

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Russia: Implications for UK Defence and Security, HC 763

Tuesday 1 March 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 March 2016

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair), Richard Benyon, Douglas Chapman, Mr James Gray, Johnny Mercer, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Jim Shannon, Mr John Spellar, Bob Stewart, Phil Wilson

Questions 1–31

Witnesses: **James Sherr**, Fellow and Former Head of the Chatham House Russia Programme, **Keir Giles**, Director of the Conflict Studies Research Centre, Eurasian Security, and **Łukasz Kulesa**, Director, Research, European Leadership Network, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, everybody. Welcome to the first of our public evidence sessions on a study into Russia and the implications for UK defence and security. I should mention that we will be doing this in three sections. We will have panel 1 and panel 2, and then the Committee will go into a private session at about twenty to 1. At that point, we will ask those who are not members of the Committee or its staff to leave. I hope you don't mind, but that is part of the way in which we try to get as much information as we can for these inquiries.

To start off with, I invite our three distinguished guests to identify themselves and their background for the record.

Keir Giles: Good morning. My name is Keir Giles. I am an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. I also work with a group of subject matter experts on Russian and Eurasian security called the Conflict Studies Research Centre, which up until 2010 belonged to the Ministry of Defence and was its red team for explaining what the Russians were thinking and what they might be doing next. Since 2010, we have been doing the same thing in the private sector.

Łukasz Kulesa: Good morning. My name is Łukasz Kulesa. I am the research director at the European Leadership Network, a non-partisan organisation based here in London. My research focuses on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, but also conventional and nuclear deterrence, Russian security policy and NATO. Those are also the topics of some of the recent ELN reports. Previously, I was working with the Polish Institute of International Affairs in Warsaw, and I also spent some time in the previous presidential Administration in Poland.

James Sherr: Good morning. My name is James Sherr. I am also an associate fellow of the Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme and a former head of that programme. I have been working on the kinds of issue we are addressing today for the better part of 35 to 40 years, 15 of which were spent in the Conflict Studies Research Centre of the Ministry of Defence.

Chair: Thank you, James. I think we first met about 35 years ago, so it is good to have you here today. I am going to ask Madeleine Moon to start off.

Q2 Mrs Moon: I wonder if you could set out for us the range, extent and key components of Russia's capability.

James Sherr: If there is one key point I would make in answer to that, it is that for the Russian general staff, capability is not a measure or a tabulation of respective orders of battle of different forces. It is a measure of all the capacities of the state and the state military organisation to prosecute the war that is set out in Russian military strategy. That means that what we now call hybrid warfare, conventional war and nuclear war, for the Russians, are not discrete and separate components of conflict, but integrated instruments and dimensions in what should be a coherent and seamless web.

I make one codicil to that. I do not think that I am alone here in perceiving that, over a seven to eight-year period, the Russians have made an impressive material and organisational investment of a magnitude that is bringing them dangerously close to the ability to wage local and regional war and to confine it to those levels, which is the aim of that strategy.

Lukasz Kulesa: If I may add to that, the Russian effort to modernise its armed forces predates the Ukrainian crisis. This is a mirror image of the importance that, from early on, President Putin assigned to the armed forces as an instrument of power and an instrument of restoring Russia's place among the great powers. On top of the investments in nuclear weapons, we have consistent investment in conventional capacities and in using other elements of state power in a co-ordinated fashion. In Ukraine and in Syria, we are seeing the results of the investments over the past eight to 10 years.

Keir Giles: My colleagues have made some essential overall points about how this is a long-term process that is still under way to achieve some specific objectives. For more detail on exactly what is happening in terms of capabilities, I would like—because time is short—to defer to your witness at 12.40 pm, who will be able to answer in much greater depth and accuracy, with the slides you have in front of you, than any of us can.

Q3 Mrs Moon: Can I just ask you to say a few words on why and how Russia has been able to expand in this way?

Keir Giles: Certainly. The process of transformation that began in the Russian military after the Georgian war, which demonstrated that it did need severe overhaul, has, in fact, been planned for much longer than is visible. But the way in which they have achieved the status they are at today—despite predictions from our centre, among others, that it would take a great deal longer to do so—is the result of an unprecedented effort. There has been total reorganisation and enormous amounts of money have been thrown at it. It is a fairly ruthless prosecution of their transformation aims. This has been a single-minded process

that has been ongoing constantly since it was given the political impetus to do so in 2008, and we see the results today.

James Sherr: I think this also reflects a retrenchment in concentration of the state leadership around a core of people with military science, security and intelligence backgrounds who have a similar optic in the way they view the world. That structure now pretty much excludes different types of outside voices and concerns that had been present in Russia in the 1990s at the top level, and even during Putin's first term in office.

Q4 Mrs Moon: What sort of voices? Could you explain which are excluded?

James Sherr: Well, during Putin's first term, the so-called siloviki—the power ministries—had a very large influence, but they were partially counterbalanced by the St Petersburg economists and by the old Moscow Yeltsin establishment. The result was that there was interplay—a certain degree of feedback mechanisms and argument—that has now been streamed out of that system.

Lukasz Kulesa: This is still an ongoing process. According to the data of the Russian Ministry of Defence, at the end of 2015, 47% of the Russian armed forces had modern weapons and other equipment. Despite the impressive advances, they still have problems with manning the forces, and with the capabilities especially of the navy, and with getting the equipment into the ground forces, which is coming gradually. There are delays in the implementation of the ambitious plans they set in 2008.

