



House of Commons
Defence Committee

Russia and Ukraine border tensions

First Report of Session 2021–22

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to the report*

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Summary

Over recent months, the security situation on the border between Russia and Ukraine has deteriorated. There has been an increase in ceasefire violations on the front line between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces in the disputed Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. Simultaneously, Russia has mobilised large numbers of troops and military equipment close to the border with Ukraine in the largest military build-up since its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia claimed the deployments were part of a training exercise, but its actions have prompted fears of another Russian invasion of Ukraine. The international community has appealed for a de-escalation of the situation.

Since fighting broke out in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, Russia, Ukraine and the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas breakaway region have failed to agree a political settlement to the conflict. Russia's recent actions have been seen by many as further attempts to destabilise Ukraine and extract concessions in the negotiations for the Donbas. President Putin has warned the West not to intervene and made it clear that NATO military activity and NATO enlargement in the region will be viewed as a threat to Russia's national security.

Russia's ongoing military aggression and subversive behaviour towards neighbouring countries has led to deep instability in Europe and become a growing concern for NATO, about how to deter Russia, whilst building resilience and supporting collective security in the region.

In this report, we examine Russia's motives for the military build-up on the border and the UK's and NATO's diplomatic and military support to Ukraine, which is not a NATO member. We also look at the UK Government's aspirations for Global Britain, and what this means in the context of Ukraine.

1 Introduction

Context: The current situation on the Russia-Ukraine border

1. The conflict in Eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian government forces remains unresolved despite a negotiated settlement in February 2015, known as Minsk II, and another agreement in July 2020 for a full ceasefire and additional measures, reached by the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group.¹
2. The ceasefire has been frequently violated by troops deployed along both sides of the Line of Contact in the Donbas, which borders the disputed eastern regions of Luhansk and Donetsk.
3. Fighting began in 2014, after Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, which led to the uprising by pro-Russian separatist forces in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Since then, more than 13,000 people have died in the conflict and more than 1.5 million people have been displaced.²
4. In recent months the security situation has deteriorated, with fatalities on both sides. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission reported 600 ceasefire violations per month between July and November 2020, which increased to 2,800 per month between December and January 2021 and more than 6,600 ceasefire violations in April 2021.³ By 12 April, Ukrainian forces had reported that 28 soldiers had been killed since the beginning of the year.⁴
5. ***The UK, working with NATO allies and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), should encourage Ukraine, Russia and the separatists in the Donbas region to enforce the ceasefire and additional measures agreed in July 2020 by the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group.***
6. Since late March, Russia has been moving troops and large quantities of military equipment to the Crimea, Voronezh, and Rostov regions near the Ukrainian border. Military analysts identified at least fourteen Ground Troop units and deployments of tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, long-range artillery, Iskander short-range ballistic missile systems and air defence systems.⁵
7. The size of the deployments and proximity to Ukraine's borders have caused alarm in Ukraine and internationally. The EU estimated that Russia had assembled over 100,000 troops near its borders with Ukraine.⁶ NATO's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg said it was "the largest massing of Russian troops since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014".⁷

1 The Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) on Donbas is composed of Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE

2 BBC News, [Ukraine conflict: Can peace plan in east finally bring peace?](#) (10 December 2019)

3 US Mission to the OSCE, [On Russia's Ongoing Aggression against Ukraine and Illegal Occupation of Crimea](#) (29 April 2021)

4 The Guardian, [Nato tells Russia to stop military buildup around Ukraine](#) (13 April 2021)

5 Janes, [Russian Ground Troop Units and Iskander ballistic missiles identified at Ukrainian border by Janes](#) (8 April 2021)

6 Forces Network, [EU Estimates 100,000 Russian Troops Are Near Ukraine Border](#) (20 April 2021)

7 The Guardian, [Nato tells Russia to stop military buildup around Ukraine](#) (13 April 2021)

8. Henry Boyd, from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), told us:

The overall personnel number build-up is relatively small in comparison with the existing force level there, but the total number of battalion tactical groups, which is a key metric of Russia's ground manoeuvre capability, will have doubled by the end of [April].⁸

9. A Kremlin spokesman, Dmitry Peskov said on 6 April that the deployments were “not threatening anyone”.⁹ Russia's Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, confirmed on 13 April that the military had moved two armies and three airborne forces units to its western borders near Ukraine over three weeks as part of a “preparedness check”, which was due to end in two weeks' time.¹⁰

10. Satellite images on 16 April showed Russian Su-30 fighter jets in Crimea, as well as attack helicopters, reconnaissance drones, Su-34s and Su-27s in various locations. Philip Breedlove, a retired US air force general and NATO military commander believes:

[The Russians] have appropriately deployed the various elements of air power that would be needed to establish air superiority over the battlefield and directly support the ground troops.¹¹

11. More than twenty Russian warships have been staging naval exercises in the Black Sea, including landing craft. Russian news agencies reported that Russia has closed several areas of the Black Sea to foreign warships. This includes the waters leading to the Kerch Strait, the access point to the Sea of Azov and part of Ukraine's coastline, thus limiting access to two Ukrainian ports. The restrictions are due to last six months from 24 April until 24 October 2021.¹² The Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs said that this was a gross violation of Ukraine's right to freedom of navigation.¹³ Freedom of navigation is set out in international law, in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which was signed and ratified by Russia.

