

# Foreign Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: The situation in Ukraine and the UK's response, HC 1089

Tuesday 1 February 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 February 2022.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Liam Byrne; Alicia Kearns; Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Andrew Rosindell; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 1-35

### Witnesses

I: Fiona Hill, Senior Fellow at Brookings Institution, Shashank Joshi, Defence Editor at The Economist, and Dr Anders Åslund, Senior Fellow at Atlantic Council

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Fiona Hill, Shashank Joshi and Dr Anders Åslund.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are very lucky to have with us, in no particular order, Shashank Joshi of *The Economist*, Anders Åslund of the Atlantic Council and Fiona Hill of the Brookings Institution. Thank you very much for coming; it is a great pleasure to have you, and the sum total of your knowledge, with us. If I may, I will start with you, Fiona, and ask about what we are seeing on the Russian-Ukrainian border, what the demands put down by Vladimir Putin really mean, and what you think he is actually trying to achieve.

**Fiona Hill:** Thank you. I will start at the end of your question rather than at the beginning, because I think what Putin is after, in part, is our full attention. He has certainly succeeded in that. That is related to the beginning of your question. We are seeing an unprecedented build-up of Russian forces, not just on the direct border between Russia and Ukraine, but also—this was a game changer for the Administration here in the United States—the movement of troops, artillery and equipment into Belarus.

I will just lay it out there: when I was in government, one of the main scenarios we worried about the most was the outbreak of a conflict in Belarus that would draw the Russians in, and put pressure on neighbouring nations, such as Poland and the Baltic states—not only Ukraine. That movement of troops and equipment on a much larger scale into Belarus, and the rather belligerent tone that Alexander Lukashenko has taken, fits into a worst-case scenario for some in the United States who are looking at all the various contingencies.

It has also drawn everyone's attention that Putin has moved forces all the way across from the Russian far east military district, which is not usual, let's just say, in an exercise. We have seen the Zapad—the West Exercises—before, and they do not usually involve that long train, literally, of equipment going from other theatres. Again, that shows Russia is very serious, and that this is not just a normal exercise. When you look back to 2008, when Russia moved into Georgia—I was the national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at the time, and of course Anders and Shashank will also probably remember that period—there was the usual exercise, Kavkaz, that the Russians conducted in the north Caucasus, but there was not any unusual activity of other deployments at that point. That was just before Russia moved into Georgia. Recent activity is unprecedented, even if you look at another exercise that preceded an intervention going back to 2008.

It is not just the Belarus-Ukraine border, of course. We have forces now in Crimea that Russia has built up since the annexation, and there are forces

deployed in the Transnistria region, and we are not really sure how the Russians might use them. In the totality, that is very concerning.

The level of rhetoric behind the scenes in Russia is also of note. There has been some diminution in the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, bizarrely enough, more recently, but there is an uptick in rhetoric against the United States and NATO. We have seen from polling in Russia that the majority of Russians believe that NATO and the United States are the aggressors, or that Ukraine basically poses some threat to Donbas, which in itself is also fairly preposterous. We have seen rhetoric also about Kaliningrad, and the threat posed to it by, bizarrely, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which I thought had disappeared many centuries ago. We are seeing ourselves in different rhetorical spaces, while Putin has pressed against Ukraine in a pretty hardline way in rhetorical and real terms going back to 2006, with the cut-offs of gas.

To return to the last question, clearly the United States Administration—I know the British share this assessment—see this as unprecedented, and as preparations for a full-scale invasion, not just some regular series of exercises. The big question is what Putin is going to do. Irrespective of whether he invades or not, at this point he has successfully deployed military forces to get attention—to put the world on edge, not just Ukraine, the United States, NATO, the UK and other allies. It is a costly exercise in and of itself, so even that is a major development.

Putin has made three sets of demands. As we know, in December he put forward twin documents to NATO and the United States. I do not have to repeat what is in them, as I am sure the Committee and everyone else is very well aware. Clearly there are three dimensions: Ukraine, NATO and the United States. He is hoping that this is all going to be a major game changer. What does he want right now? Full attention, and clearly he wants a capitulation from us on Ukraine, NATO and basically the withdrawal of forces and positions since 1997 and 1999, when the first big wave of expansions started. It is clear that he wants the United States to sit down at the table and negotiate a whole series of European security arrangements, and Ukraine is being held hostage to that set of demands.

**Q2 Chair:** Fiona, you spoke about preparations at home. This does not seem to compare with the preparations for the 2014 invasion that we all remember, when the Russians were talking about the Ukrainian Government being fascist, and being any number of different things. There do not seem to be the same echoes. Is Vladimir Putin preparing the Russian people at all for a protracted conflict, were one to arise?

**Fiona Hill:** Well, I think he has set the scene. I think there would need to be a trigger at this point. That was part of the purpose of the US Administration, along with the United Kingdom and others, going to the United Nations to put everyone on notice. This is obviously a very familiar scene. As you said, we saw this in 2014, and in 2008, with the preparation of a war with Georgia. At different times, we have seen a menace towards Estonia and the Baltic states with a similar kind of preparation of rhetoric. There has been a long trend, as I am sure that Anders and Shashank



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

would agree, in this rhetoric. In any case, there has been no diminution, in terms of the rhetoric towards Ukraine. At the United Nations, before Nebenzya walked away, there had already been these statements that Ukraine was fascist, and a reiteration of some of the rhetoric that we have already seen. The uptick in rhetoric towards the United States has also been notable. Again, in Russian polling, there is already this sense that the United States and NATO are aggressors, so there is fertile ground for some kind of pretext, but we have been putting Russia on notice about that.

**Q3 Chair:** I have one last point before I open up the questioning. Clearly, there are various options that the Russian Government have prepared themselves for, whether it is the invasion of Ukraine in small or large volume, or deployments to other parts. What are the chances of the Russian Federation attempting to close that area of territory—the Suwałki gap, as it is called—between Kaliningrad and Belarus? What do you think the chances are that Russia will use troops to change the way that Belarus operates, rather than to interfere quite as directly in Ukraine?

**Fiona Hill:** I think that the chances are very high. That is part of the risk that we have. This is again a classic Putin move. He has attracted all our attention to one set of spots but may well do something elsewhere. I think we need to be very vigilant. It would not just be a question of Belarus; it could also be threats to the Baltic states, as I have said. We have seen rhetoric towards Estonia in the past.

Anders and Shashank will probably also recall that there have been all kinds of moves that Putin has made against other neighbours. There has been pressure on Finland, Sweden and other countries, for example—especially if Sweden and Finland still have their open door to NATO. We have already seen Russia consolidate positions in the former Soviet space: there was the intervention of the CSTO in Kazakhstan; and putting troops in Nagorno-Karabakh, exploiting the summer 2020 conflict there, after resistance to that for decades by Armenia and Azerbaijan.

There is pressure on Moldova as well. There has been a track that Dmitry Kozak has been running behind the scenes on Moldova and Transnistria, but that also looks designed to get leverage over Moldova, given the configuration of its new Government. We have seen in Georgia that Mikheil Saakashvili is now sitting in jail, and there has been a complete shift in the orientation of the Georgian Government, in terms of their interactions with Russia.

Russia has very effectively consolidated its position in Eurasia and the post-Soviet space, and Ukraine is an outlier, but there is also a great opportunity here to establish military bases and the potential deployment of missiles in Belarus, and to put the squeeze on Poland and Lithuania over Kaliningrad, as you point out.

**Q4 Bob Seely:** Fiona, you talked about Belorussia. It seems to me that that is a big win pocketed by Putin, and that it has not even clicked for the West that in the last six months to a year, Belorussia has gone from a country that could just about pretend to be an independent state to



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

either an external or a sort of internal colony of the Russian Federation. I assume that those troops that Putin has moved into Belorussia are never actually going anywhere and are now there permanently. Would you agree?

**Fiona Hill:** I think that is a fair assumption, yes, and I think we should be paying close attention to the statements from Lukashenko about potential missile placements, and also there is Kaliningrad. One thing to point out, though, is that this is all about Lukashenko; it is not really about Belarus itself—this is very much a decision made by him. As you look around at what I have just said is the consolidated position of Russia, it is very much dependent on its leverage over key leaders, as we have seen in Armenia, where Pashinyan was reined in, in a similar way to Lukashenko. Obviously, Tokayev in Kazakhstan, having made the decision to call in the CSTO, has put himself in a very different position than before.