Keir Giles: Implementation is delayed. Nevertheless, the plans are so ambitious that the forces we see now are unrecognisable from just a few years ago. We often hear that the military modernisation plans are unsustainable and cannot be continued because of the economic pressure on Russia, but coming back to the point about other voices being excluded, the people now making the decisions are less concerned with economics than they would have been previously. Their education and background is exclusively in security, and those who are saying that this is unaffordable are not being listened to. The process of investments in rearmament has been scaled back but is still enormously impressive, and the results are to be seen.

Q5 Mr Gray: The capabilities are well demonstrated in operations ranging from those in Syria, Ukraine, Crimea and Georgia through to the High North and Zapad exercises. What is much harder to understand is why they have bothered. What is the purpose?

Keir Giles: I would break that down into five separate topics, all of which overlap; it is always a mistake to look for a single overriding objective for any particular Russian action. I would identify for you briefly keeping the current leadership by Putin in power; making sure that Russia can prevail in the conflict with the West that, in their perception, has already begun; reintroducing Russia to the world as a global power with global status and influence; as part of that, maintaining not necessarily military but other forms of control—political and economic control—of the periphery of Russia, in order to maintain Russia's own self-perceived notions of security; and, allied with that, ultimately breaking western unity, whether it is in the form of NATO or the EU, and making sure that organisations cannot stand together against Russia, because individually nations cannot.

James Sherr: I think there is an overarching objective that encompasses what my colleague said. The unifying determination that motivates this is a determination to break out of what is seen as a geopolitical and civilisational normative-based encirclement that has expanded beyond the confines of the Russian Federation and its borders. Even the definition of what is defensive now moves beyond the former Soviet border into all those zones where Russia has traditional influence, and all those zones that military minds think of as part of the defence perimeter. Even countries inside NATO and even countries like Sweden and Finland, which are not inside NATO, are now viewed as being legitimate parts of the Russian defence perimeter. Whether they see this as defensive or not, it creates for others a very worrying capability and a very worrying set of intentions.

Lukasz Kulesa: At the same time, I don't believe personally that there is a masterplan in terms of Russian military expansion. We know the general objectives, and there I agree with my esteemed colleagues, but at the same time, there is also an element of reacting to outside developments and reacting to what Russians perceive as crisis, as in Ukraine. There is also a strong element of opportunism—for example, the entrance of Russia into Syria with the air operation, where they basically saw the chance to insert themselves into Middle East politics and become partners of the United States. The military capabilities enable them to do more and to be bolder, but I don't believe there is any grand plan.

Q6 Mr Gray: Is it possible to differentiate between what might be described as conventional and acceptable ambitions—for example, defending one's nation is something one has always done, and making sure that people who are coming close to one's nation go away is a conventional and sensible military objective—and what might be described as unconventional or unacceptable military ambitions, such as preserving the regime in power or a variety of other things you describe?

Keir Giles: The extent to which the ambitions are acceptable is really a value judgment. There is a direct conflict between our notions that the states on Russia's periphery should be sovereign, independent and able to decide their own future and the Russian notion that in order to ensure its own security, it needs to control and dominate substantial depth beyond its borders in order to protect it from approaches to them. That is a binary choice.

James Sherr: There is also a very strong inclination and belief that defence, in the Darwinian world the Russians think they find themselves in, has to be proactive defence and therefore has to start well beyond even the territories we have been discussing.

I want to add one point to Dr Kulesa's earlier comment, which I agree with. What the Syria intervention also demonstrates is the Russian ability to integrate different theatres of conflict and interest. So it is not accidental at all that after this deployment got seriously under way—in fact, 24 hours after the Paris attacks—the ceasefire in Donbass in eastern Ukraine, which had been holding very impressively for two months, was dramatically violated and has not been restored since. These things that we look at as separate issues, and on their merits they link together.

Q7 Mr Gray: Finally, I want to move the conversation forward slightly. What you are describing is today, but only two or three years ago Russia was NATO's best friend. There were a large number of Russians in NATO. There is a Russian ambassador to NATO to this day. Surely you are just telling us what is obvious today. Is it not possible that in two years' time, Russia's ambitions with regard to NATO will once again go back to détente?

Łukasz Kulesa: At the same time, Russia was describing NATO enlargement and putting NATO infrastructure closer to its border as a military danger in its 2010 and 2014 doctrines. Actually, in the latest national security document it upgraded NATO to a military threat to the Russian Federation. In a sense, we had co-operation on practical issues, which also benefited the Russians, such as stability in Afghanistan. At the same time, there was a growing list of disagreements well before the Ukraine summit.

Keir Giles: I disagree absolutely that Russia's attitude towards NATO has changed. What has changed is that Russia's capabilities have now been developed to the extent where they can be used to implement its persistent intentions. In the next session, you will hear from Robert Pszczel from the frontline of dealing between Russia and NATO. Depending on what he is allowed by NATO to say, you may get a graphic picture of what exactly it was like two to three years ago.

James Sherr: Mr Gray, some of us predicted everything we see today as early as 1999. I have to emphasise is that what we see are cumulative developments based on views of the world and a set of grievances that have been in place for a considerable period of time.

Keir Giles: I must add that that goes to the additional question that we were briefed we might expect: is there expertise to predict what Russia is going to do next, and where can it be found? Russia is often described as unpredictable. That is not the case. I refer you to James's written submissions where he refers to very specific and detailed predictions of the situation we are in now.

Every time we sit in these chairs we say the same thing. Now some of those things are actually coming true. I hope and trust that you will, for example, be allowed to interview other individuals who are sitting on the frontline of the relationship between the UK and Russia, for example Air Commodore Carl Scott, the defence attaché in Moscow.

Q8 Chair: We are going to have to crack on a bit if we are going to get through our questions, although it is absolutely fascinating. Sometimes, if the other two of you are quite happy with the first answer that has been given, you might just say so, and that way we will be able to cover more topics.

