there are enough military assets there to secure that objective, knowing that you also have your logistics chain now going through the garrison town of Voronezh in Russia.

Henry Boyd: Overall, I would probably have enough. It is not where I would want it to be for that kind of operation. If I was primarily intending this to be a coup de main operation for expanding the holdings in eastern Ukraine or annexing them subsequently, I would want more force in Rostov. That is my key jumping-off and support point. While my permanent presence there is sufficient for day-to-day operations, I would not understand why I have diverted more of my resource into Crimea at this point if that was my objective.

Q30 **Chair:** The curiosity is that if this was a display of force, you could have done it with a lot less force and fewer ships, fewer trains and fewer troops. It would still have the same symbolism of showing strength, determination and testing the United States. Instead, the build-up continues.

Henry Boyd: I probably could, but, on the other hand, this is also a great opportunity. How do I figure out when I am ready for a larger operation should that become requisite? Let me see if I can also transfer something from Central Military District. Let me see if all of Southern Military District can be brought forward where it needs to be brought forward. How does distribution work? How does command and control work?

Chair: That is very interesting from the Russian perspective. Let us now turn to the NATO side.

Q31 **John Spellar:** If we do move on to that stage and if there is escalation and the Russians actually launch an attack, would NATO or should NATO provide military aid to Ukraine?

Henry Boyd: There is direct military intervention by NATO forces and then there is the perhaps much more likely aspect of how and what we

would do in terms of providing military support, both in terms of tangible transfer of weapons and systems, but also how much intelligence and information sharing we might provide Ukrainian forces and the aspect of that.

We can probably step away from the first aspect. It would take a fairly substantial escalation before it becomes a realistic prospect that there is direct NATO-Russian confrontation militarily over this. I think I am right in saying that the current NATO VJTF land is a Turkish mechanised brigade; I would struggle to see Ankara taking a very sanguine view of being asked to be a frontline operation deployment against the Russians, given the difficult balancing act—

John Spellar: An ambiguous relationship.

Henry Boyd: Yes. We have already seen suggestions that the Biden Administration is considering supplying further anti-tank weapons. They mentioned air defence weapons. I presume that would be man-portable. The Ukrainians got rid of their man-portable air defence systems during the 1990s and thereby have a gap in inventory. There is also anti-ship weaponry. Taken together, that is a package of raising the cost for Russia of any military action. These systems are unlikely to give the Ukrainians a decisive edge to defeat the Russians but are enough that Russia would understand the potentially higher cost in terms of platforms and people lost when operating against Ukraine.

In terms of quite how much we would be prepared to go for in terms of direct intelligence sharing, it is challenging. Other aspects of Ukrainian weakness are much more difficult to address in the short term. Things like electronic warfare capabilities and how they would counter Russian artillery systems are more dependent upon a longer-term package of support, so the training packages put in place and the longer support packages in rebuilding capability in the Ukrainian armed forces from there.

We are probably not in a position to provide essentially a large-scale resupply of UAVs in the way Turkey used them in Libya. I know that Ukraine has, for obvious reasons, looked with interest at how Turkish-backed forces have countered both Russian-supplied equipment in Libya, but also how the Azeris with Turkish backing and support were able to overcome the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. They have invested in the same Turkish UAVs the Turks widely demonstrated in both those conflicts for probably pretty similar reasons. We do not necessarily have the inventory or supply line to hand that capability over, nor do the Ukrainians have the size and training of personnel to adopt that.

In terms of military aid, one key problem is most of Ukraine's forces are still dependent on Soviet-calibre weaponry, such as the tank ammunition for artillery systems. Some of these systems are simply not going to be compatible with a direct supply of NATO-sized ammunition, so we are limited. It is interesting the kind of missile systems that would be

supplied whole as opposed to resupply. It makes more sense as a discrete capability that could be reasonably quickly delivered, have a force trained up and become effective over a very short period of time, as opposed to the longer-term measures that might be taken to develop a more sustained Ukrainian defence capability over a period of years.

Sarah Lain: Can I just very quickly add that I would agree that NATO would respond in the sense of doing more of what they are already doing? That can either be on a bilateral level with member states or NATO as a whole. Turkey and the drone discussion with Ukraine has been significant and that has really angered Russia, because it does show that Turkey is changing its view slightly. Everyone is aware of what a gamechanger that was in Nagorno-Karabakh and not in Russia's favour.