12. Russia and Ukraine also signed an agreement in 2003 on cooperation in the use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, which sets out that their cooperation in the strait must be managed “by implementation of existing agreements” and in accordance with international law, such as UNCLOS. Under Article 4 of that agreement, any dispute between the Parties “shall be resolved through consultations and negotiations, as well as other peaceful means at the choice of the Parties”.¹⁴ Russia and Ukraine already have an arbitration case ongoing under UNCLOS.¹⁵

13. ***The UK, working with NATO allies and other UN Member states, should insist Russia lifts restrictions on the movement of foreign vessels in the Black Sea, particularly in the Kerch Strait, which is in violation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and Russia's agreement with Ukraine on maritime cooperation in the Sea of***

8 [Q2](#) [Henry Boyd]

9 Jane's Intelligence Review, [Russian troop build-up sparks concern in Ukraine](#) (9 April 2021)

10 The Guardian, [Nato tells Russia to stop military buildup around Ukraine](#) (13 April 2021)

11 The Times, [Images show Russian 'invasion force' near border](#) (21 April 2021)

12 Deutsche Welle, [Russia restricts movement of 'foreign warships' in Black Sea](#) (25 April 2021)

13 UNIAN, [U.S. in OSCE calls on Russia to unblock Kerch Strait](#) (29 April 2021)

14 FAOLEX, [Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Ukraine on cooperation in the use of the sea of Azov and the strait of Kerch](#) (24 December 2003)

15 Permanent Court of Arbitration, [Dispute Concerning Coastal State Rights in the Black Sea, Sea of Azov, and Kerch Strait \(Ukraine v. the Russian Federation\)](#)

Azov and the Kerch Strait. If Russia does not comply with UNCLOS rules, the UK should support Ukraine's efforts to seek resolution through the dispute mechanism under Part XV of the UNCLOS, either through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea or to the International Court of Justice or an arbitral tribunal.

14. On 22 April 2021 the Kremlin announced that the additional troops, which it said had been deployed on exercise, would be withdrawn by 1 May 2021. The Russian Defence Minister said “the troops have demonstrated their ability to provide a credible defence for the country”.¹⁶

15. At the time of writing this report, we understand that Russia has only withdrawn a few thousand troops from the border and that many of the units have left their trucks and armoured vehicles behind. NATO's adviser to Ukraine, Major General Repass expressed concern:

[Russia] have retained a rather lethal force in the region and have only pulled back some forces. That tells me they may want to come back later when timing and circumstances are more advantageous to Russia. This will happen again.¹⁷

16. The 1 May deadline, by when Russia said it would pull back additional troops exercising on the border with Ukraine, has passed; the UK, working with NATO allies and other OSCE Member states, should insist Russia withdraws all its additional troops and equipment from the border with Ukraine and from the Crimea. There are legitimate concerns about the underlying nature of Russia's actions.

Our Inquiry

17. This inquiry comprised a one-off evidence session in reaction to the deteriorating security situation on Ukraine's border with Russia. Sarah Lain, Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), and Henry Boyd, Research Fellow for Defence and Military Analysis at the Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), gave evidence to us on 21 April 2021. We also received a joint private briefing from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD).

18. This is the fourth report in recent years that we and our predecessor Defence Committees have produced on Russia's ongoing military aggression and destabilising behaviour towards neighbouring countries.

19. In 2009, the Committee conducted an inquiry into Russia, *Russia: a new confrontation?*¹⁸ in the wake of the Georgia conflict, to explore the consequences of Russian foreign policy on relations with the West and to examine future defence policy for the UK and NATO.

16 BBC News, [Russia to pull troops back from near Ukraine](#) (23 April 2021)

17 The New York Times, [80,000 Russian Troops Remain at Ukraine Border as U.S. and NATO Hold Exercises](#) (5 May 2021)

18 Defence Committee, Tenth Report of Session 2008–9, [Russia: a new confrontation?](#), HC 276

20. In 2014, the Committee reported on NATO, *Towards the Next Defence and Security Review: Part Two - NATO*,¹⁹ in the aftermath of Russian military actions in Ukraine, arguing that NATO was not well prepared for a Russian threat against a member state.

21. In 2016, the Committee was compelled again to produce a report, *Russia: Implications for UK defence and security*,²⁰ examining Russia's increasing military capability and its changing intent, made evident by its actions in Crimea, Ukraine and Syria. The Committee at that time concluded:

Russia has increasingly demonstrated military aggressiveness in different regions, as well as the ability to create confusion, fear and doubt in others, including NATO member states. Because it perceives these methods as successful, and because they appear to Russia to be unchallenged, it is likely that Russia will continue to use military means and unconventional warfare as ways of reasserting what it believes to be its rightful role on the international stage.²¹

22. In Chapter Six of this report, we will reflect on some of the parallels between Russia's military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine. We will consider whether there are lessons to be learnt by the UK, NATO and the international community, with regards to Russia's military actions and how we should prepare for and respond to them.