I would like to check a little point before I ask Richard Benyon to come in. I think I heard Dr Kulesa say that by inserting themselves opportunistically into Syria, they hope to be partners of the US. If I heard that correctly, how does that fit in with what we heard earlier—that according to your collective view, Russia has in a sense already declared itself in an adversarial relationship with the West?

Łukasz Kulesa: I think there will be an adversarial relationship between NATO and Russia and the US and Russia. In Russian thinking, it does not preclude co-operation on specific issues. Most importantly, what the Russians want from the United States is admission that they are being treated as equals, and that they are being treated as partners in solving issues in various regions. By inserting themselves into Syria and showing that they can be a spoiler, they are basically showing the United States that.

Q9 Chair: Are you saying that if Russia were treated with more respect by the West they would not be so keen to look on the West as adversarial?

Łukasz Kulesa: I don't think it is about respect. We showed Russia plenty of respect during the past 20 years. It is about what Russia wants from the United States and from NATO. From NATO it wants it to stop interfering in the area of the joint neighbourhood. If it wants a relationship with NATO, it wants it on the basis of equality.

Q10 Chair: And am I right in thinking that the Crimea, having been seized by Russia, is now integrally involved in Russia's operation in Syria as a mounting base? Is that correct? Would that show some joined-up thinking on the part of the Russians, or was it just two things that were done separately and happened to work in support of each other?

James Sherr: There is a definite relationship there. The Russians understand the strategic importance of Crimea and the Black Sea region very accurately. Turkey understands this very well and Russia makes no distinction between Crimea and any other part of its own territory. From the beginning of this occupation, they have moved into place military capabilities that could not have been arrived at at that particular moment. This has been preceded by lots of planning.

Keir Giles: Again, on Crimea I would refer you to the maps in front of you for the later session. It appears that one other very brief point about Syria is being overlooked. The results of what is happening in Syria at the moment just confirm for Russia once again that decisive and assertive military intervention is the best way to resolve foreign policy challenges not necessarily directly related to Russia. They have been encouraged by the success in Syria once again to see that this works. We should expect that they will act on that belief.

Chair: Richard, would you like to proceed now? If we are not able to cover some topics in this session, I hope that we can write to witnesses for further elucidation.

Q11 Richard Benyon: Many of you have predicted many things that have come true. What I have not seen is a prediction of the level of theft and corruption at the heart of this regime and how that impacts on its economic ability in the medium to long term. The other prediction that I have not seen from many commentators is about the oil price and its effect on the ability of a petro-economy such as Russia to continue to function. I would be grateful for your thoughts on the economics of trying to maintain state spending on defence at this level when it is hiving off so much to the regime in corruption and inability to get the income it thought it was going to get from an oil price that is a third of what it wanted.

James Sherr: One has to think again about the people we are talking about. The leadership in Russia views the West as being as weak politically as it is economically. They believe—they are quite confident—that they can achieve, and in fact are achieving, major results in the short to mid term that would change all these calculations. They have a belief, which many of us would be perfectly happy to say is erroneous, that if you get the geopolitics right and win the geopolitical battle, the economics will fall into line, the sanctions will disappear, the trading relationship will start again and all this will have been worth it. Now, these might be very hazardous calculations to make, but this is the thought structure we have. One interesting contrast: in the US National Security Council, four senior officials deal with economic affairs at the top level, while the Russian Federation Security Council, which is twice the size, has only one person with that competence and responsibility.

Keir Giles: President Putin was saying two to three years ago that Russia must not repeat the mistake that the Soviet Union made of continuing to spend on defence in conditions of low oil prices to the extent that it leads to the collapse of the state. He has stopped saying that. Corruption at the top level in Russia is the same as corruption at every other level. It is not a problem with the system. It is how the system works and how power is maintained. It needs to be seen through that prism, rather than as something that will destroy the state.

Lukasz Kulesa: In terms of the defence economics, we would probably see a smaller growth or a slower growth of the Russian military budget. We need to remember that the security-related expenditure in Russia goes beyond the military budget. It is also hidden in the research budget, in top-secret projects and in the expenditure for internal troops and special services. We might see a little bit less of the official defence budget, but we would also see the continued involvement of the Russians in the non-military aspects of waging conflicts.

Richard Benyon: About 100 other questions come from that, but I suspect we haven't got time.

Chair: That is very considerate of you, Richard. Thank you very much. Douglas, a question on article 5.

Q12 Douglas Chapman: There has been a lot of discussion about ambiguous hybrid warfare and multidimensional approaches. How does that sit with our conventional understanding of article 5 and the position that Russia would adopt in these circumstances?

Keir Giles: This is quite a well developed debate now. It no longer comes as a surprise to anybody that Russia can calibrate an approach to not trigger article 5 and to work around article 5's weaknesses. Nobody any longer believes that article 5 automatically triggers a response. But to refer to what Russia does as—

Q13 Mr Gray: Sorry, that is extraordinary. No one actually believes that article 5 triggers an automatic response?

Keir Giles: It triggers an automatic discussion of a response and then each nation decides what it wishes to do. Russia knows this very well. They have read the text of article 5. Some of the well-developed scenarios we are seeing at the moment are ways in which that could be exploited in order to disrupt NATO unity and make sure that there is no collective response.

To describe it as hybrid or ambiguous warfare and say that this is all that Russia is doing at the moment is highly misleading. First, the hybrid terminology and the Gerasimov doctrine that we hear a lot about is not an accurate way of describing how Russia sees this. It leads us down blind alleys that are not in accordance with the Russian way of thinking. If we think back to 2014 in Ukraine, it was treated as an irregular conflict. It was actually a major cross-border invasion of regular, conventional troops which stabilised the frontline in the face of the Ukrainian Government offensive. That is roughly where that frontline is now under the Minsk agreement.