Anti-tank, anti-ship and air defence would be significant, but in terms of boots on the ground, no. I am not sure about air support. There are already US and UK surveillance flights happening in and around Crimea and the Donbass. There is intelligence sharing. It would be more of the same, while also continuing that long-term assistance to Ukraine in terms of trying to build up their defences. NATO is very aware as well that it does not want to get into a confrontation directly with Russia. Also, NATO itself is not, as an alliance, united in opinion on what should be done on Ukraine, so realistically it would be more of the same.

Q32 **Chair:** Just to pursue that a bit further, is there a procurement issue, from a Warsaw Pact perspective? Where is Ukraine getting its upgrades from if it is having an ever-corrosive or degrading relationship with Russia?

Henry Boyd: There is a question here about the sustainment of the domestic Ukrainian defence industry. They inherited an awful lot of fairly substantive defence industry infrastructure on the collapse of the Soviet Union. Again, they did not necessarily have the budget to sustain all that in-house. They were competing in a quite complex international arms market at the end of the Cold War, with various countries attempting to downsize their forces and sell on second-hand equipment.

What you have seen since 2014 has been an emphasis as much as anything else on re-enabling the domestic defence industry. Most of their efforts have been basically refurbishing, midlife upgrades, modernisation to their existing systems and actually putting stuff back into service that was still nominally on inventory, but essentially had decayed over time, had been parked in a warehouse and had not necessarily been that well maintained over about a decade and a half.

The direct new military equipment from the West is relatively limited. With the budget Ukraine has, it is having to balance recruiting and expanding the armed forces and paying the personnel necessary to do that with modernising their equipment inventory and sustaining and maintaining the existing inventory during a time of conflict, where even

the stuff that works on the frontline is being damaged and needs to be repaired.

The Turkish contact relationship is an early step towards actually looking at a capability that is seen as worth spending precious capital on. It might enable them to have an outsized effect on upgrading Ukraine's capability by bringing this into their armed forces, but the perennial Ukrainian request is, "We do not just want handouts. We actually want technology transfer to be able to do it ourselves". There is also this connection that the Ukrainians have to deliver both on defending against Russia, but also sustaining jobs and employment in Ukraine and sustaining things like the domestic defence industry of Ukraine. They are to some extent aware that the relationship with the West as an arms supplier is not necessarily a given and can fluctuate and, thereby, the more it is able to somewhat diversify its supply requirements, but also the more it can do in-house, the better that would be for them. It comes with some limitations in terms of overall level of quality and effectiveness.

Q33 **Chair:** Sarah, could you perhaps describe the overall strategic relationship with NATO? At the moment it sounds like the Ukrainian President is building it up far more. You would perhaps think that they were already a member, when clearly they are not yet.

Sarah Lain: This goes to this point of some commenting that President Zelensky has started being a bit more hostile towards Russia. Since the beginning of this year, he and his Cabinet have mentioned NATO more in terms of needing membership and in terms of, "Why are we still on the sidelines?" Post this build-up coming in from the Russians, they are lobbying more on this issue.

Zelensky himself has never been anti-NATO. He has endorsed Ukraine's membership of NATO since the beginning. In 2018 I believe Ukraine changed its constitution to make membership of the EU and NATO an aspiration, so this is not new to Russia.

In terms of Ukraine's strategic relationship, there is the very difficult issue for NATO itself in terms of, if it was to bring in MAP for Ukraine, Russia's reaction being pretty negative. Russia has wasted no time reiterating time and time again since March that this is a red line and that NATO membership for Ukraine is a bad idea. NATO, as I say, is also itself not united, in terms of what certain countries want their relationship to be with NATO. Hungary in particular, for example, has in the past been very much against extending MAP to Ukraine.

Then there is the domestic reform issue in Ukraine and the fact that they need to do more reform to come closer to NATO standards and to become more interoperable with NATO and its equipment. A recent military strategy was released by the Ukrainian Government, which partly identified Russia explicitly as a threat to Ukraine and the region, which is understandable, but also read, basically, like a checklist of things they

are going to do to try to reform, in terms of defence, to work better with NATO and just increase that.

They are aware of the reality. The Ukrainians are aware that this is a very difficult issue for NATO and they have their own homework to do, but Zelensky right now is trying to garner all of the western support he can to make it look like he is not alone standing against Russia. He has used that in terms of his own foreign policy goals, but he is not unaware that NATO membership is not necessarily feasible.

Q34 **Chair:** Henry, what international military assets are currently in Ukraine, if any?