For Putin, Russia and the Kremlin, this is all really about leadership. Should something happen to Lukashenko, the dynamic in Belarus might be quite different, but we should watch that very closely.

Q5 **Bob Seely:** Briefly on Transnistria, I thought that there were only three battalions of a sort of local defence force, and that they were not necessarily aligned with Moscow's aims in the way that they were in the past. Are you saying that that is not the case?

**Fiona Hill:** I am saying we should watch it, because I am not quite sure what the situation is there. I think we often forget and overlook the fact that there are battalions there, as you point out. They are usually just there in some sort of placement or holding pattern. When you take a look at the map and factor those in, it makes you wonder whether there is some potential play there.

Again, we've also seen Russia, in a way, dangle the resolution of Transnistria at different points. What comes to my mind is that they have been doing this again. Dmitry Kozak, who technically has oversight of Ukraine and Belarus as well as Moldova in Russian Kremlin circles, has recently been engaged in a track 2 process that, before the whole build-up in Ukraine, looked like another effort to find a different model of resolution there. Of course, it was also timed with the new Government in Moldova, and we have seen in the past, when the Germans organised the so-called Meseberg initiative, which was their effort to resolve Transnistria, that such things are used by the Government in Moscow to gain leverage. The Germans stepped away from that, realising that there was no serious intent to resolve the conflict; it was more a way of finding how to get a tighter grip over Moldova, or leveraging it, even with Germany.

Let us watch that as well, because there is a tendency for Putin to surprise us when we've all been looking in the wrong direction. I am not necessarily saying that there is something that I have picked up there on at the moment, but we should just bear it in mind, as you said, given the fact that the battalions are still placed there.

Q6 **Bob Seely:** Finally, this is now a pretty advanced and sophisticated



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

model. I know the Russians do not use the word “hybrid”, or they claim it is an import from the West, but this full-spectrum or new generation of warfare—a mix of paramilitary, military, diplomatic, economic and cultural—they’ve really got it down to a fine art, if you look at what they are doing, as you say, in central Asia, in the Caucasus, in Moldova, in Ukraine. The Baltic republics may be a target yet to come. It is pretty sophisticated stuff, isn’t it?

**Fiona Hill:** It is, and it is internally, in our countries, as well. I think part of the problem that we’re going to be facing is how we manage with our own domestic politics and the private sector. We have senior officials from various countries on the boards of Russian companies, doing advocacy or, basically, consulting for Russian companies. SPIEF, or the St Petersburg International Economic Forum—this is really Anders’s area, and I’d love to hear what he has to say about this—is still advertising for June. Putin is convoking meetings with business delegations with Italy, for example. We have an issue here. That is very sophisticated because, in a way, they have bought a kind of insurance package within our own politics and economies.

**Bob Seely:** Thank you.

Q7 **Liam Byrne:** Fiona, I want to zero in on the core of Russian insecurity and close off one issue. You were an adviser to the Administration that withdrew from the INF treaty, and presumably that leaves Russia fairly vulnerable to ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe. Russia has built fairly effective air and sea defences, but it is obviously vulnerable to ground-launched cruise missiles. How important is that as a factor in Putin’s calculus? How important is a settlement on INF to Putin?

**Fiona Hill:** This is a really good point. It is a very important factor for him, and if it weren’t for the current coercive force that is being deployed against Ukraine, it would be a perfect moment for this Administration to be negotiating with Russia on what comes next after INF. That was supposed to be the purpose of the strategic stability talks.

To be very clear, one of the motivations for the previous Administration in withdrawing from INF—although the timing was a bit debatable and very much driven by individual preference, rather than any exigency about a particular moment—was that Russia had been violating the INF treaty for years, as you are well aware. Because successive Administrations had become bogged down in a “You said this,” “You said that,” “You’re violating,” “No, you’re violating,” dynamic, we could not break out of it to talk about the next phase—even on New START, for example. The whole idea had been that, after the US withdrawal in August, there would be a series of discussions with the Russians on the next phase. Putin was very concerned about that. As I was leaving the Administration back in 2019, it warned Trump that if there was not an immediate follow-on, the atmosphere could easily return to the Euromissile crisis of the 1980s, which is of course where we find ourselves—with more threats of deployments of missiles in Belarus, Kaliningrad and elsewhere, and a clear intent to rattle nerves in Europe.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Putin and the people behind the scenes were already making it very clear that they wanted a sense of what was going to happen to make sure that there was a guarantee—some kind of undertaking—from the United States of no more missile deployments in Europe. Again, that was supposed to be on the agenda for the strategic stability talks that Wendy Sherman was conducting under this Administration. So yes, I think this is a major factor for Putin.

Q8 **Liam Byrne:** So where does it sit in the hierarchy of Russian insecurities?

**Fiona Hill:** Well, it is up there. Obviously there is their whole view of the privileged sphere of interests; Ukraine being back in the fold; missiles—not just intermediate, but long range. It is not just about the United States for intermediate; there is obviously China and the way it is developing the Asia-Pacific region, and there are other countries—India, Pakistan and so on—in a much broader dynamic. The hierarchy of things is pretty close to the idea of ensuring a privileged sphere of interests and getting Ukraine and the rest of the former Soviet bloc back under their grip.

Q9 **Liam Byrne:** NATO has not said much about this, other than that there is no intention to deploy nuclear-armed ground-launched cruise missiles. The UK Government has said almost nothing. Should this be an area where the UK Government offer a few more proactive suggestions?

**Fiona Hill:** Prior to all this, it was a hope that the UK, along with France and other nuclear powers, would have some say in how we discussed these matters. Under current circumstances, saying something independently is probably not a great idea, but trying to find a way of co-ordinating with the United States and finding a way forward that does not look as if it is done at the point of a missile would be part of our planning for what we do if we get out of the current crisis. It is overdue.

There has been a long set of discussions about how to manage the withdrawal or the amendment of the INF and INF phase 2 or 3, but my colleagues and others who are working on strategic stability were hoping for more of an omnibus agreement that would cover tactical, intermediate and strategic—a kind of post New START. That is why this Administration rolled over new STARTs. That was talked about as a possibility for at least a year or two under the previous Administration, but there had not been a full discussion of everything.

You may recall that there was also a discussion on what to do about China and whether to bundle China into this. That was probably a bridge too far for the initial phases.

This is an area that one could have a very serious discussion about, but I would not do it individually. The Russians will obviously look for a way to pluck off not just the UK as a nuclear power, but Germany and other countries that have a stake in this from their own security perspectives.

Q10 **Chair:** Before we move on, does Shashank want to add to this?

**Fiona Hill:** Anders wanted to as well.



**Shashank Joshi:** I just wanted say very quickly that, in theory, the INF is a sensible topic for discussion and it is clearly on Russia's mind. We have heard Putin talking quite a lot about the flight times of intermediate-range missiles from European territory, although the flight time from eastern Ukraine is not all that different from the flight times from the Baltics, so whether it is a substantive problem is arguable. However, it was clearly part of US strategy to go into the strategic stability talks saying, "We're not going to talk about red lines or rolling back NATO expansion, but we will make a good-faith effort to find stuff to talk about. That is going to be INF missiles, confidence-building measures, conventional forces—all those kinds of things."

One of the things that worries me most profoundly about this crisis and my reading of Russian intentions is that, at every step of the way, I see Russia's leadership closing the space for diplomacy rather than grasping it. We saw Russian diplomats come out of the talks saying, "Missile discussions are good, but it's not what we're here for." I saw them repeating that message again and again. To me, that strongly suggests that they will not be fobbed off with what they see as secondary topics. As best as I can read it, for them, the diplomacy is not a serious effort to find space for agreement, but a process designed to buy time and lay responsibility on the other side.

While the INF discussion is a sensible one, the way it has actually proceeded reinforces my sense that the Russians are not really interested at this point in having a productive, fruitful, substantive discussion on intermediate-range missiles with verification and all of these things. I really think they are focused on halting Ukraine's westward drift, which is why this is such a dangerous moment.