James Sherr: I fully support the spirit of the question that you asked and its importance. One of the aims of the Russians pursuing what they have long called the initial period of

war is to incapacitate a state as much as possible before that state is even aware that a conflict has started. In Ukraine, this was done very effectively. So at one dimension of activity, we are dealing with something which is unfamiliar to us, but has been around in Russian thinking since the 1920s.

Lukasz Kulesa: The discussion about article 5 is a bit artificial, for me, because the continuation of any crisis with Russia would need to be taken into account. If we go as far as talking about the invocation of article 5, it means that we have failed seriously in earlier phases of the conflict in terms of sending the signals to Russia that we know what is going on in the initial phase, using the article 4 consultation mechanism and using the preventive deployment of forces into a conflict area, all before the discussion of article 5 starts.

Q14 Douglas Chapman: On hybrid warfare and so on, given Russia's position and its relative weakness compared with where NATO sits at the moment with the technological warfare that we can deliver from the West, why wouldn't Russia go down a route of hybrid or multi-dimensional warfare? Given that, is the UK in a good position to defend itself from the approaches that Russia would take? Are we in a good place in terms of having a strategy that would deal with anything that might affect the UK?

Keir Giles: If there is a strategy, it is hard to discern from our position. On the relative weakness, we have to bear in mind that there are key force multipliers that Russia has for what it wants to do that are not available to us. It is about the willingness to use force and the reluctance of the western allies to provide the forward defence that Dr Kulesa was talking about. It is also about the other elements of the total panoply of Russian warfare, such as the information warfare campaigns that accompany it. None of those are available to the UK to resist any Russian campaigning to the frontline states.

James Sherr: When I drew attention some years ago in Government circles in the UK to the connection between signals of weakness on our part arising from the 2010 defence review and the aggressiveness of Russian intelligence activity inside this country, including assassination, this point simply provoked incomprehension, but this is what we need to think about.

Lukasz Kulesa: I have one remark. The role for the UK would be, in most instances, a support role to the countries that would be directly affected by some of the most severe forms of hybrid warfare—and also in pushing through a unified NATO and, dare I say it, EU response to some of these issues, because we have seen, for example, serious discussions between the EU and NATO about responses to hybrid warfare.

Chair: Thank you. Now from one end of the military spectrum to the other.

Q15 Phil Wilson: What are Russia's nuclear capabilities, and how do they compare with NATO's?

James Sherr: The overarching point I would make, while being reticent in talking about detail, is that for the Russians, a nuclear weapon is not just a weapon designed to deter an opponent or even constrain him when war has started; it is a tool of de-escalation. If you look at one of the two Zapad exercises that Mr Gray referred to a moment ago, this ended with a Russian nuclear strike on Warsaw, which brought the conflict to a halt and discouraged NATO from escalating to the strategic level.

Again, as with the economic question that was raised earlier, we are looking at strategies that we would regard as highly risky, or even reckless, but we are talking about war, which by definition puts the whole state and its survival at risk, so they would see the risks as totally appropriate. These calculations might be very foolhardy indeed, but we have to understand that that is the view of nuclear weapons that we are dealing with, and it is that strategy and approach that we have to deter.

Lukasz Kulesa: Let me push back a little on this, if you will allow me. Yes, the capabilities are much more varied than the capabilities on the NATO side. If you look at non-strategic nuclear weapons especially, the Russians have everything from air-launched weapons to ground-launched ballistic missiles, to probably depth charges for the submarines, so they might be able to do a limited nuclear strike. They certainly want us to think that they would be able to do that, in order to break our cohesion and to generate discussions between the alliance, but I am not at all convinced that they will actually be ready to launch a nuclear escalatory strike against an alliance that counts three nuclear weapons states among its members.

Keir Giles: However, the essential caveat to that is that unlike in the NATO alliance, nuclear weapons are an integral part of Russian military planning. They are not something separate that is an almost unthinkable last resort; they are built into operational planning.

Q16 Chair: Thank you very much. To bring this session to a close, you have just given us your interpretation of how Russia views its own nuclear arsenal. Would you like to say to us how they view western military strategy and western nuclear deterrent policy and what they think the weaknesses in the United Kingdom's defence posture might be?

Keir Giles: First of all, they are fully aware of the points that I alluded to a moment ago—that for us, there is a very different construct for when nuclear weapons might be used, and the answer to that, of course, is practically never. Messaging is also important here—

Q17 Chair: Sorry, when you say “practically never”, the phraseology that Britain always uses is that it is a “weapon of last resort” and an “ultimate insurance policy” used to deter—is that what you mean when?

Keir Giles: Yes. It is not dissimilar to the Russian wording on the same topic; however, the mental construct underpinning it is entirely different. Messaging is also extremely important. If we think back to the disastrous BBC programme, “War Room”, that will have been treated in Moscow as an official British statement of intent.

Chair: Oh dear.

James Sherr: May I just add that a moment ago, my colleague mentioned the key word, “cohesion”? For the Russians, even in war itself—particularly in war itself—the most important factor is the political factor. The most important factor for them is, again, not the number of nuclear systems we have, or the adequacy of their deployment, but what they perceive as the ability and the determination of the alliance to pull together at a critical moment and make an effective decision.