Henry Boyd: Essentially, there is a mainly US-led but multinational training mission from various nations that have rotated through Ukraine for the last five or six years now. That is, all told, fewer than 1,000 personnel. It would not register as a military capability in and of itself, nor is it a particularly sizeable deployment of US forces or other forces, be it UK, Lithuanian or Canadian; various people have run through the training mission there under a variety of different names, depending on which country you talk to and which mission you talk to.

Other than that, the international NATO military presence is largely by dint of neighbourhood, in terms of our military action so far, the intelligence flights coming out of other NATO countries into the Black Sea—and naval deployments into the Black Sea on occasion, primarily by the US Navy but also by other nations, and by NATO standing maritime groups, both at frigate level and at minehunter level. Otherwise, the direct military commitment to Ukraine is very small at the moment, but also the direct commitment to other NATO members in south-east Europe is, relatively speaking, small when compared to the overall NATO balance of military force.

The emphasis has really been on the Baltics and north-eastern Europe as a primary aspect of NATO military capability build-up. Even that has proven somewhat challenging, in terms of NATO being able to provide enough ready forces and enough bulk forces to meet those aspirations.

The NATO 4x30 generation plan is nominally done and successful. Still, I see question marks from various observers about quite how much of that exists in practice and how much of the commitment there is that people have signed up for it and nominally, yes, are providing this, but in terms of the readiness and availability levels there is a big question mark.

We are supposed to be part of the Defender-Europe exercise and demonstration last year. Covid really hampered that, so there is still a question mark about exactly what exists on the ground there. The primary most available assets are going to be air and maritime, just geographically at this point in time. Otherwise, it is very limited.

Q35 **Chair:** From the way you have described that, if I was Russia and I was

being provocative, my assessment of NATO is that they would be unprepared to prevent an invasion to secure the Donbass region. We simply do not have the assets in eastern Europe to respond in time before the Russians could say their mission was complete.

Henry Boyd: That might be one way of looking at it. The question mark that Russia would have is about whether, even if we had more assets available, Ukraine is a sufficiently high interest beyond the rhetoric that we would risk a direct conflict with Russia. Part of Russia's emphasis has long been, "Ukraine is an absolute strategic red line for us. It is more of a nice-to-have for you guys in terms of the Russian power-politics level; thereby, we will always be willing to commit more to this fight than you will be, which gives us an advantage. Ultimately, this will be resolved in our interest, because you simply do not have the same level of strategic interest in what happens here as we do".

Q36 **Chair:** The only way that could really change is if we placed land capability inside Ukraine, so there was the timeframe to respond and to hold enough ground before more NATO reinforcements could come in. Would that be the way you would actually deter Russia if it was intent on moving forward? Sarah, do you want to start off with that and I will come back to Henry?

Sarah Lain: It is best to defer to Henry, but it is still a difficult calculation. Henry is right. This means, in some ways, more to Russia than it does to NATO, in the broader military sense in terms of how far they are willing to go. It is indicative that in 2014 this is where the relationship properly developed between NATO and Ukraine, but the response was really to reinforce NATO members and NATO allies in the Baltics. There is that argument that Ukraine is not a NATO member. Yes, this is a European security issue, but it is relatively localised, although I hate to say it, in eastern Ukraine, depending on if they were to do something elsewhere.

One of the key points to reiterate on why Russia has done this to prevent, for example, NATO membership and further support is Article 10 saying that membership can be extended but it should be to reinforce the security of the alliance, which this obviously would not do. For me, rather than actual deterrence and what that would do, there is the issue of political will. Also, calling Russia's bluff is something that sometimes we should go further on a little more. In this case, it might escalate things much further, but it is very difficult to tell.

Q37 **Chair:** It is really interesting about calling bluffs. If we are going to support Ukraine, then we have to have the absolute will and the desire to follow through, unlike with Syria, if you go back there, where the red lines were produced and they disintegrated. Is that perhaps the reason why we have not seen NATO, or indeed the United States separately, provide a statement on what would be the consequences if Russia was to invade eastern Ukraine?

Henry Boyd: It is certainly one possible explanation. As Sarah pointed out, the current US Administration have not come into office with Ukraine as a high priority for them and a key issue to be resolved. They had a very clear line of what they want to think about. There is still the internal US political debate about who should be the NSC Russia point, the potential candidacy of Matthew Rojansky and what that led to, which is illustrative of still a question mark about exactly where the Administration sit down. That is particularly true of an Administration that has made it fairly clear that foreign and defence policy is going to have to take a backseat to pandemic response and domestic US political issues in the short term, coupled with doing a global force posture review that is already essentially linked to China becoming more of a pacing threat. They are trying to find US savings in their military commitments elsewhere to rebalance with China.