19 Defence Committee, Third Report of Session 2014–15, [Towards the Next Defence and Security Review: Part Two - NATO](#), HC 358

20 Defence Committee, First Report of Session 2016–17, [Russia: Implications for UK defence and security](#), HC 107

21 Defence Committee, First Report of Session 2016–17, [Russia: Implications for UK defence and security](#), HC 107, para 94

2 Russia's motivation

The risk of full-scale military operations

23. Russia's motives remain unclear. Moscow has insisted it has no plans to attack Ukraine and that it has the right to train and station troops near its borders. However, Russia's deployments are causing alarm in Ukraine and across the West because similarly ambiguous manoeuvres took place before the invasion seven years ago.

24. Russia was quick to accuse Ukraine of malign activity on the border and to imply that Russian troop movements were a measure of self-defence. Sarah Lain told us that the Russian-backed separatists "started with the rhetoric of Ukraine being about to attack, which there was not much evidence of" and "then you saw this echoed in Moscow particularly, saying Ukraine is planning an offensive."²²

25. The Kremlin issued a warning that Russia would defend its citizens in Donbas if Ukraine tried to counter-attack to regain control of the territories.²³ Since 2019, Russia has issued up to 650,000 passports in the region.²⁴ Reports have suggested that the threat feels very real for Ukrainian soldiers. They believe the Russians are preparing for a full-scale offensive and report an increase in shelling and sniping from separatist territory.²⁵

26. There are aspects of Russia's military build-up, such as new field hospitals, long-distance shipments of armour and artillery and last-minute railcar bookings which analysts argue do not "feel" like normal training exercises.²⁶ Henry Boyd told us the build-up was being conducted across multiple military districts, which is unusual for a Russian exercise outside the big four annual Zapad and Vostok exercise series.²⁷

27. However, Michael Kofman of CNA, a security think-tank in Washington, said that the movements were "decidedly visible", which would discount a surprise attack, and were not structured for a major military offensive.²⁸ Henry Boyd explains the Russian troops were not positioned where one would expect for a full-scale invasion of Eastern Ukraine:

None of the reinforcements have gone to areas in the Rostov oblast, on the Russian side of the border from the Luhansk and Donetsk areas of Ukraine. Of the 20 battalion tactical groups that have gone in as reinforcements so far, 14 have gone to Crimea and the other six have gone to either Klintsy or Pogonovo, near Voronezh.²⁹

28. He continued that the positioning of the troops provides "limited opportunities" for a large-scale manoeuvre operation out of Crimea over the Perekop Isthmus land bridge. Russia's amphibious forces were also "relatively limited" and we had not seen the scale of logistic and supply reinforcement one might expect.³⁰

22 [Q8](#) [Sarah Lain]

23 The Times, [On Ukraine's front line: 'So what if Russia's army is on our border, they should be afraid'](#) (16 April 2021)

24 Atlantic Council, [Russian passports: Putin's secret weapon in the war against Ukraine](#) (13 April 2021)

25 The Times, [Russia's army is on our border, they should be afraid](#) (16 April 2021)

26 The Guardian, [Ukraine still outgunned as Russia prepares for larger conflict](#) (14 April 2021)

27 [Q2](#) [Henry Boyd]

28 The Economist, [A Russian military build-up on Ukraine's border prompts alarm](#) (14 April 2021)

29 [Q2](#) [Henry Boyd]

30 [Q15](#) [Henry Boyd]

29. An alternative theory is that Russia was planning to use military force to seize water supply facilities in Ukraine to reinstate the water supply to Crimea. After the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine diverted water supplies away from the North Crimean canal. The Crimea now suffers from a severe water shortage due to drought and low reservoirs and restricts water usage in many towns and villages.³¹

30. Michael Kofman of CNA disagrees:

I do not subscribe to the thesis that Russia intends to invade from Crimea because of the water crisis. This notion is floated annually, and thus far incorrectly. The current activity appears directly connected to the ceasefire breakdown, and coercive in nature.³²

31. Henry Boyd suggested that Russia did not necessarily view its military build-up in a binary way, as either an exercise or an operational deployment:

For Russia, there is an entirely plausible narrative that says this is simultaneously an exercise to demonstrate internally that Russia can do what it wants to do in terms of military posture in Ukraine; secondly, an exercise in coercion to bring Ukrainian policy into a more Russia-friendly posture; and, thirdly, it gives the Russians a backstop military option should they need it under the circumstances.³³

32. The final argument against a Russian invasion, simply put by James Sherr at the International Centre for Defence and Security is that “Ukraine’s army is not the army of 2015, and it would offer proper resistance”.³⁴ A full-scale military operation would incur significant losses for Russia as well as for Ukraine.

33. The large scale of the Russian military build-up is unusual for a normal exercise, but our evidence suggests that based on where troops are positioned in Crimea, it is unlikely to be a preparation for a full-scale Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine.