Lukasz Kulesa: They see a weakness here, which they are trying to exploit—the weakness within the alliance in which there are countries that would prefer not to speak about nuclear weapons at all, and even hide that they have nuclear weapons on their own

territory, and countries that are much more open in discussing nuclear deterrence. They see this weakness, and they want to exploit it in peacetime by fomenting divisions. I think one of the basic topics for the Warsaw summit, in which the UK would also play a major role, would be how to signal back to the Russians that we are not playing this game—that we wouldn't be coerced into something by the mere threat of nuclear retaliation.

Q18 Mrs Moon: So the current discussions on Britain's nuclear weapons are seen as a weakness on our behalf.

Lukasz Kulesa: By the Russians, I think they are.

Chair: We have to stop there, but as Richard Benyon rightly said earlier, we could have, easily, 100 more questions. That has got us off to a flying start. May I thank our three witnesses for a very good insight into the problems with which we are going to be grappling? Thank you all very much.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Mark Laity**, Chief Strategic Communications (StratCom), SHAPE, and **Robert Pszczel**, Acting Head, NATO Information Office in Moscow, Public Diplomacy Division, NATO HQ, gave evidence.

Q19 Chair: Gentlemen, thank you very much for joining us for this second panel. Would you please introduce yourselves for the record?

Mark Laity: My name is Mark Laity. I am the chief of strategic communication at SHAPE, NATO's military headquarters. Previously I was a BBC defence correspondent and a special adviser to Secretary-General Lord Robertson. Now I lead and mentor the strategic communications effort for NATO's military. I should add that, while I obviously have permission to be here, I am speaking personally, not as an official spokesman.

Robert Pszczel: My name is Robert Pszczel and I have the honour to be the second Pole on this illustrious panel. I am a Polish diplomat, educated both in the UK, at the LSE, and at Warsaw university in political science. I joined the international staff of NATO headquarters as early as was possible for my country, in '99. I worked for many years in the press service of NATO headquarters, and in 2010 I departed for Moscow, where I stayed and worked for four and a half years as the director, the head, of the NATO Information Office. I came back at the end of last year and I am now an acting head of that office, until we find my replacement, and continue to work in the public diplomacy division.

Chair: Thank you both very much. To start us off I am going to ask Jim Shannon to ask a question.

Q20 Jim Shannon: When we were over at SHAPE and NATO, we had an opportunity to get a better perspective on what happens there. It is clear to me and other members of the Committee that there is more than one way of fighting a war—not necessarily with soldiers, bullets, guns and so on. You can fight wars by media and communications. In the light of that, I know we had a session when we were there in relation to this, but I would like to get your thoughts on it. Would like you to expand upon how Russia uses the media and

communications as part of its strategy? I have a couple of supplementaries to come on the back of that.

Mark Laity: I think, in a way, following up from the three witnesses you have just seen, the thing to highlight is that the Russians take a holistic view of conflict, and that for them the information line of effort is just a part of it. So I think the most important thing is that they see it as integral and fundamental to their overall effort. If you look at what they did when they annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine, the information line of effort was fundamental, not just to give them a strategic narrative to try to justify what they did, but to use information to deceive, delay and disrupt, like a smokescreen. The whole debate about little green men, and were they Russians or weren't they, was a delaying action, because by the time the Ukrainians and the rest of the world decided they were Spetsnaz, it was too late and they had done their job. They have a very operational, utilitarian view of information. That also fits in with what they have done historically. What is new is the internet and social media, but there is nothing new in using deception activities. It is just that they have found good new tools to use them with.

The Russian attitude to information has been very sophisticated and very effective, and at a strategic level the Russians have a very firm narrative. They tell the world a certain story; they tell their audience a certain story; they tell people who don't like America a certain story; they tell people who don't like right-wingers a certain story. They have a narrative for everyone, but every single one of those is then aligned to an overarching narrative in support of their strategic objectives. So when they do information, they do it for a reason, they do it strategically and they do it pretty amorally. Let's say they have a thoroughly pragmatic attitude to the truth.

Robert Pszczel: A factor that I think is very important was touched on by speakers in the previous session. At the risk of over-simplification, let's say that over 10 or 20 years, the misinformation campaign has been used extensively in Russia itself. In other words, to put it bluntly, Russian society has been the first target. The result is—this important point has been mentioned—that it is a country in which there are not that many dissenting views. They exist, but there are very few places and forums in which they can be expressed. The media, of course, are controlled, particularly those that matter—television and so on. That is the first point.

The second point is that there is a continuum. In other words, the same techniques—obviously we can expand on that—can be used for a domestic audience and for audiences in neighbouring Russian-speaking countries or those where Russian is the primary language, but also outside. The problem is that it leads to some contradictions in the narrative, but nevertheless that approach is pretty holistic.

Q21 Jim Shannon: I have a supplementary following on from that. When we were there, we were very aware that NATO and SHAPE were doing tremendous work, but I thought they were under-resourced and perhaps unable to reach out. They gave examples of surveys and who they were reaching. It is clear that not everybody will have access to newspapers and other media, but most people have communication, whether by the web, Twitter or whatever their IT system is. There are other ways of sending our message.

What can the United Kingdom do better individually or through the British Council or the BBC World Service? Should we allocate more resources for staffing and more funding? I

think we should. I hope I know what your answer will be. What are your thoughts? Is it something we have not done enough of? Do you feel the same?

Mark Laity: Because I am a NATO official and even speaking personally, I don't want to start poking individual nations in the eye, but I think it is fair to say that all NATO nations can look to do better. It is not just resources. It is partly, but it is also being very clear about what we are trying to achieve. As the three previous witnesses highlighted, there is a coherence about Russian strategy, and that gives it an extra force so we need to be very clear about what we are doing and why, and what we are trying to say.