The US attitude is very clear. In terms of whether the US Administration takes a much harder line on Russian actions in Ukraine, to an extent the rest of NATO is viewed by Russia as, "They may follow where the US leads. If the US does not do something, then we are less interested necessarily in what the UK and France are worried by here", because, ultimately, they will not act independently against Russia in a military sense. This is going to be dependent upon whether the US is prepared to put an awful lot of military capital backing certain policies.

The Russians will have looked at, among other things, the statements about US posture coming out of both the current White House Administration and the previous White House Administration, that there is a through line on the Pentagon for this and that Europe has faded a bit from their list of priorities. Post 2014 what was the European Reassurance Initiative and then the European Deterrence Initiative took centre stage in Pentagon budgets. Now it is the Pacific and China. It is going to be INDOPACOM. Although they are not going to talk about it in this sense, EUCOM is certainly going to have to think about doing more with less, to use the slightly hackneyed defence phrase. In terms of Russian thinking, that would reinforce their view that, "Ultimately, this is a secondary issue for NATO, this is less important for NATO members and our job is to keep it that way in some ways, because that is how we can sustain our freedom of action here".

We have touched a little already on, to some extent, the US shift away from viewing Russia as a prime threat and talking about, "Russia is going to fade over time and China is the thing we are really worried about". That does not necessarily sit well in Moscow, because a Russia that one of the other great powers views as just not that big a deal is a Russia that is inherently vulnerable, because it is thereby seen as not strong and can be pushed around a bit. The complex relationship that Russia then has with how the West perceives it as a threat or not a threat underlies all of this really.

Chair: This is a very interesting discussion, because it has taken us into

the wider geopolitical factors at play here. We are departing Afghanistan, which we debated yesterday. It was a statement, whether you like it or not, of the West's inability to perhaps encourage and support liberal democracies or liberal efforts around the world because of wider geopolitical factors at play, with China and Russia doing their thing. Ukraine could be an illustration of this as well. Is it worth dying on this particular hill? It is very interesting indeed.

Q38 **Stuart Anderson:** There are a lot of hypotheticals, calling bluffs, escalations and posturing, but Russia is saying these are routine exercises. One thing that we will be able to see is time. They have said there are several weeks or a few weeks left of these exercises. Where would we go in six weeks if the numbers are the same in the same location or, if not, have increased? That has gone from routine exercises to longer-term deployments. I plucked six weeks, but it could be one month, two months or three months. What would be our next escalation on that?

I am conscious of what you both said, particularly Sarah, where we could be seen or Ukraine could be seen as the ones to start it because Russia antagonised that. What are the timelines and where should we be looking, around that and the next escalation from our side?

Henry Boyd: Russia can sustain this level of military build-up reasonably for a short to medium-term deployment without too much pressure on other commitments. The last official figure out of Russia is the total strength of the Russian armed forces is 136 battalion tactical groups. If you are deploying 56 of those to just a series of exercises for coercion against Ukraine, that is not a long-term sustainment for Russia. That undermines its ability to do other stuff elsewhere. Russia has competing commitments elsewhere, both active and potential, that it needs to be able to honour.

There is a long discussion about the seasonal aspect of fighting here. The Russian build-up is expected to be complete by the end of April. That happens to more or less coincide with the end of the "mud season" in the local area, which basically makes for better operational terrain. We have already seen the initial warnings come out of NATO and EUCOM, which were generated by a very small number of Russian battalion tactical groups staying on post exercise. The continuing presence of the large number of these groups post exercise would be a real worry, as would be their remaining in the region but moving away from the training grounds to temporary encampments close to the Ukrainian border. That would be a big red line of impending action there.

Q39 **Stuart Anderson:** How many battalions were used in the annexing of Crimea?

Henry Boyd: I cannot remember off-hand, but it is substantially fewer than the total number they have activated already for this operation, simply because six or seven years ago Russia's overall number was

substantially smaller then. A ballpark would be something like 20 to 30, just offhand. I would have to defer to going back and reworking a note. We are talking about maybe roughly double the size of the battalion tactical group force they had on hand for the last operation.

There would be a strong pressure on both the US Administration and NATO countries to provide some form of military deterrent response to Russia that continued to maintain that size of presence beyond the end of this exercise period. There is a time window in Russia in terms of the point at which it can plausibly simply continue to use this to achieve coercion without consequence, both internally in terms of Russia's own military commitments but also in terms of hardening western and NATO attitudes to what it wants to do and facing more pushback in terms of, "Now you are clearly in the territory of threatening to conduct a military operation we find unacceptable. We are going to have to examine both reinforcements put into place into Europe but also other actions we might take elsewhere as a result of that".