**Dr Åslund:** Let me follow up on a similar line. Fiona in the beginning laid out very nicely how Putin is throwing everything up in the air, and then he hopes to get something somewhere on some issue, and we do not know where, geographically or on what topic. The western strategy—I mean here primarily the US and UK strategy—I think has been just right: expose it all, emphasise as much as possible what is going on, and provide as much intelligence as reasonably can be provided, and by doing so, the west is really pushing Putin into a sort of dead end. Either he goes for everything, and then he is likely to lose, or he is not getting anything.

The worst would be that he gets something, so you can say that the summit with Biden is a big win for Putin—he shows that he is one of the big three leaders in the world, together with the US President and the Chinese President—but it is not enough. He needs something more. The big thing that Putin is talking about repeatedly is Yalta 2: he wants to divide the west. Previously, he tried to break Europe out; now, he tries to break the US out and have an agreement over Europe with the US. All these things need to be stopped, and I think the US and the UK are doing exactly the right things in the strategy.

What does Putin really want? Fiona offered a number of issues, but the fundamental thing is that he wants to stop democracy in his



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

neighbourhood, and in particular in Russia. He does not recognise Ukraine as a state, and he wants to have it abolished, but that is primarily in order to get what Russians have called since the beginning of the 20th century a small, victorious war. The ultimate aim is to gain popularity by doing something for the nation, and at the same time getting an excuse for more repression at home. I think we should concentrate on these things, and what he achieves in terms of a specific arms agreement is, I think, quite relevant.

Fiona and also Shashank emphasised that Putin has put everything here in terms of ultimatums. This is not a question of reaching an agreement, and it is not an opening for negotiation: it is to put the west in a corner, but when the west ends up as it now admirably has done, he is putting himself in a corner. I think we are moving in the place where we should be, and I think it is excellent that you are holding this meeting today and that you are so focused on these issues. This is, in itself, something that really harms Putin's strategy.

**Chair:** Thanks very much. Alicia, all yours.

- Q11 **Alicia Kearns:** Fiona, when it comes to our time in Ukraine, I was slightly taken aback by the fact that the western intelligence assessments seem to differ quite significantly from those of the Ukrainians. There were a lot of views when we were in Kyiv that any invasion would come over the contact line, and there was some reference to the fact that there could be an effort to directly decapitate Kyiv—obviously through Belarus—whereas obviously when we met with the Ukrainians, it was very much, “The contact line is far too built up. There is far too much defence infrastructure. That is something that is not going to be crossed. It will either be, yes, a direct decapitation of Kyiv, or more likely a move through the south or through other vulnerable parts of the borders.” How likely do you think each of those scenarios is, and what do you think Putin is looking at specifically?

**Fiona Hill:** Putin is clearly trying to keep us guessing because he has given himself a lot of options. There is also the option of air offence. If you look at what they did in Georgia in 2008, which is a long time ago, it was more of a set piece, world war two, tanks through the Rokhi tunnel, plus the use of aircraft. The Russians have also adapted a lot since then, with the use of covert operatives, different forces and cyber-attacks. We have also seen the deployment of vessels from the Baltic fleet coming around into the Black sea, with amphibious landing capabilities. So, there is also the option of sea attacks, and they have already blocked off with good effect the sea of Azov completely to any outside shipping, as well as then taking Mariupol and other Ukrainian ports, and threatening Odessa. The hope is that, by whatever means they deploy, there will be a squeeze put on Kyiv.

We also have to bear in mind the intelligence that was deployed to rather good effect by the UK Government about efforts to literally decapitate the Ukrainian Government by overthrowing or removing Zelensky and finding a replacement. We have seen that happen through triggers in other



countries around the Soviet-Russian periphery. We should not rule such things out either. I am a little bit mystified as to Zelensky's efforts right now to pick fights with various oligarchs and the previous President Poroshenko, but again, Anders may have some insight into this, given the work that he has done very closely with the Ukrainian Government. That tactic also suggests that there are quite a lot of machinations going on inside Ukraine and Ukrainian political circles, which Putin and Kremlin could try to take advantage of. We saw them do that in Georgia, for example, as well as attempt that in Armenia.

Another factor to bear in mind is the variety of covert operations by Russia. One thing that President Zelensky is very worried about is the market effect. Part of the reason that we are getting a difference of interpretation is the crushing effect on the Ukrainian economy by the threat of war and all of the pressure that Russia is applying. Perhaps that is also being factored in by the Kremlin and Putin as a way of getting Zelensky pushed to the margins.

There are a lot of dynamic factors in Ukraine that the Russians can use. I think in some respects it is a bit risky for us to focus in on one issue. Obviously the United States Government, based on their intelligence, have laid out the maximal possible invasion that is feasible, but there are many different ways that Russia could deploy the forces that it has arraigned. That supports the difficulty that we have.

**Q12 Alicia Kearns:** Absolutely. Anders, would you like to come in on that?

**Dr Åslund:** I would like to pick up on two broad points, one which Fiona mentioned. Ukrainian politics are very divided, and President Zelensky is now trying to prosecute the former President Poroshenko, his main political rival, for high treason. I saw Poroshenko last in October, and he said that there were then 129 criminal cases open against him. President Zelensky completely controls the Prosecutor General, so this is a political prosecution. That is not to say that President Poroshenko did not do anything but what he is accused of does not make sense. The high treason charge is about the Ukraine imported coal from the occupied Donbass territories where Ukrainian companies were still operating and paying a tax in Ukraine, and so on. Fiona mentioned the possibility of a coup or simply the collapse of government and that is quite possible. Unfortunately, as you could see from President Zelensky's press conference on Friday, he is not focused on this at all, but rather picks an unnecessary fight. That is worrying in itself.

The other point that Fiona mentioned is the economic impact of what has already happened. One thing that has not been much noticed is that the Ukrainian eurobond deal is up 11% to 14%, which means that Ukraine does not have access to international finance. So whatever happens on the ground militarily, Ukraine will need substantial stabilisation finance after all this is over. Not only does money not come into Ukraine, but nobody in Ukraine or any foreigner is prepared to do even elementary deeds. Economists have come to a standstill in this regard. It is perceived as too dangerous to do something.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

President Zelensky complained about this in his press conference and blamed western intelligence for causing the crisis. Of course, the crisis is there in any case. Ukraine had started off in a strong position with low public debt, a small budget deficit and the largest cash reserves since 2011, but that is not enough. This is something that we will come back to, and we need to come back when it is all over. For the time being, that is a big cost to Ukraine.

**Q13 Alicia Kearns:** Thank you. In terms of timings, when we were in Ukraine two weeks ago, the assessment was that it would take another month for Putin to put in place the full infrastructure and troop numbers that he needed to be able to successfully undertake any such venture. That would take us to 20 February, which is when the genocide Olympics kick off in Xinjiang—in China. What is your assessment of the likelihood that Putin will be happy to kick off such a conflict at the same time as Xi Jinping's great state piece for the Olympics? Do you want to start Shashank?

**Shashank Joshi:** Sure. First of all, a month seems like an overly long timeline to me. We have an enormous amount of equipment in place. The latest independent estimates that I have seen are in the region of about 76 battalion tactical groups, or BTGs, which is the currency of Russian build-ups. What is missing from lots of these forward deployed units is personnel—the people to man these in full force, but those can be brought in very quickly in about two to three days, particularly if a large-scale airlift was involved. Additional units that you would expect to see associated with any major offensive—warplanes and airborne units—are all very mobile, and very quickly mobile. A month seems like a very long timeline to me. I think Russia could execute military operations on a very short timescale with the forces it has available, albeit not necessarily a full nationwide territorial land-based campaign, but I think it could certainly do so by the middle of February, if not before. I am not sure about the assessment.

On the political timeline, it is worth stating clearly that China would become politically and economically more important to Russia in the aftermath of any large-scale attack on Ukraine for a variety of reasons, including circumventing sanctions, economic stability, political support and all kinds of other things. It would be wise from a Russian perspective to avoid torpedoing the signature achievement of the Chinese leadership. Having said that, I would not get complacent and I would not assume that Russia would rule out an operation during the Olympics or in its final stages, or even before that point, because I think there is an additional risk to the Kremlin. Having built up such a sizeable force, and if I am correct in saying it will be largely in place before the 20th—I think quite a bit before the 20th—then what he has done now is open the floodgates.