34. Russia has a right to deploy troops on its own territory but also has a duty to regional security and stability to be transparent about military exercises and military activity close to her borders, as set out in Section 1 of the OSCE’s Helsinki Final Act on exchange of military information on exercises.

Russia’s political motives

35. We will now consider what Russia might be hoping to achieve politically from its military build-up.

36. Firstly, President Putin has violently suppressed pro-Navalny protests at home and has parliamentary elections coming up in September. Over two-fifths of the population say that the country is moving in the wrong direction and the economy is in decline.³⁵

31 UNIAN, “[Russian-occupied Crimea facing even greater water shortage in 2021 – expert](#)” (5 May 2021)

32 Michael Kofman, [Twitter](#) (1 April 2021)

33 [Q2](#) [Henry Boyd]

34 ICDS, [Rumours of War: Another Russian Surprise in Ukraine?](#) (30 March 2021)

35 The Economist, [A Russian military build-up on Ukraine’s border prompts alarm](#) (14 April 2021)

Sarah Lain told us that although Putin will undoubtedly want to increase ratings before the elections, “the popularity boost that Putin got with the annexation of Crimea was not repeated when things happened in the Donbas”.³⁶

37. Political tensions have been steadily escalating between Kyiv and Moscow. In February, Ukraine imposed sanctions on Viktor Medvedchuk, a close friend of Putin and leader of Kyiv’s main pro-Russia party. At the same time, the Ukrainian Government banned broadcasts by the three pro-Russian television channels owned by Medvedchuk’s ally, Taras Kozak. James Sherr believes:

For the Kremlin, even leaving aside the personal factor, this is a major blow, as Medvedchuk, his party and his media holdings had become its principal instrument for changing Ukraine’s course.³⁷

38. It is plausible that Russia orchestrated a military build-up in retaliation against the Ukrainian President, Zelensky, for his actions to limit Russian influence in Ukraine.

39. This could also be an attempt by Russia to coerce Ukraine to resolve the dispute in the Donbas in Russia’s favour. Sarah Lain told us the Kremlin was disappointed that President Zelensky had not done more to implement the Minsk agreements.³⁸ She said “the whole crux of the Minsk agreements is that Ukraine reabsorbs these republics into the Ukrainian state and pays for them”³⁹ and “Zelensky cannot sell the idea very easily back home that you are giving special status to a region that is pro-Russian”.⁴⁰

40. It is arguably not in Russia’s interests to annex or take over the Donbas region because that would mean the end of the Minsk process and Russia’s political leverage over Ukraine. EU sanctions against Russia are also linked to Minsk implementation.⁴¹ Sarah Lain concluded that Russia’s actions are “mainly aimed at pressuring, sabre rattling and military diplomacy.”⁴²

41. Russia might be content for the Donbas to remain a frozen conflict for a long time. Whilst the area is under territorial dispute, NATO membership for Ukraine is highly unlikely, and this is “a key policy objective and a red line for Russia,” according to Henry Boyd.⁴³

42. On 1 April, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov changed the narrative and claimed that Russia was responding to increased NATO military activity. He said that Russia would need to “take extra measures” to protect itself should the US send troops to Ukraine, or NATO increase its presence in the region.⁴⁴

36 [Q19](#) [Sarah Lain]

37 ICDS, [Rumours of War: Another Russian Surprise in Ukraine?](#) (30 March 2021)

38 [Q7](#) [Sarah Lain]

39 [Q12](#) [Sarah Lain]

40 [Q17](#) [Sarah Lain]

41 [Q12](#) [Sarah Lain]

42 [Q1](#) [Sarah Lain]

43 [Q11](#) [Henry Boyd]

44 RUSI, Sarah Lain, [Russia Piles Up the Pressure on Ukraine](#) (6 April 2021)

43. During President Putin's annual state of the nation speech on Tuesday 21 April, he issued a threat to the West "I hope no one will think of crossing a red line in relation to Russia. The organisers of any provocations against our [national] security will regret this as they have never regretted anything before".⁴⁵

44. As our predecessor Committees have noted on several occasions, Russia views NATO as a threat to its own security. It does not want the West to intervene in the Ukraine conflict. Sarah Lain told us:

There is a mixture of very conveniently blaming NATO for their own problems or using NATO as a stick to get other things, but, generally, in all their strategies and doctrines NATO expansion is defined as a threat to Russia.⁴⁶

45. In a wider geopolitical context, some experts consider there is also a connection between Russia's recent actions and the Biden administration. Lieutenant General (Retired) Ben Hodges, a former commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, believed "this could be posturing, but the Kremlin is testing the new administration".⁴⁷ Sarah Lain agreed:

Putin is a person who wants the respect that he thinks he deserves on the international stage. Biden came in and clearly other parts of the world might have taken priority over Russia. He was not the central priority, certainly, for the Biden Administration at the beginning. Ukraine was not as big a priority for the Biden Administration.⁴⁸

46. If one of President Putin's aims was to get President Biden's attention, he has been successful, because on 13 April Biden offered Putin a summit meeting.⁴⁹ This took place on 16 June in Geneva. The leaders made some limited progress in their discussions on Ukraine, with Biden saying "we agreed to pursue diplomacy related to the Minsk agreement".⁵⁰

47. Russia prefers to keep the West in the dark about its military activities and the strategic goals, which underpin them. However, it is unlikely that Russia would want to provoke further Western economic sanctions or military assistance to Ukraine.