Again, as was highlighted, if the Russians detect what they believe is a weakness on our part, they will play upon it. So the first thing is what we are trying to say. We have to be very clear about what we are trying to say. Then we must look at the various vehicles that are looking at it. Frankly, to get at Russian audiences in Russia is very hard, even on social media. Russia, again, through the operationalisation of the way it does information, has regarded this as a bastion that must be protected, so over a period of years, it has systematically taken over the main elements—the newspapers, television and so on—and then worked down to the social media; I think Robert will be better placed to talk about that. Outside that, the key thing that we have to do is find trusted intermediaries. There are people out there who need to be influenced, and the issue is not just the means of influence; it is who is influencing them. Anyone who has a child knows that at a certain point their peer group is more influential on them than the parents are. It is the same with any audience. They need to feel that the people speaking to them are people they trust, so if you want to speak to Russian minority audiences, you need Russian minorities. That is one key element.

When it comes to resourcing, in the military sense there are a lot of issues. We do not train enough people; we do not keep them doing the job long enough; and we are still somewhat behind in integrating the information line of effort into everything else we do. I could expand on that, but I won't.

Chair: We are going to have to move on.

Robert Pszczel: Very quickly, what is it that we do in NATO? What we don't do is respond to propaganda with propaganda. We really try to be very proactive when it comes to our narrative. Also—we believe this works in all circumstances—we need to have, and we do have, a proactive rebuttal policy. There is always a dilemma. One cannot answer, because the Russian misinformation campaign is so far-reaching and active that you cannot answer every single myth that is produced, but nevertheless you have to answer some of them. The key thing is the quality, of course, and the principles, but the number of voices also matters, and that is where we believe we are doing a relatively good job. We are allying ourselves with colleagues who make similar efforts in the European Union, but there are still huge reserves in the member states. The number of voices is important. This is also about having comprehensiveness, and the timing of the response, because at the end of the day we are confident we have the right answers and the right arguments; it is just that one has to resist the fatigue that comes with answering the effort that Russia is putting into a variety of sources. One has to find the strength to answer it.

Chair: We are going to have to move on a bit sharply now.

Q22 Richard Benyon: On that last point, it was very shocking for those of us who visited NATO to hear about the propaganda example of the Russian 12-year-old girl whom they claimed was raped in Berlin—it never happened. “A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has got its boots on” is never truer than when dealing with Russia. But may I ask you about doctrine? Do we in the West—does NATO really understand; is it fleet enough of foot to understand the changing doctrine over the last few years in Russia and particularly the role of multidimensional warfare in Russian military policy?

Mark Laity: I would say that we are catching up. My personal view is that we were behind the curve. We had a warning with Georgia, which we then did not fully integrate. We then saw what has happened with Crimea, and we are now on this 100%. My personal view is that we are playing catch-up. We have the right questions and we are coming up with the right answers, but the doctrine itself is really quite difficult to work out, because there are certain natural advantages.

I’m sure you are going to see this document that I have quite a lot. It is the Gerasimov slide. You may have already seen it. It shows how the Russians use information from a covert stage through six phases of warfare to the re-establishment of victory. Information confrontation is conducted in every phase, including covertly, in peace and in war. Our doctrines do not allow us to do a lot of this stuff till the fighting basically starts. So there is a disconnect there, which we are grappling with, and part of that disconnect is ethical. We do not want to be like the Russians. We want to learn what we can, to do a better job, but we don’t want to ape them, because that’s not what we are. So there is a doctrinal catch-up going on, and I am one of the people leading the effort, for instance, for a new military policy on strategic communication, precisely to deal with this kind of thing.

Robert Pszczel: I would simply add that I think our Russian colleagues have helped us to improve the situation and awareness, precisely because of their shocking misinformation examples. You mentioned one to do with events in Germany—or alleged events—but we have seen precisely these cases when it comes to the conflict in Ukraine: the famous issue of the allegedly crucified child, and so on. The point is that we have taken on board this challenge and addressed it through the efforts that the nations have been undertaking as part of their answers to hybrid warfare, which the Russians, by the way, constantly try to update. Yesterday, General Gerasimov was talking about the fact that they need to update day to day on hybrid warfare because allegedly we are the ones who are engaging in it. He was mentioning the so-called coloured revolutions. He was talking about the risks of the Russian Duma elections and so on.

Looking at the situation in house, for example, through the emergence of the centre of excellence on strategic communications in Riga, we are doing much better. But there is also the educational part, for example, the question of the awareness of the general public. Some people call it media literacy, and so on. Not everybody, when they read the comments on the websites of famous newspapers, realise that half of them are written by Russian trolls. A lot of things could be done to improve that.

Q23 Richard Benyon: What about Russian perceptions about where UK weaknesses might lie? You rightly say that we want to be the good guys. We don’t want to go down the agitprop route. Do they perceive that as a weakness? We all remember in Soviet Union times that their perceptions of the West varied from viewing us as an aggressor to viewing us as being

decadent and unable to respond to the strength and order of their doctrines. Are we going back to that kind of awful scenario?

Mark Laity: When I said they have a thoroughly pragmatic view of the truth, I meant it in all its senses.

Richard Benyon: They lie.

Mark Laity: The important word there is “pragmatic”. If telling the truth helps, they will tell the truth. If telling a lie helps, they will tell a lie. The editor of “Russia Today” is famously quoted as saying there is no such thing as objectivity, so for them, I would say that the Russian approach to information really is operational. They would therefore see us being slow, not being resourced or something as a weakness. To them, telling the truth or telling a lie is about the effect. They are 100% effects-based. If it achieves the effect, they will do it and do it up to a very high level. For instance, seeing President Putin having a summit about peace on the same day as they launch an offensive in eastern Ukraine. This kind of operationalising of information as an integral part of everything is what the trick is.