Arms have flown to Kyiv and leaders have flown to Kyiv. I think today we have three Heads of Government in Kyiv. The big risk to Russia is that it loses control of the timeline. The Olympics are a constraint on Russian decision making, but they are not a hard constraint. On that note, I would also say nor is the weather a hard constraint, as has sometimes been



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

suggested. The terrain and the ground conditions will make it more complicated for Russian armoured formations, but they will not be prohibitive, and Russia can still mount an offensive after the dates that have been suggested.

- Q14 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you. A quick follow-up for you: do you think that the approach the west has taken over the past three months has created a tacit acceptance of Russia's legal occupation of Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and of the continuing ceasefire violations that we are seeing in eastern Ukraine? Do you think this could have been some kind of underlying motivation for Putin's activities?

**Shashank Joshi:** Russia's Government says that, of course, Ukraine's Government is poised for some kind of major offensive in the Donbass. It points to tactical actions like the use of a TB2 drone to suggest that Kyiv is bent on taking the province by force. I see no evidence of that. I saw claims in Russian accounts last April as well during the build-up that Ukraine was building up substantial combat forces. There was no real evidence of that. To my mind, what has happened, though, is that more attention has been placed on the Donbass, probably to Russia's detriment. I noticed that after President Biden said that a minor incursion would not result in sanctions, the US Administration clearly went into overdrive to correct that impression very hastily and almost to the point of absurdity when we saw, I think, Secretary Blinken say that even a single Russian soldier crossing the border would bring major sanctions. Of course, we know that Russian units have crossed the border regularly and continue to do so. Therefore, it is not a credible red line to say that any soldier crossing the border with Ukraine is a sanctions-worthy act. In some ways, we have drawn more attention to the state of affairs in Ukraine and Russian proxy forces than existed before.

- Q15 **Alicia Kearns:** I am sorry, Fiona, you tried to come in before.

**Fiona Hill:** I was just going to underscore what Shashank said there about the Olympics. Obviously, the Olympics are going to start in a couple of days. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia right in the middle of the opening ceremony of the Beijing summer Olympics in August. That probably was not necessarily the timing that the Russians had chosen; it made for probably some great awkwardness. Although it was Dmitry Medvedev, at that point, who was in charge rather than Putin, certainly Putin was there on the scene. It was triggered by events on the ground, creating a pretext—the kind of pretext that they had been trying to create in Donbass. So things can easily get out of hand. Of course, the Sochi Olympics were also very neatly timed to just before the annexation of Crimea. They just timed it themselves because they were more in control of events. Olympics seem to be a common feature in Russian activity in and around Ukraine and the former Soviet space at this particular juncture.

There is an element, however, that we should watch about China. Again, this is why it was extremely important to take the issue to the United Nations, because China itself has been extraordinarily concerned about its



own sovereignty and independence. No matter what our view may be about Taiwan, Taiwan is not recognised as an independent separate member of the United Nations. We all have our strong views about Taiwan, but from China's perspective, as a country from its viewpoint that has been predated upon by European colonial powers, the idea of independence and its own territorial integrity are pretty important. We have seen some interesting developments in that regard over the last several years, when Russia has moved into Georgia and also into Ukraine. China has not recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. China has not recognised the incorporation of Crimea into Russia. It plays with these issues. Although Russia now will have, as of today, the chairmanship of the Security Council in the United Nations, it will be interesting to see how China manages that issue in that context, given its own positions.

I also think that China itself is trying to play with this in different ways. There were phone calls from President Xi to President Zelensky and some other former Soviet leaders—I think it was Rahmon in Tajikistan and elsewhere—on the anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the 30-year anniversary of their independence. So China has some of its own relationships with regional Governments as well, and those could also be factored in in different ways. We just need to watch that closely to see how this plays out. There may be some tiny bit of wriggle room there that we can play in.

**Alicia Kearns:** Thank you very much. Thanks, Chair.

- Q16 **Bob Seely:** I have just a couple of quick questions, firstly to Shashank. If NATO membership is an issue and the excuse, and if the west said privately that Ukraine—this is probably what it would do anyway—would not be offered NATO membership for at least 20 years, what do you think the Russians would do? Would it be enough to confuse them and to slow down an assumption that war was inevitable?

**Shashank Joshi:** That is a fascinating question, and I think we had a hint of the answer to it a few weeks ago. I saw one of Russia's Deputy Foreign Ministers—I think it may have been Sergei Ryabkov—on a stage. Was it at the Valdai Club discussions? It was a forum in Russia recently. I think he was on a stage alongside John Mearsheimer and other political scientists, and he was asked—someone was asked—precisely that question. If Russia was told that there was a moratorium on membership for 10 or 15 years—I can't remember the exact period—would this be acceptable to Russia? And he immediately shook his head and said no.

To me, that goes back to one of the things I said at the beginning, which is that at every juncture of this crisis the issue is not just the absurdity of the scale of the demands set out in December; it is that I see Russian diplomats shutting down the space for negotiation, which is the opposite of what you would expect if these were maximalist demands designed to be whittled down to something acceptable or a pragmatic compromise. I see them shutting down potential compromises like that and instead demanding things like written guarantees, ironclad legal guarantees, that



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

we all understand are not possible—not just politically, but, in the American system, given the requirement for the assent of Congress, politically completely off the table and impossible to achieve. So I'm incredibly pessimistic on that, Bob.

- Q17 **Bob Seely:** So the Russian plan is to dismember or reabsorb Ukraine in some form. It's just a question of whether they can threaten enough to get it done through a federalisation, so that they can pick it off a bit at a time, or whether they can invade. That's that point. Thank you very much, Shashank.

Anders, you explained the bond crisis that the Ukrainians would have, because they are finding it difficult to raise money. As you know, back in the days of the USSR, there was something called the ideological struggle, which was an intimidating military posture in eastern Europe, combined with what we now know as active measures: KGB disinformation and demoralisation, political corruption and all that interesting stuff. In your opinion—maybe Fiona would like to come in on this as well—to what extent can Russia make the Ukrainian state unworkable, force it into being effectively a failed state, by using military intimidation but no direct invasion, and then actions designed to make Ukraine unable to raise funds and to continue with its reform programme, in order to enable corrupt pro-Russian oligarchs and those people to regain control in Ukraine? What is the likelihood of that being an option?

**Dr Åslund:** I would start at the other end. I think that this is what the Kremlin is striving to accomplish—I don't think that it is easy to accomplish it, but we can see several steps in this. One is a gradual takeover of the sea of Azov. That has been taking place ever since Crimea was taken over. We had, a bit more than three years ago, the arrest of three small Ukrainian naval ships when entering the sea of Azov, which was perfectly legal. About one third of the shipping through the sea of Azov has been stopped. It simply takes too long a time. The Russians have a legal right to inspect ships, and they tend to inspect commercial ships for 24 hours or so; and then the ships avoid going into the sea of Azov. This attracts little attention, because it is a very gradual process. We have also seen other landing-craft moving to the area around Odessa, and as one of the members here mentioned before, the Ukrainians are very attentive to the possibility that the Russians will start some action in the south and block the ports.

So this is one way, but what we are seeing right now is that Ukraine is out of the market, out of international finance, simply because of the troops. I don't think that will last long. We saw that foreign direct investment stopped in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015, but then it came back in 2016. So this is more a matter of time, and it's also a matter of the west providing sufficient security in one way or the other. The Russian military threat does not remain that scary for a long time if nothing is being done. But this is certainly a Russian plan.

- Q18 **Bob Seely:** I will just vary my question to make it a super-short one. Fiona, tell me if this is wrong, but I always assume the way to look at this



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

is that, from 2004 to 2014—so after the Orange revolution up to the crisis that brought the annexation—you had, effectively, Russia using non-military tools. From 2014 to 2021, it has used a mixture of paramilitary and other tools, so it has broadened it. That was phase 2. If there is now a conventional invasion, it is not separate from hybrid war but, again, Russia is changing the balance to something that now includes large amounts of conventional service personnel, as well as all the other factors that it is using, either in or around Ukraine. Is that fair comment? How would you improve or correct our understanding of that?

**Fiona Hill:** Yes, I think that is a fair comment. We have Shashank here, who has done a lot of work on the changing nature of war, so I hope he will jump in on this as well. I think a lot of this is also for demonstration effect. I think Putin wants to show his range. Of course, in all of this, in 2006, you have the cut-off of energy. It should be noted that they have pretty much tried every tool in the toolbox here. Putin is certainly of the view that if he has a capability, he'd like to use it.