48. Russia has several probable motives for escalating tensions on the border with Ukraine, driven by regional insecurities and President Putin's willingness to engage in power politics. Russia is using its military for coercive diplomacy, to pressure the Ukrainian Government to make concessions in the political settlements for the Donbas and to test Western allies' resolve to come to Ukraine's aid.

45 The Times, [Cross our red lines and you will regret it, Putin warns West](#) (21 April 2021)

46 [Q17](#) [Sarah Lain]

47 New York Times, [Fighting Escalates in Eastern Ukraine, Signaling the End to Another Cease-Fire](#) (30 March 2021)

48 [Q17](#) [Sarah Lain]

49 The Economist, [A Russian military build-up on Ukraine's border prompts alarm](#) (14 April 2021)

50 Washington Post, [Biden, Putin hold 'positive' summit but divisions remain over human rights, cyberattacks, Ukraine](#) (16 June 2021)

3 The international response

The reaction from Kyiv

49. As Russian troops amassed near its borders, Ukraine appealed to Western allies for support. President Zelensky had calls with the leaders of the US, France, Germany, the UK and Turkey, and the Secretary General of NATO and said that they were all “on our side”.⁵¹ However, it must be recognised, that US and NATO military support may be limited, as Ukraine is not a member of NATO and thus is not protected by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

50. In addition to seeking support from her Western partners, Ukraine turned to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to help de-escalate the situation. The OSCE has a risk reduction mechanism in chapter III of the Vienna document, which can be used as a tool for crisis management. On 14 April, Ukraine and 39 participating States of the Permanent Council met in the Joint Meeting of the Forum for Security Cooperation and the Permanent Council (FSC-PC) to call on Russia to explain its military build-up on the border with Ukraine under paragraph 16 of the Vienna document on “unusual military activities”.⁵² Russia claimed its actions required no further explanation.⁵³ Sarah Lain commented:

[Russia] refused to engage when Ukraine, through the OSCE, asked for more information about the military activity under the Vienna Document, but Russia does not co-operate on things like that. At the moment it seems that is their approach to things.⁵⁴

51. ***Russia must honour its commitments under the Vienna Document as an OSCE participating State and fully co-operate in OSCE meetings to support confidence and security-building measures and de-escalate conflict. The UK should, with its Allies, use the OSCE mechanisms in the Helsinki Final Act to hold Russia to account, and if necessary, bring the dispute before the OSCE’s Court of Conciliation and Arbitration.***

52. It is also worth noting here, that Russia—alongside the UK and the US—signed the 1994 Budapest Memorandum with Ukraine.⁵⁵ This document provided security assurances to Ukraine, in that the signatories would “refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine” and “respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine” in exchange for Ukraine’s unilateral nuclear disarmament and accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.⁵⁶

53. ***The UK, with the US, should insist Russia stand by the international agreements it has signed up to and its commitment, made in 1994, to respect Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.***

51 Politico, [Ukrainian president invites Putin for talks in conflict zone](#) (21 April 2021)

52 US Mission to OSCE, [Recommendations Provided at the 81st Joint Special PC-FSC Regarding Activities of the Russian Federation](#) (29 April 2021)

53 US Mission to OSCE, [Recommendations Provided at the 81st Joint Special PC-FSC Regarding Activities of the Russian Federation](#) (29 April 2021)

54 Q18 [Sarah Lain]

55 [Military Assistance to Ukraine](#), Standard Note SN07135, House of Commons Library, 29 April 2021

56 [Military Assistance to Ukraine](#), Standard Note SN07135, House of Commons Library, 29 April 2021

54. On the same day as President Putin's annual state of the nation speech, when he warned the West not to cross his red lines, President Zelensky invited Putin to meet him in the Donbas region for peace talks.⁵⁷ Putin declined. He offered to discuss bilateral relations with Zelensky in Moscow rather than meet in the Donbas to discuss the conflict there and suggested Zelensky should hold talks with the separatist leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics - with whom Zelensky does not want to negotiate.⁵⁸

55. When Russia announced the next day that it would withdraw its additional troops by 1 May 2021, Zelensky was quick to respond on Twitter:

The reduction of troops on our border proportionally reduces tension. Ukraine is always vigilant, yet welcomes any steps to decrease the military presence and deescalate the situation in Donbas. Ukraine seeks peace. Grateful to international partners for their support.⁵⁹

56. Zelensky would like the US and UK to join the Normandy group of Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia to help negotiate the peace process in the Donbas.⁶⁰

57. Zelensky has urged the West to step up economic sanctions against Russia⁶¹ and is lobbying NATO, France, the UK and the US to commit to a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine, which seems unlikely at present⁶² as hitherto there has been no consensus in NATO to grant Ukraine membership.⁶³

58. Ukraine is also initiating the International Crimea Platform, which will comprise a set of practical approaches to achieve de-occupation of Crimea and its return to Ukraine. Ukraine hopes to consolidate international efforts and the initiative will focus on areas such as enforcing sanctions and countering Russia's militarisation of Crimea, as well as monitoring human rights and environmental threats.⁶⁴

59. In contrast to Georgia's response in 2008 to send in troops to counter Russian aggression, Ukraine has demonstrated restraint and sought to resolve the escalating situation through political and diplomatic channels.