Robert Pszczel: I would just add that I think they are making a mistake. Pragmatic is one word. They make certain assumptions and they are pretty well informed obviously because we are an open society. For example, they perceive it as a weakness that NATO has 28 countries, therefore each of them rightly may have a slightly different view of things, at least initially. But that is also our strength. The proof is in the fact that their arguments are contradictory most of the time. They are not even very persuasive for those Russians who bother to think about them. I have in mind the position on Ukraine, for example, where there was a strong assumption, which the propaganda machine played for a long time, that Ukraine was going to disappear from the map and collapse. Nothing of the sort has happened. The Russians are counting on fatigue and the fact that at some point we just get slightly bored—how many misinformation myths et cetera do we have to deal with?

There is also the fact that Russia has unfortunately become a problem, even though we tried very hard for it to be a partner, but Russia is not the only game in town. There are a lot of challenges for us, but they are not just pragmatic, I think they are being too cynical. At the end of the day, they don't fully understand the capability that we have and the strength of our society.

Q24 Bob Stewart: Sorry I am late; I have been in a hospital—old injury, Laity, you might recall?

Mark Laity: Well, it wasn't me!

Bob Stewart: The thing that has always puzzled me is why, considering that the Black Sea fleet was in Simferopol in the Crimea, NATO seemed surprised by Russian actions such as taking over the Crimea, when frankly, to people who had thought about it, the Russians would not leave that jewel in their crown utterly isolated, behind a foreign border. It was almost an inevitable consequence. Why was NATO surprised, do you think?

Mark Laity: The fact that somebody can do something doesn't mean they're going to do it. I think that there has been a huge effort and desire on the part of NATO to be real

partners to Russia. I think that, however cynically people look at it, NATO tried very hard, and that may well have included wanting to believe the best of things.

When it happened, it happened very fast. It happened in ways that were carefully used to make it unclear what was going on, and therefore it was hard to work out not just what was going on, but what we do about it. If you like, it was a coup—it was a coup de main: it was a very fast action. I think we learnt from that, and I think you saw the same thing when they tried to do the same thing in eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainians had learnt from it, the world had learnt from it, and the sanctions went on much more quickly. So I think, if you like, it was scales dropping from people's eyes, against a desire to get on with Russia. Russia may say, "We don't want to get on with them," but believe you me, I've been in NATO since 2000, and the effort put into trying to get on with Russia is extraordinary.

Q25 Bob Stewart: That's totally understandable, going back all those years to partnership for peace and all that stuff that you and I were involved in a long time ago. We always thought too well of them and didn't distrust them enough, the Russians particularly.

Could I ask, therefore, a follow-up question to that? What would happen if Russia did a similar act to a NATO country? Would the NATO alliance falter? Would NATO actually react in a proper, upfront way or would it whinge, take ages in the NAC to consider the matter—some people would actually whinge away from it—and allow it, frankly, to be another *fait accompli*?

Mark Laity: As one of the previous witnesses highlighted, the Russians would clearly try to position any activity on what they would see as the ambiguities contained within article 5. I've watched NATO for nearly 15 years now. I believe firmly that if they tried to do something like that, they would breach article 5—they would be seen as breaching article 5—and very, very firm action would follow; and frankly, they'd be damn silly if they tried to do it.

Robert Pszczel: Their objective is indeed to blur the complicated question of attribution for any action that might lead to article 5, but we make an assumption that they are rational people in the end. Of course, it can be shown in practice that one can make a mistake; nevertheless, they have proven on a number of occasions that they recognise the strength of the unity of the alliance when it matters.

By the way, on the historical grounds, we only activated article 5 once, in 2001, and it took us, if I'm not mistaken, about 11 or 12 hours.

Bob Stewart: That was for Afghanistan.

Robert Pszczel: No, this was for 9/11. These were, of course, different circumstances but, speaking frankly, I think our record as an alliance is not bad, and we are saying pretty openly and directly to our Russian colleagues, or anybody who would like to listen, that nobody should test us, because we have both the capability and the will to resist. So it's kind of an unthinkable situation that they should not try and enter even in a hypothetical way.

Q26 Bob Stewart: I will end my questions by asking you both to nod when I ask you this: do you agree that NATO would stand firm and do something if a NATO country were attacked and that there would be no shilly-shallying in the North Atlantic Council?

Robert Pszczel: Yes, I do.

Bob Stewart: That's good enough. Thank you.

Q27 Chair: Splendid. Thank you. The last two questions from me and Johnny Mercer will be about propaganda. Before that, and following on from what we have just heard, Russia still has a presence at NATO headquarters. Is there any value in that? Is there a potential in that for facilitating improved relations if there were a move by both sides in favour of improved relations?

Robert Pszczel: Yes, Mr Chairman. That is exactly the thought and policy behind NATO's approach. Russia has a presence in NATO because, first of all, the Founding Act of 1997—the constitution of NATO-Russia relations—remains valid. We strongly believe that Russia has violated it but, with the political wisdom of the allies, the allies decided that we want to stick to it. That means that although the practical co-operation—military and civilian—was frozen on 1 April 2014, the dialogue remains an open possibility.

In fact, it is not a secret that we are currently having some primary discussions with Russia because the allies are ready to hold a NATO-Russia Council at an ambassadorial level. That is important for us because NATO's policy on Russia at the moment can certainly be described as strong defence with important elements of deterrence, but also as an openness to dialogue. At least for the purpose of avoiding any incidents such as with the downing of a Russian plane over Turkey's airspace, we should maintain this dialogue. We remain hopeful that Russia will change its ways in the future, so that presence and other forums are important.