That is actually part of our problem, because he always assumes that if we have similar capabilities then we are also likely to use them, even if we don't have the intent, as he clearly does. He has crossed every threshold now of places where people thought he wouldn't go. I think the classic case is Novichok and its use against Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, which killed Dawn Sturgess in the United Kingdom. There was clearly an intent to use everything that they could possibly throw at an issue in as inventive and brazen a way as possible.

Sometimes that is in the hope of not being caught out—making a demonstration effect at home and to others who realise what this is—but sometimes it is with the intent of being caught and doing something very publicly so that the rest of the world gets to see Russia's potential. This is all about getting attention, establishing Russia and Putin as one of the top powers, clearly at the expense of the United States and NATO, and making demonstration effects to China, about how important Russia is as a player, and to the immediate neighbourhood, showing that Russia will do whatever it takes to dominate them. That clearly has a very chilling effect on Ukraine and elsewhere.

I want to underscore what Anders said about the sea of Azov, which I mentioned before. One incident really underscores his point: the Kerch strait incident, which Anders referred to, when Russia seized the naval vessel and all of the sailors. That was just ahead of the G20 in Argentina, and a major meeting had been scheduled with Trump and Putin to talk about nuclear weapons. This goes back to that issue that we talked about before: they were supposed to talk about INF, the next kind of phase, where we would move on to, and how we would structure a larger negotiation on nuclear weapons. Trump really wanted this, and Putin ostensibly wanted this as well, but when push came to shove and there was a direct request from Trump to Putin, via the national security advisers, to release the sailors, the Russians essentially told us to take a hike.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

This goes back to the question that we had before about Ukraine versus the nuclear weapons, because it became very clear that, in that hierarchy, hitting Ukraine hard—this was ahead of the election, so damaging Poroshenko's standing and showing the Ukrainians a lesson—was much more important than having the sit-down with Trump that had been prepared for such a long time on nuclear weapons. I think, first of all, that the Russians thought they could get away with it, and there was a lot of pressure behind the scenes from various Russian advisers like Ushakov and others to try to schedule a meeting, but it was very clear that Ukraine mattered so much more—as did the sea of Azov and basically securing that area.

At the time, we also looked into how we could put some pressure on Russia in the sea of Azov. I think that is still worth looking at. As Anders rightly points out, foreign shipping going to Ukrainian ports, like Mariupol and others, has been pretty much stopped. But the sea of Azov remains the location of major ports for Russia. An awful lot of Russian grain goes out from the sea of Azov, and also supply ships to Syria and to the Russian base in Tartus and other operations in the eastern Mediterranean.

We did not get very far with that, but we started to wonder whether there was some way in which we could look at Russia's positions in the sea of Azov as well. Clearly, we should have paid a lot more attention to the construction of the Kerch strait bridge, as the Ukrainians said at the time, because, as Anders has said, the Russians have now very successfully used that as a basis for having what are basically these endless customs investigations and controls. Also, there is the idea that somebody might blow up the bridge and that this could be another pretext.

I think we have to take a very firm look at what is going on in the sea of Azov. Again, on your point, the way that you laid that out at the very beginning is very valid.

**Bob Seely:** Thank you.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. You are giving fantastically full answers, for which I am enormously grateful, but we are trying to get through a few more questions, so I will ask for a little bit of brevity. I know that is a lot to ask, because you have so much to say. Andrew, you wanted to come in.

**Q19 Andrew Rosindell:** Good afternoon. Could I ask you to give your own assessment of the western diplomatic effort and the different ways in which certain organisations and nations have responded? I do not mind who answers first.

**Shashank Joshi:** I am happy to kick off, if that's okay. Generally, I think the western diplomatic response has been impressive. I think it's very tempting to say we're in disarray, we're weak, we're irresolute and so on. Actually, I think we have been fairly impressive as a group of western countries.

You have had a US Administration that, by all accounts, has done extremely well at consulting allies, and most of the diplomats I have



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

spoken to in Europe have been very pleased with this. They have sent out the message: "Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine. Nothing about Europeans without Europeans." I mean, the lines blur, because you cannot talk about INF missiles without European interests being at stake. But by and large, I think they have held to that.

I think I have seen a succession of efforts that say, "We'll think about what we do after any attack, if it occurs, and prepare the groundwork for heavy costs on Russia, but we'll also take some steps now." I am seeing French proposals on reinforcing Romania, the Danes have stepped up in Baltic air policing, and Britain obviously is doing a great deal, not just with anti-tank weapons but also with the proposals we have just seen in the last few days on reinforcing the enhanced forward presence.

So, by and large, as tempting as it is to bemoan our response and say how divided we are, I would say it's cohesive, united and strong. Although I fear it won't be enough to deter a Russian attack—I'm pessimistic about that—I still think it's very important to prepare this in order to shape Russian behaviour in the aftermath of any attack, and shape and contain the nature of an offensive and contain its effects.

**Q20 Andrew Rosindell:** How do you compare the EU's reaction to this and their response with that of NATO?

**Shashank Joshi:** Well, they have fewer levers to pull, and they were slow-footed and perhaps griped in public, but I think they quickly corrected that. We saw Borrell publish a blog about three weeks ago that was very clear-eyed on Russia and that sort of shed lots of the loose talk that had existed previously.

By all accounts, EU and NATO co-operation has been very good. That is very important, of course, because Sweden, Finland and other non-NATO members of the EU are very important players in Euro-Atlantic security, and the EU is an important player in terms of effecting sanctions and doing so quickly.

So the EU has been perhaps slow to start—it's been on the sidelines in some respects—but that's fine. NATO and other fora are more effective in dealing with this crisis in the first instance, and that is how it has been.

**Dr Åslund:** Allow me to be a bit more critical of the European Union in this regard. For many years, the European Union has not had an effective policy-making structure with regard to Ukraine. I would argue that Stefan Füle, who was Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, was the last effective policy maker. Javier Solana, when he was head of foreign policy in the EU, was very effective in 2004.

Today, we don't really have any clear spokesperson from the European Commission. Responsibility is divided. Federica Mogherini, as head of foreign policy in the European Commission, visited Cuba more than she visited Ukraine and paid no attention, so the foreign service was pretty much taken out. Borrell has done a bit to reinforce that role. The Hungarian commissioner for the European neighbourhood eastern



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

partnership has just visited Ukraine—I think it was for the first time. He is completely anonymous.

The EU simply needs to take this as a crisis; they need to get organised, so that they can formulate a policy. We are also seeing that the EU is surprisingly ineffective, and of course, we need to point out that Germany has been the odd one out. While the rest of Europe, and certainly NATO, have been quite effective, Germany has done as little as possible, with a symbolic gesture of 75,000 helmets in military support to Ukraine.

- Q21 Andrew Rosindell:** Your point about the EU being surprisingly ineffective is something that some of us may be not so surprised about. Do you think that this highlights the importance of the western alliance working together? You are talking about the biggest threat to peace and security in Europe that we have seen for a very long time and, again, NATO is there to deal with the issue and take a robust stance, yet the EU seemed very disjointed, disorganised and ineffective, as Anders has just accepted. Any further comments on that?

**Fiona Hill:** If I could just jump in here—again, Shashank and Anders may have a thought on this too—one of the reasons why the EU is less effective and less united is, again, this role of the private sector in investment and trade. NATO is not a private sector trade organisation and is pretty much focused on security issues, and of course, Europe does have—as Anders said—a foreign policy perspective, although that has evolved over time, and sometimes in not the best ways. There is, of course, the common security and defence policy perspective as well, but again, that is not really set up to deal with a crisis like this.

The biggest problem is the member states' trade, economic and other financial arrangements and relationships with Russia. When reading some of the European documents some time ago on software, high-tech and other ventures, I was very struck to see Russian firms included in the list of European entities, for example, in terms of what Europe has as its various capabilities. This is part of the issue: we think now of Europe and the European economic space as including Russia, and again, as I mentioned in some of my first remarks, it is that private sector role that is actually one of our most acute vulnerabilities.

With no particular offence meant to some of your colleagues in the United Kingdom, because the same things are happening in the United States and elsewhere with all kinds of offshore havens for Russian money, when you have grandees of your political parties or former officials, like we have as well, who are advocates for Russian businesses—you know, we all use Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, so I will just pile it all on him, but you have plenty of similar cases—

- Q22 Andrew Rosindell:** Are you essentially saying that policy is being guided by vested interests? Is that the point you are making?