The window for that is somewhere in the two-weeks-to-one-month period, where this really goes from being a potential hypothetical to, "At this point now we have to be realistic that Russia is trying to keep these forces in-region and continue to pressure Ukraine with military coercion. The exercise is now done. This is here for the pursuit of Russian geopolitical objectives and we need to know how we would respond to that". Beyond that, I would have to defer to exactly what NATO countries individually would think, what the collective response would be, how much US pressure there would be and how much pressure countries like the UK, which traditionally takes a stronger line against Russia, would be able to exert on other member states for a collective response.

Q40 **Chair:** Just to confirm, is 136 battalions the scale of strength that is now surrounding eastern Ukraine?

Henry Boyd: Just to reclarify, that is a two-year-old figure for the overall strength of the Russian armed forces, so I would use it in measure of the 56 battalion tactical groups the Ukrainians ultimately expect to be deployed in this operation. Forty-eight are currently there. We expected 56 by the end of the month. If 136 is still the valid number, it is between a third and a half of Russia's overall available ground manoeuvre strength. This is not something that is a limited portion of Russia's strength.

Q41 **Chair:** Approximately half of Russia's ground capability is now surrounding Ukraine.

Henry Boyd: It will be by the end of the month, yes, if projections stay true.

Q42 **Chair:** There is a sober thought. What should the UK specifically be doing, bearing in mind our Global Britain credentials and that we have just had an integrated review? Perhaps it is not the best time to cut back

on our own tank numbers as well.

Sarah Lain: It is very difficult, partly because nothing has necessarily happened yet, so it is about continuing to do whatever the UK can with NATO allies, bilaterally with Ukraine, reassuring Ukraine, going through every single scenario possible, planning and determining what that red line would be. I agree, as you mentioned earlier, that you cannot have a red line and then not do it. Tactically it is sometimes best not to warn Russia what you might do, because they will make a calculation as to whether they can mitigate that or whether it is worth it.

We have to be really clear on what the response will be and understanding where this lies in the priorities. Unfortunately for Ukraine, it is not a NATO member. This is one issue in Europe in a raft of European security issues. I am sure we are being honest with the Ukrainians behind closed doors, but we need to also try to pressure them on the much-needed reforms that they need to do to defend themselves better. Then there is a raft of probable weaponry that one could help supply to deter Russia in terms of the equivalent of Javelins. Figuring out what our red line is would be helpful.

Henry Boyd: We talked about the Integrated Review and the Defence Command Paper stuff. On the ground forces side, a large part of that review is really thinking about a credible force for a high-intensity scenario. We are basically deterring Russia by being able to credibly fight a high-intensity war with them if necessary. That underlines the questions there.

Understandably, questions of quantity versus quality come out of that. It is difficult to steer the course between the two correctly, but there is a necessity. Just focusing on one or the other simply will not work here. The ability of Russia to generate sizeable forces at relatively short notice for operations puts a similar pressure on NATO overall. In terms of what the UK commitment as an overall part of NATO's defence should be, we are playing our part with the 4x30 commitments. Should we be able to do more? The US tends to lean on the side of, "Yes, we like what you are doing, but can you do more of it, please?" That is understandable, because that is the nature of how that relationship often works.

It is about really clearly understanding where our interests lie, where the alliance's interests lie and what we could realistically get the Russians to buy as a red line, in terms of communicating that to them in a way that meant they would understand that we are prepared to do things that they understand the meaning of in retaliation for actions that cross that red line. That is key to all of that, in the sense of both having the capability but also clearly communicating our willingness to use it under certain circumstances. It is about how that ties into our relationship with both our European partners and the United States and getting a clear picture of that, because this will need to be an alliance response.

Chair: Thank you for that. It has been very illuminating and somewhat

depressing in coming to better understand what is exactly happening on the Ukrainian border. I personally believe it is much more than muscle flexing and sending messages to the United States. We have learned that half of Russia's land capability is now surrounding eastern Ukraine; I fear that is no military exercise. There is something much darker at play here to do with Russia's expansionist ambitions, but we will only know as time will tell.

Thank you very much indeed to Sarah Lain and Henry Boyd for a fascinating extraordinary meeting of the Defence Select Committee looking at the significant build-up of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border. That brings this session to a close. Thanks once again to the staff here and to my Committee.