Q28 Chair: Moving on to propaganda, throughout the cold war years and the communist era Russia always had a sophisticated propaganda operation and, in particular, a network of front organisations that could link up with sympathisers in target countries. There were organisations such as the World Peace Council, the World Federation of Trade Unions and the World Federation of Scientific Workers—something for every distinguished level of activity in society. Those days have gone, and the doctrine has gone, but Russia has quite a sophisticated propaganda operation now, notably in the television channel “Russia Today”. How effective are the propaganda tools that Russia is using to get its message to the West in reaching Russian minorities in the West, influencing the Russian people back home, and persuading people in the West—perhaps on issues such as common approaches to terrorism—who are simply looking at the Russian channels with an open mind?

Mark Laity: I think it's a mixed picture. The effect on their domestic audiences is almost absolute. Their control is really tight. With regard to their compatriots, the Russian language is very difficult and they have considerable influence there. The problem that we have outside the Russian Federation is to come up with feasible competition. One should also then look at the nature of what they are trying to achieve. Are they trying to persuade us that they are right, or are they trying to get us to do what they want? I think a lot of it is that they are just trying to get us to do what they want. That can just be delaying decision making by disrupting and confusing, or it can be by disinformation. A lot of what they have done has been highly—I keep using this word, but it is important—operational. They just wanted to achieve an effect. President Putin lied about Crimea, and a year later he admitted that he had lied. Why did he do that? Because it didn't matter anymore. The operational aspect is overarching, but they have problems. The credibility of Russia

worldwide has definitely gone down. I think it is effective, but it is a mixed picture and it is by no means unbeatable.

Robert Pszczel: Although General Gerasimov mentioned yesterday that soft power is an undeveloped instrument and should be worked on, in reality Russia has not attached such importance to it. For example, one compares the Russian efforts when it comes to so-called soft power with the Chinese efforts. Economic attraction is certainly not there, to be honest, and there is not really an equivalent of the Confucius Institute. In a sense, this leaves a lot of stress on the political muscle.

As Mark said, with the Russian population it has worked, to a large extent. It is pretty effective when it comes to those people who watch Russian media, including those outside Russia. But it has not been tremendously successful. Some of the statistics on “Russia Today” are, frankly, rather inflated. Just because a channel is part of a certain satellite package does not mean that everybody watches it.

Ultimately, the key thing is the strength of their arguments, which are not very persuasive. That is why Russia has to resort to misinformation, hoax stories and the use of trolls or just plain intimidation. It is a very crude method. There is the example of the commander of the Russian 80th Brigade who talked about its capabilities, saying it could fight in Spitsbergen. Well, he forgot to mention that Spitsbergen is part of Norway. I am sure that that was done on purpose. There is a lot of that, which proves the fact that there are limits to propaganda, but those limits are also set by our societies and how receptive they are. That goes back to the questions that were mentioned earlier.

Q29 Johnny Mercer: The UK Government aim to engage with the Russian public as a way of countering this propaganda that we have talked about. Is that realistic? Is that something which we can really interfere with or interject in? Would it have any effect?

Mark Laity: Engaging with Russian speakers is important. We can’t just abandon the information battlefield, but we have to be realistic about the difficulties of that. Practically, it is very hard to get into the Russian Federation, but we shouldn’t abandon it.

Q30 Chair: What are our main methods of doing this?

Mark Laity: At the moment, you’ve got your standard BBC kind of material, and America has the same thing. There are problems of credibility. The best way of influencing people is with people who they believe, so we need social media and that kind of access. We have to put the information out there for people to see. We have to expect a relatively low return, but it is an effort that has to be made. We need to put more effort into the Russian language, because if we don’t we are abandoning millions and millions of people, and ultimately we do need to change that viewpoint.

Robert Pszczel: I agree with that, but I would add a number of points. First, as I have mentioned already, there are not enough voices. Part of that is to do with the way that our institutions work. There are only a certain number of people who are allowed to speak on the record, and so on. We are dealing with an onslaught, essentially, and so the numbers matter. Secondly, engagement is still important. For instance, we regularly invite a group of Russian media, not just those who write critical stories about us. They have a chance to

deal with facts. There is also engagement with various NGOs, even if we know that they are, let's say, closely connected.

All of this matters, but at the end of the day the most important thing is that the Russian propaganda machine is like an industry, and therefore it operates to some extent on the basis of market principles: supply and demand. That means that if we are sufficiently confident and really have the right arguments, as I believe we do, the messages do get picked up. They feel obliged to pick them up. They may add a commentary, but sometimes we can still reach an audience even without having a direct opportunity, and we do try. For instance, I personally accept some invitations to appear on Russian television. It is not a great pleasure but, still, somebody has to do it. There are not that many. If we have the right arguments and they are picked up by BBC, Reuters etc. and they are relevant, they will still be shown on Russian television.

Q31 Johnny Mercer: Do you know if any other NATO member states are doing much in this regard? Is this your focus of effort, or not really?

Robert Pszczel: There is quite a lot of effort these days, for the reasons that we have discussed. We are living in very dangerous times. Russia is very non-transparent when it comes to military activities, and that worries us a lot, because we are transparent and we believe there is an intrinsic value to minimising the risk. So there is a lot of effort when it comes to civil society, where those issues exist. NGOs and various groups recently hosted a small combined group of Russian and Ukrainian experts at NATO HQ.

Mark Laity: It is all about critical messages.

Robert Pszczel: It is about messages, but also we should not be afraid. On the contrary, we should encourage any engagement opportunities that exist, but with our eyes wide open.

Chair: I am afraid we have to leave it at that. Thank you both very much indeed for packing so much information into a relatively short slot.