**Fiona Hill:** I am afraid that this is absolutely an issue, and it is about how you and your Committee can frame this, as well as how we do that. In the

National Defence Authorization Act in the United States, we have some push for basically cleaning up our own act.

I think the EU itself is beset by problems like this, because you have different parts of the EU that are pushing different interests, and that is our Achilles heel—it is one of our most acute areas of vulnerability. Anders mentioned Hungary: I mean, Hungary has predatory interests towards Ukraine at this particular juncture. I know this for a personal fact, after seeing Viktor Orbán in action in my previous job, so we have a lot of vested interests here that are driving things in a different direction, no matter how good our diplomacy and our politics are at the Government level.

**Q23 Andrew Rosindell:** Finally, how does Britain come out of this in terms of the way we have reacted and responded to this potential major conflict in Europe compared to, say, Germany?

**Fiona Hill:** I have been personally very impressed by the statements that have come out—Ben Wallace’s statement on Russia, for example. The essay that he produced recently, calling Russia out, was spot on. Going back to what Shashank and Anders have said about putting a spotlight on Russia’s activities, the UK has done a really credible job there. In terms of being very forward-leaning on coming to the defence of Ukraine, and dispatching delegations—you have all visited Ukraine—it has all been extraordinarily admirable.

As you were suggesting before, the next step now is really about how we can pull together other allies and partners to do very similar things to what the UK has done.

**Dr Åslund:** If I may add to that, the dark money in Britain is a really serious problem. Russian dark money is concentrated, as far as we know, in two countries: the United States and the United Kingdom. Those are the two countries that allow anonymous companies and have deep financial markets. Small offshore havens cannot really absorb that much money.

We recently learned that the Nazarbayev family had real estate in Britain worth £560 million. Secretary Truss suggested the other day that a large number of Russian oligarchs in Britain have substantial value. Their assets should be investigated. Aside from the wonderful job that Britain has done to support Ukraine swiftly militarily, it should on the other hand be cleaning out Russian oligarchs in Britain who are of dubious nature. I am not saying that they all are, but some certainly are.

**Q24 Chris Bryant:** One of the points that was made to us when we did our “Moscow’s Gold” report was that you could not make serious money in Russia without Putin’s say so, which would suggest that any oligarch who wants to bring their money to the UK is potentially a Putin apologist. Do you think that is fair?

**Dr Åslund:** Not altogether. It is true of new money now, but a lot of people made money before 2008, or something like that, when Putin really got full political control over the judicial system. Today, you cannot make



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

serious money in Russia without the consent of the state administration, which is essentially the secret police, the FSB. Before that, you had, for example, very good high-tech companies developed in Russia, and most of those people have fled. Some of them live in Britain today, and I would consider them quite honourable people who one should respect. It is a question of when they came to Britain and how they made their money. So, the new money yes, but not the old money.

**Fiona Hill:** There is also a point of leverage here because that is really how the Kremlin and Putin can exert leverage over people. It does not mean that they are necessarily apologists for the Kremlin, as you were suggesting. As Anders was saying, a lot of people have tried to move themselves away to increase their autonomy and to give themselves some distance. As we saw with the incidents with polonium and Novichok in London, the Kremlin and the intelligence services, by going after dissidents and people who are sort of speaking out, have ways of signalling to Russians and others who are seeking refuge in Britain that they are very vulnerable.

There is also the use of people's dual citizenship, their families back in Russia and other connections. I have seen that time and time again. We are in the phase where we see Putin and the Kremlin calling in chips, which deserves some delicate handling. As Anders has suggested, you cannot blanketly approach all of this, but definitely it is a vulnerability for all of us in the United States, the UK and elsewhere in Europe because of the penetration of Russian money into our systems.

**Chris Bryant:** I can understand why Mikhail Khodorkovsky might not be thought of as a Putin apologist—

**Fiona Hill:** Exactly.

**Chris Bryant:**—since he was put into prison.

**Fiona Hill:** Instant leverage over him, of course.

Q25 **Chris Bryant:** Indeed. But what about Alexander Temenko?

**Fiona Hill:** I am not very familiar with him. Anders, are you?

**Chris Bryant:** Sorry, Temenko. I am getting my "n's" and my "r's" in the wrong place. He is a former Russian—well, largely he is Putin's arms manufacturer who has given quite a lot of money to British politics.

**Fiona Hill:** There are a host of people who the United States Government put on the oligarch list, and others, that has been shared with the British Government. Obviously, we have done quite a lot of due diligence on some of these individuals behind the scenes, but I think overall one should not be taking money from Russian oligarchs for anything. Honestly.

Q26 **Chris Bryant:** You may know that since 2008, we have had a tier 1 investor visa, which, if you say you have got £2 million, guarantees you the right to citizenship here, or indefinite leave to remain, within five



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

years. Do you think that that is a vulnerability for us or not?

**Fiona Hill:** It is a huge vulnerability. It doesn't have to be just Russians; it could be anyone with some different kind of intent. I hope that there is some proper procedure for looking into individuals. Other countries have this arrangement as well, such as Malta and a host of others. I would say that it is not the best approach for citizenship.

**Dr Åslund:** I read today in the *Financial Times* that there are 700 Russian oligarchs who have a tier 1 visa. I think those are people who could be very suitably investigated.

On the Navalny list of 35 people who Alexei Navalny thought should be sanctioned there are two prominent residents of the UK. One is Alisher Usmanov, who previously owned 30% of Arsenal, and the other is Roman Abramovich, who left Britain three years ago, but who is still the owner of Chelsea. Those two people, who are known to be close to Putin, have fronted for him in repeated business deals. Neither of them has been sanctioned by the UK, the US or the European Union. Abramovich recently got citizenship from Portugal; otherwise, he has Israeli citizenship. These people are really close to Putin, and they have so far not been hurt in any way.

**Fiona Hill:** There is also the use of the legal system, which you are well aware of. We have all been following what happened to Catherine Belton and her book on Putin's people, which also documents some of them. Anders has had some personal experience of being targeted himself by various oligarchs for his writings, and through legal proceedings. We are well aware of the way that our legal systems can be manipulated as well.

The Russians have been very clear about this, going back to the early 2000s in statements of their strategic investments in various sectors, including the financial sector, in not just the UK and US but in the west more generally, and see that this will gain leverage. We also have to understand that from Putin's perspective, the global economy is also a battlefield. Although many of us can speak out about this, there is now an awful lot of leverage just because of the sheer size of Russian investments and positions in our societies.

Just take note of the fact that at the height of this crisis, Putin has just met a delegation of Italian business. You may also note that a statement was sent to *la Repubblica*, the major Italian newspaper, a couple of months ago by Maria Zakharova, the spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, when it had a rather critical opinion editorial about Russia and Ukraine. It basically laid into the editor and laid out in a very brazen, blatant way the position of the Russian Government vis-à-vis Italy. We can see over and over again the different ways in which the Russians can push back against what we are doing at the Government level through our media, our legal system, and through the use of money, campaigning and other contributions.

Q27 **Chris Bryant:** You may have noticed that the Foreign Secretary



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

announced yesterday that there is going to be new legislation, though it has not been published. It is apparently going to be on the statute book by 10 February but, as I say, it has not been published yet. It will change the pattern of sanctions here, so that the UK Government would legally be allowed to sanction individuals who had a direct connection to the Russian state, rather than the more prescriptive situation that they have now. Can I ask you to comment on two aspects of that? First, do you think that is a good idea? Secondly, even if that is a good idea, is it enough?

**Dr Åslund:** I think it is a wonderful idea. I was referring to it perhaps unclearly before, but it is strongly welcome. What I am concerned about is whether it would really be applied. Britain has a lot of good laws already on the books, so this unexplained wealth order—

Q28 **Chris Bryant:** Which we have only used four times in four years, and most of them have not been successful.

**Dr Åslund:** Indeed. That is the point I wanted to make. It is very difficult. It also comes to the point that Fiona raised: the oligarchs have very good lawyers. They have the best lawyers you can get for money. Those are really good in London. We saw that Abramovich sued Catherine Belton, as Fiona mentioned. It is a real problem if you can get these cases through the British courts.