The West's response

60. The US, UK and NATO have all issued statements calling for de-escalation of the situation and for Russia to cease its destabilising behaviour. The US military's European Command raised its watch level to "potential imminent crisis".⁶⁵

61. Behind the scenes, the international community has been closely monitoring the situation on the ground. In addition to the OSCE special monitoring mission, Sarah Lain said "there are already US and UK surveillance flights happening in and around Crimea and the Donbas. There is intelligence sharing".⁶⁶

57 Politico, [Ukrainian president invites Putin for talks in conflict zone](#) (21 April 2021)

58 Financial Times, [Zelensky forced to 'face reality' over peace process with Russia](#) (3 May 2021)

59 Volodymyr Zelensky, [Twitter](#) (22 April 2021)

60 Financial Times, [Zelensky forced to 'face reality' over peace process with Russia](#) (3 May 2021)

61 UNIAN, [Zelensky: U.S., EU leaders ready to step up Russia sanctions](#) (21 April 2021)

62 [Q17](#) [Sarah Lain]

63 Carnegie Europe, [Judy Asks: Should NATO Admit Ukraine?](#) (21 April 2021)

64 EU Today, [The International Crimea Platform](#) (21 March 2021)

65 New York Times, [Fighting Escalates in Eastern Ukraine, Signaling the End to Another Cease-Fire](#) (30 March 2021)

66 [Q31](#) [Sarah Lain]

62. The UK rallied quickly behind Ukraine. The UK Foreign and Defence Secretaries spoke to their Ukrainian counterparts on 2 April; Prime Minister Boris Johnson spoke to the Ukrainian President on 5 April and UK Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nick Carter, met with his Ukrainian counterpart on 20 April to discuss ongoing defence cooperation. The Chief of MI6 said the UK and the US warned Russia not to invade Ukraine.⁶⁷

63. On 20 April, in a reply to a Written PQ, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office said:

There has been regular Ministerial and senior official level engagement with the Government of Ukraine and with our allies on this issue ... to assure them of the UK's unwavering support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine ... As a fellow Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, we engage directly with Russia on matters of international peace and security, including Ukraine. We continue to raise our concerns with the Russian government at every opportunity ... We will continue working closely with partners to monitor the situation and consider all options.⁶⁸

64. On 2 April, President Biden spoke with Ukrainian President Zelensky for the first time and on 6 May, US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken visited Ukraine to show US support for Ukraine's sovereignty. He stated that the US was looking to strengthen security co-operation and assistance to Ukraine,⁶⁹ although it is not clear yet what this support will consist of.

65. The G7 met in London on 4 May for a Foreign and Development Ministers' Meeting to discuss relations with Russia as one of its geopolitical priorities. The G7 issued a statement prior to the meeting, declaring:

We underline our strong appreciation and continued support for France's and Germany's efforts through the Normandy Process to secure the full implementation of the Minsk agreements, which is the only way forward for a lasting political solution to the conflict. We call on all sides to engage constructively in the Trilateral Contact Group on the OSCE's proposals to confirm and consolidate the ceasefire.⁷⁰

66. The UK's presidency of the G7 is an opportunity for the UK to demonstrate global leadership in security, diplomacy and conflict resolution, consistent with its expressed strategic intentions set out in the Integrated Review.

67. UK Ministers should continue to support and encourage Ukraine to seek peaceful resolution to the conflict with Russia, through political settlement and implementation of the Minsk agreements.

68. The UK Government should continue to work closely with Ukraine, NATO and other allies to monitor the situation on the ground, share intelligence and plan a co-ordinated approach for joint action to promote collective security in the region.

67 The Times, [MI6's 'C': We warned Putin what would happen if he invaded Ukraine](#) (25 April 2021)

68 PQ181414 [on Ukraine: Russia], 20 April 2021

69 BBC News, [Antony Blinken: US tells Russia to cease 'reckless and aggressive actions'](#) (6 May 2021)

70 [Statement of G7 Foreign Ministers](#), 12 April 2021

69. NATO leaders have called a summit in June, with Russia high on the agenda. NATO will be looking for ways to defuse the situation, without getting into direct confrontation with Russia. Sarah Lain pointed out that “NATO itself is not, as an alliance, united in opinion on what should be done on Ukraine”.⁷¹

70. We will look at UK and NATO military commitments to Ukraine in the next chapter.

71. The UK and NATO must push back on Russia’s narrative, that Ukrainian membership of NATO, and NATO enlargement in general, would present a threat to Russia’s security, pointing out, for example, that Russia, not Ukraine or NATO, has taken or supported activities that destabilise the region.