**Fiona Hill:** That is why I am speaking rather elliptically about all of this—because of the legal situation. I suppose we are speaking technically in London right now.

**Chris Bryant:** You have parliamentary privilege now.

**Fiona Hill:** I am aware, but let's just say, it is always a very delicate issue. I also worry, like Anders, that it will not be sufficient just to have these on the books, unless they are actually applied. We saw in the United States as well that we actually do have provision for individual sanctions. Of course, they have been applied in the case of the United States. I was there in the Government during the application of these sanctions against Oleg Deripaska. We saw how difficult it actually it was to apply this, because there are so many ways of getting around them.

Again, we have opened ourselves over the past 20 years to large-scale Russian investment in all kinds of areas—in our think-tanks, universities and elsewhere. I see investment even there too, because I have experienced myself how it can be leveraged by Russian oligarchs behind the scenes, where, for example, gifts have been given in supposedly objective ways in support of research but become anything but that, so we just have to be well aware that this is a key vulnerability for all of us right now.

Q29 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I have some other issues I want to come back to, but, briefly, we have talked a lot about oligarchs and individuals connected to the Kremlin. I wanted to ask about instruments of the Russian state—in particular propaganda instruments like RT UK, Sputnik



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

and all the rest. I confess, my position on this has kind of changed over time. It has gone from thinking that we maybe should not sanction these outlets—because of the potential implications on the BBC World Service, for example, or the kind of propaganda coup it gives to them—to being a bit more hardline and thinking that we probably should look at doing something, if not outright banning them. I wondered what your views were on that, Anders and Fiona?

**Dr Åslund:** I will leave that to you, Fiona.

**Fiona Hill:** I have the same concerns that you do—and probably articulated in the same way. There is concern about giving them a huge propaganda boost by moving in that direction. I think that transparency by calling them out and making it very clear what they are is very important.

It is absolutely the case that the Russian Government will retaliate, and we have already seen that. The BBC is already in enough of a precarious position domestically—to my regret, as somebody who uses it as a GPS navigating system in the current information chaos. It would give a lot of grounds for the Russian Government to undermine the position of the BBC and other outlets. We have seen them going after Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and other outlets in Moscow, so we have to tread very carefully there, but we certainly need to call out their propaganda and be very careful to make sure that no senior official appears on RT, Sputnik or any of the other outlets.

We also need to work with Governments to push back—for example, the Spanish Government found out during the peak of the crisis in Catalonia that RT and its outlets in Venezuela and Latin America were launching covert attacks on that Government, which did not go unnoticed in Madrid. Calling out the kinds of campaigns that RT and others engage in is very important. Joining together with other Governments and entities to oversee them and, again, to bring their activities to light is very important, but I think that it will backfire if we move to ban them in some way. I don't know whether Shashank has any thoughts on this too, because this is, again, part of the changing warfare—information warfare. Obviously, it is a difficult arena to be operating in.

**Shashank Joshi:** Very briefly, these have been used to create confusion and to support military offences and paramilitary activity, but one of the most effective things we have done—we have learned over the last six or seven years on this—is the art of rapid rebuttal and rapid clarification. We saw this very clearly in 2018, when the Government learned from previous stumbles or problems in dealing with disinformation blips by quickly making clear the multiplicity of ludicrous explanations that the Russian state had set out in response to the Skripal poisoning, publishing these in real time, shedding light on them and then putting out evidence, including through declassification of intelligence that would not previously have been declassified or publicised in that way, which gave force to that response. We are now seeing it again to some extent in response to recent Russian charges. Rather than working to ban or restrict the activity of



these outlets, an effective and somewhat less complicated response is the sunlight aspect and the sunlight response.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. I don't know if you have noticed, but NTV, which is funded by Gazprom, has been doing roughly the same thing today. As you may know, they are based here in London, which is, frankly, pretty extraordinary. Liam, you wanted to come in.

Q30 **Liam Byrne:** To enlarge this question about responses, obviously if there is an invasion of Ukraine, the security environment in Europe is going to feel rather more nervous. A range of options have been discussed—in US media, largely—about the way in which the western alliance could therefore use this to roll forward. Some of those options have included intensifying NATO activities—short of membership—in Finland and Georgia, and potentially in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There have been a second range of options around providing support against the insurgencies in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. Some have even suggested that under certain circumstances, Turkey could use its NATO membership to close the strait of Bosphorus. Do you think there are options like this that could help us to ensure that any tactical advance by Russia into Ukraine actually leads to a strategic defeat because, across the entire Russian frontier, there becomes a more assertive, better trained and better equipped western presence? Shashank, do you want to kick off?

**Shashank Joshi:** I think not only is that a possibility; that is the likelihood. I think that is the likeliest course of the aftermath of any kind of large-scale military option. You know all the things that are in motion, in terms of the US putting elements of the NATO response force on standby and various NATO allies sending additional forces to the east, so I will not recount all those.

What I will say is that there will be some fundamental questions about the viability and utility of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which, as you probably know, sets out limits on the sort of forces that can be permanently deployed in eastern Europe in exchange for comparable Russian restraint. A lot of people will, quite legitimately, say, "What is the value of this Act, when we have seen the biggest combined armed offensive since world war two in Europe?", if that is what occurs. We will have major debates over how to reinforce eastern Europe that will go beyond those we saw in 2014-15.

There will be a focus on the Black sea, in a new and heightened way, when, of course, in 2015-16 the focus was on the Baltic. That will still exist, particularly if there is an enduring Russian military presence in Belarus. That will put pressure on the Suwałki gap and Baltic reinforcement, but the Black sea region will have new significance and importance.

We currently underestimate the difficulty and dilemma faced by the US Administration in balancing its global posture requirements in Europe, if it comes to that. We haven't fully thought through the problems that the



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Biden Administration is going to face. The environment is not the same as 2015. A major influx of European forces into eastern Europe will ask serious questions about its posture in Asia, particularly after a global posture review has just concluded.

Many people in Washington were disappointed that it didn't do more to focus on the Indo-Pacific, and a nuclear posture review and a national security strategy is under way. We, in Europe, have to ask questions as to how far the US will go and what Europeans can do to show they are stepping up in the first instance. We haven't reckoned with that completely.

Finally, don't forget Finland and Sweden. A major attack on Ukraine really shakes up the NATO debates in both those countries. It doesn't mean there is an automatic path to membership, but it increases the likelihood of both countries joining NATO in the medium term.

**Dr Åslund:** Let me follow up on Shashank's last point, as a Swedish citizen. Sweden and Finland were greatly upset by Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014. A Finnish journalist summarised it by saying that the Swedes got angry, and the Finns got anxious.

Since then, it has been about 50:50 in opinion polls in Sweden for joining NATO. The Social Democrats are not fully there, as yet. A new Russian attack on Ukraine would tilt the Social Democrats to be in favour of NATO accession, and then it could happen very fast.

Finland and Sweden are likely to do it together. In Finland the politics are completely different and it depends on one person: the president. President Niinistö has a very strong standing in Finland and he made a remarkable new year address this year, where he emphasised that Finland and Sweden have a right to apply for membership of NATO, if they so desire, and NATO has no problem accepting Sweden and Finland swiftly.

There have been two major concerns recently in Sweden. Somebody of Russian citizenship has been flying drones over the three nuclear power stations and the royal palace, which has not been appreciated. The other concern is Russian contingency plans to use Gotland for air defence, so Sweden has now militarised Gotland again. It was quite absurd that it was demilitarised in this time of naivety and innocence.

Meanwhile, both Finland and Sweden have bilateral strategic agreements with the United States, as a replacement for NATO membership, but that facilitates the defence planning, so that both countries can more easily join NATO if the chips are down.

**Fiona Hill:** I agree with all of that. It was extraordinarily well laid out and I don't have a lot more to add. Obviously, this has upturned all the calculations and planning, not just of the United States, but of other NATO members and NATO itself. We hoped that we were not going to be back in the business of confronting Russia.

Previous assessments and reviews by previous Administrations didn't really factor this in, as Shashank has pointed out. The most recent review of NATO's posture was also still trying to look at other factors, looking beyond Europe to see what role NATO might play in other issues—relations with China, cyber-space, etc. We still have to factor all that in. This is going to be a very difficult time for planning ahead.

One of the dilemmas we have, from the United States perspective, is that it depends on what happens in 2022 at the mid-terms and also in 2024. You never really get a long-term assessment from the United States, because it changes from Administration to Administration. It feels like five minutes ago that I took part in similar kinds of posture reviews, and we are going to keep on doing them.

This is one of our biggest problems in dealing with Russia: you have the same guys, just in slightly different configurations, that you have had for the last 22 years. You obviously have had a few small changes at the helm, but you have the same defence and foreign policy establishment, even though there is talk about Lavrov perhaps being replaced by someone like Ryabkov at some point. Shoygu was not always the Defence Minister; he used to be the Emergencies Minister. You still have the same people in the same place, so they have stayed pretty constant in their planning and assessments, and we keep changing over.

We are going to have to think about how we create more permanent structures in that setting. Obviously, we have them in NATO, but more broadly in the European space and in the United States, is there some way to create some kind of continuity? I think planning is one of our biggest dilemmas.

- Q31 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Could I come to the Putin essay from last year? I wonder how the panel thinks that essay is read in the Baltic states. How is it received in Finland, Sweden and those places?

**Fiona Hill:** Is this the essay about Ukraine?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes—on the historic unity of the Russian and Ukrainian people.

**Fiona Hill:** I would just point out that Putin wrote a variant of that essay back in 2013. This has been a narrative that has been out there for quite some time—seven or eight years now. The period in which it first started to be articulated by Putin comes just after he returned to the presidency in 2012, when he clearly decided that the west was no longer a model and there was no point in more intensive engagement with Europe or the United States, and sought to create a new national narrative for Russia that put Russia on its own path.

He then turned towards Ukraine, Crimea and the myth-making around Prince Vladimir, Vladimir the Great—his namesake, by coincidence or not, as Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. That set Russia on this track that is very familiar in a European historical context of fusing Russia together with Ukraine. We have been dealing with that for some time. That essay was



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

just another iteration—a riff on the same theme. It is almost like this has become Putin's jazz ensemble record at this point.

It is clear in Europe. There was recently a very good piece in *The Washington Post* by the historian Timothy Snyder pointing out exactly what this is—a national myth-making. It is not very dissimilar from what Slobodan Milošević did with the anniversary of Kosovo polje, the Kosovo field: the defeat of the Serbian forces—well, they were not really Serbian back in the day, they were Slavic—forces by the Turks back in the early 1300s. This is classic national myth-making and meant to justify Ukraine as part of an internal issue for Russia.

**Dr Åslund:** Let me add to that. I read this at the time as a declaration of war. Putin's position on Ukraine has evolved. In 2004, the Orange revolution came as a nasty surprise to Putin. He reacted by adopting a lot of domestic legislation against non-governmental organisations and increasing domestic repression. Then he started this theme of Ukraine not being a state, at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008—Fiona wrote about it recently. His speech there, which was only published in Ukraine, was quite outrageous and it was on the same lines as the article about them not taking it as far. Then we have Putin's speech from April 2014, when he talked about Novorossiia—the new Russia. He clearly indicated without really stating it that half of Ukraine should be taken over by Russia. It started with domestic repression and then he has moved on to denying Ukraine's right to be an independent state.

- Q32 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Can I ask, Anders, what conversations will be happening between the three Baltic capitals right now about the risk to their respective countries?

**Dr Åslund:** They are very worried. They are doing whatever they can to defend themselves. They are very happy to have NATO troops—the British troops that are there and the extra troops. They are extremely grateful for that. I asked the national security adviser of Latvia several years ago, "What will you do if green men in unmarked uniforms pop up in Latvia?" He said, "We'll shoot them. You can only do that trick once."

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Shashank, can I come to you? We seem to be losing you and then getting you back, so hopefully you will stay with us.

**Shashank Joshi:** I'm here—sorry, my video feed is a bit unreliable.

- Q33 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** No worries, that is all right. On NATO's strengthening of the military presence on the eastern flank, could you talk us through how Moscow will be calculating these moves? What are the risks of something going wrong somewhere that leads to an escalation?

**Shashank Joshi:** First of all, let's just take a moment to reflect on the fact that the additional deployments that have been made since 2014, mostly in the form of the enhanced forward presence, are relatively modest forces. They are sort of battle groups with lots of armour and

some organic helicopter capabilities, but these are not substantial offensive forces that would pose a major threat to Russia. Russia knows that.

There are lots of different risks. One of them is Russia's response. What we have heard from Vladimir Putin so far is a promise of military technical measures. He hasn't specified what those are. For various reasons, my own view is still that a major military offensive is the likeliest course of action. We have discussed that. But it is very important also to realise that in response to additional NATO deployments on the eastern flank, we could see all sorts of other things, such as a reinforcement of Kaliningrad, which already has had additional missile deployments in recent years; or a more overt stationing of intermediate-range missiles. Russia says the SSC-8 missile does not violate the INF, and various other things. Quite clearly, additional deployments of that closer to NATO's borders would pose an additional threat to European cities and to NATO infrastructure of all sorts—so we could see a more punchy posture there.

We could see a lot more Russian activity in places like the Black sea, which has already become heavily militarised, thanks to the additional strengthening of the Black sea fleet, and in Crimea—but also in the high north, where NATO and Russia both have been increasingly active in recent years—that is certainly not Russia alone. We could of course also see all kinds of other things in relation to cyber-activity, space activity and so on.

There is a lot that NATO can do and almost certainly will do—I think we will see additional deployments—but it should do so fully aware that there will also be a heightened and more assertive Russian posture going forward. Whatever happens in this crisis, whether or not there is an attack at the end of it or whether Russian troops are drawn down and the border is left more militarised, I think we are in for a period of several years of a much more assertive Russian posture towards Europe than we have seen in the last several years—whether or not we see an overt attack.

**Q34 Chair:** Thank you very much. I am keen to thank the panel and end the session, but I have a couple of last questions, if I may? I would be very interested in your perception of the support that the United Kingdom has given in terms of military capability to Ukraine. How dissuasive do you believe it is, or is it simply more show than substance? Is it really persuading Russia to think again? Shashank, perhaps you could answer that?

**Shashank Joshi:** My assessment is that the anti-tank weapons are a very important political gesture, made at a very opportune moment. However, they will not fundamentally change the nature of the early stages of a major offensive because of the way that Russia will likely strike by using a long preparatory phase of stand-off strikes and manoeuvring over long distances. I do feel the weapons could make a difference to subsequent stages of the conflict, particularly if Russia becomes enmeshed in any kind of occupation—especially of urban areas. It will probably seek to avoid that, but cannot necessarily guarantee it will avoid that ahead of time. The



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

longer that a conflict goes on, the messier it is, the more that Russia will feel that it has to stick around to enforce a favourable political outcome in Kyiv, and thus the more militarily useful several thousand anti-tank weapons will become—even relatively short-range ones such as the NLAWs.

**Chair:** Anders—do you have any views?

**Dr Åslund:** No, as it is a military matter.

**Chair:** Fiona—you are looking quiet.

**Fiona Hill:** I am grateful to Shashank for leaping in on the technical side of this. Like Anders, I am not a military specialist. However, I do think it is very important for the Russians to realise that other countries are stepping up. The UK is obviously still a significant military player in the European space. As we have mentioned earlier, getting more countries to call the Russians out and take steps to show support for Ukraine is pretty significant signalling. As Shashank has mentioned, if Putin and the military command have made a decision to move in in some fashion, the sale of these weapons is not likely to deter them in the immediate stages. However, it will make a difference to their calculations as we move along.

Q35 **Chair:** Thanks very much. This is my last question, and it is for you, Shashank: what more can we do? What should we be doing—cyber-support, small arms? What would you send?

**Shashank Joshi:** At this stage, I think that giving assistance and training to the Ukrainians in thinking about long-term resistance would have a dissuasive effect. I also think that the Ukrainians are going to be very dependent on intelligence sharing—giving them operational warning of an attack and assistance in thinking about where Russian strikes may occur. Those areas are going to be very important to them. Let us be very clear: there are and there should be limits to how far that assistance goes, because this is going to be a very high-risk and high-stakes situation, and one in which Russia has much greater interest and resolve than we do. That has to be the starting point of realistic and pragmatic policy.

**Chair:** Fantastic. Thank you very much, all three of you. We ranged across many more subjects than we thought we were going to, and in much greater detail than we had hoped. It has been enormously informative, and I am extremely grateful.