4 UK Military Support to Ukraine

Ukraine's military capability gaps

72. Ukraine's military today is better-equipped than it was in 2014, as a result of increased domestic and foreign support.⁷² Ukraine is enhancing its capabilities with US Javelin anti-tank missiles and combat drones from Turkey⁷³ - the same sort of low-cost drones, which were successfully deployed by Azerbaijan against Armenian forces in 2020. Nevertheless, Janes analysts' assessment of the Russian and Ukrainian forces concludes that if conflict should break out, Ukraine is outmatched by Russian military superiority on land, in the air and at sea. Moscow's biggest fear in such a situation would be Western intervention.⁷⁴

73. Henry Boyd attributed this superiority to Russian military modernisation programmes, which, since 2011–12, have “delivered on effective capability improvements” and led to “increased confidence in the effectiveness of the modernised equipment they put in place”.⁷⁵

74. By contrast, he said the Ukrainian military's lack of resources had restricted what they could achieve, and pointed out that they were still dependent on Soviet-calibre weaponry, such as the tank ammunition for artillery systems: “some of these systems are simply not going to be compatible with a direct supply of NATO-sized ammunition”.⁷⁶

75. Sarah Lain also pointed to corruption in Ukraine, which had hampered efforts to modernise its military:

There has been an inherent issue of corruption throughout, particularly in the defence sector, which remains a problem, although since 2014 Ukraine has done a lot with NATO itself and with NATO member support.⁷⁷

76. Ukraine has focused its efforts on land domain forces, which Henry Boyd believed had led to “some reasonable improvements in terms of their operational capabilities” but “there are still some questions about officer standards and leadership”. He concluded “the real weakness in the Ukrainian armed forces still lies in the non-land domain aspects, like the Ukrainian air force”.⁷⁸

77. Sarah Lain said the Ukrainian Navy took a “massive hit” during the conflict in Crimea in 2014:

They basically did not have a navy, which is why I would be more concerned in some ways about what is happening around the Sea of Azov, the Black Sea and Crimea. Allies, particularly the UK, are trying to help Ukraine build that up, but that was a huge weakness.⁷⁹

72 Politico, [Ukraine's military poses a tougher challenge for Russia than in 2014](#) (14 April 2021)

73 The Times, [On Ukraine's front line: 'So what if Russia's army is on our border, they should be afraid'](#) (16 April 2021)

74 Jane's Intelligence Review, [Russian troop build-up sparks concern in Ukraine](#) (9 April 2021)

75 [Q3](#) [Henry Boyd]

76 [Q31](#) [Henry Boyd]

77 [Q5](#) [Sarah Lain]

78 [Q4](#) [Henry Boyd]

79 [Q5](#) [Sarah Lain]

78. Both witnesses agreed that Ukraine needs to develop anti-tank, anti-ship, air defence and electronic warfare capabilities, which Henry Boyd argued would raise the cost for Russia of any military action, but, he added, to help Ukraine deliver on these capabilities would also require “a longer-term package of support”.⁸⁰

The UK’s Defence relationship with Ukraine

79. The MoD states that the UK and Ukraine have built a strong defence relationship in recent years. Following the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, the UK and Ukraine established a UK training mission in 2015, called Operation Orbital. Since then, the MOD says, British troops have trained over 20,000 Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel.⁸¹ Between 2015 and the end of 2017, the UK Government also gifted £2.2 million of non-lethal military equipment to Ukraine.⁸²

80. Operation Orbital focuses on training in medical, logistics, planning, leadership and infantry skills and countering improvised explosive devices (C-IED), armoured vehicle attacks, sniping and mortar attacks.⁸³ In August 2020, training was expanded to include maritime capacity-building such as diving, firefighting, damage control and sea surveillance as part of a multinational Maritime Training Initiative, which is being led by the UK.⁸⁴

81. Operation Orbital comprises around 100 UK Armed Forces personnel, working in short-term training teams (STTTs).⁸⁵ It is funded through the Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) and delivered in conjunction with NATO support to Ukraine. In September 2019, Operation Orbital was extended until March 2023.⁸⁶

82. Prior to publication of this report, on 21 June 2021, the UK and Ukraine signed a Memorandum of Implementation for naval projects, with Babcock as the prime industrial partner.⁸⁷ This agreement includes a government to government sale of two refurbished Sandown class mine countermeasure vessels and the joint design and construction of eight missile vessels for Ukraine, two of which will be built in the UK; as well as UK assistance to Ukraine in building two naval bases on the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.⁸⁸

83. *We welcome the new Memorandum of Intention for naval projects with Ukraine and endorse the UK Government putting in place a much longer-term package of support, beyond the conclusion of Operation Orbital in 2023, to assist Ukraine in building up the capability and resilience of the Ukrainian armed forces, particularly the navy. We would like to receive annual updates on the progress of the naval capabilities enhancement programme.*

80 [Q31](#) [Henry Boyd]

81 Ministry of Defence, [Operation ORBITAL explained: Training Ukrainian Armed Forces](#) (21 December 2020)

82 PQ116422 [on Ukraine: military aid], 8 December 2017

83 Ministry of Defence, [Operation ORBITAL explained: Training Ukrainian Armed Forces](#) (21 December 2020)

84 Ministry of Defence, [UK launches multinational training to enhance Ukrainian Navy against threats from the East](#) (18 August 2020)

85 Ministry of Defence, [Op ORBITAL: Why are British soldiers in Ukraine?](#) (15 October 2019), [Operation ORBITAL explained: Training Ukrainian Armed Forces](#) (21 December 2020)

86 HC Deb, 4 November 2019, [Armed Forces Training Update HCWS84](#) [Commons written ministerial statement]

87 Forces Net, [UK Selling Ukraine Sandown-Class Vessels In Defence Deal](#) (22 June 2021)

88 Ministry of Defence, [UK signs agreement to support enhancement of Ukrainian naval capabilities](#) (23 June 2021)

NATO assistance to Ukraine

84. Ukraine has been a member of NATO's North Atlantic Cooperation Council since 1991 and joined the Partnership for Peace programme in 1994. Current security issues are addressed in meetings held by the NATO-Ukraine Commission. NATO provides a "Comprehensive Assistance Package" of support to Ukraine, which focuses on command and control, logistics and transformation, cyber defence, medical rehabilitation, explosive ordnance disposal and countering-IEDs.⁸⁹ In June 2020, NATO offered Ukraine Enhanced Opportunity Partner status, which provides preferential access to NATO's exercises, training and exchange of information and situational awareness, to increase interoperability.⁹⁰

85. The NATO-Ukraine Commission met on 13 April 2021, to discuss the response to Russia's military build-up. The NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, said:

We have supported wide-ranging reforms that are making Ukraine more resilient and help advance its Euro-Atlantic aspirations ... We will further enhance our cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia on Black Sea security, and we are working to make full use of Ukraine's status as an Enhanced Opportunity Partner.⁹¹

86. The UK and Ukraine have taken part in regular joint training exercises, such as Exercise Joint Endeavour, which took place in September 2020. Two hundred British troops from 16 Air Assault Brigade parachuted into Ukraine, and exercised with Ukrainian, Canadian and US troops.⁹²

87. The UK is participating in NATO exercises Steadfast Defender 2021⁹³ and Sea Breeze 2021⁹⁴ to test NATO readiness and military mobility and provides support to NATO's ongoing Operation Sea Guardian, all of which will have a presence in the Black Sea.⁹⁵

88. In June 2021, a Royal Navy Type 45 destroyer, HMS Defender, deploying as part of the UK's Carrier Strike Group stopped off in the Black Sea, to show solidarity to Ukraine.⁹⁶ On 23 June, Russia claimed it had fired warning shots at HMS Defender whilst she sailed off the coast of Crimea.⁹⁷ The Ministry of Defence has denied any shots were fired and said the ship was conducting "innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters in accordance with international law".⁹⁸

89. *The UK and NATO should continue to maximise efforts to help Ukraine reform to meet NATO standards and to become more interoperable with NATO and its equipment, for example through regular joint training exercises.*

89 NATO, [NATO-Ukraine Trust Funds](#) (28 March 2018)

90 NATO, [Partnership Interoperability Initiative](#) (3 November 2020)

91 NATO, [NATO-Ukraine Commission addresses security situation in and around Ukraine](#) (13 April 2021)

92 Ministry of Defence, [Hundreds of UK troops parachute into Ukraine for joint exercises](#) (19 September 2020)

93 NATO, [Steadfast Defender 2021](#) (accessed 22 June 2021)

94 Navy Times, [Sea Breeze 21 begins in the Black Sea after Russia threatens to fire on 'intruding' warships](#) (28 June 2021)

95 Hansard, Adjournment Debate on Ukraine, 17 May 2021, [Ukraine Volume 695](#)

96 Royal Navy, [HMS Defender heads on Black Sea mission after Mediterranean workout](#) (10 June 2021)

97 BBC News, [HMS Defender: Russian jets and ships shadow British warship](#) (23 June 2021)

98 Ministry of Defence, [Twitter](#) (23 June 2021)

Global Britain

90. The Government published its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy: Global Britain in a Competitive Age⁹⁹ on 16 March 2021 and the corresponding Defence Command Paper: Defence in a Competitive Age¹⁰⁰ on 22 March 2021.

91. The review warns of a more complex future operating environment, in which our adversaries are developing advanced capabilities in naval warfare, land systems, long-range precision strike, early warning radar and integrated air defence systems, alongside new threats in space, cyberspace and from artificial intelligence.¹⁰¹

92. This has led the UK to shift its approach in line with its Integrated Operating Concept. According to Defence in a Competitive Age, today's force will be more versatile, flexible, assertive and integrated and will deliver "permanent and persistent global engagement" as well as preparing to respond to a major conflict and warfighting.¹⁰²

93. The Government states that our alliance with NATO remains central to our Defence policy and "our ability to contribute to it a high-end warfighting force useable against a peer opponent".¹⁰³ Henry Boyd put this into the context of our inquiry:

On the ground forces side, a large part of that review is really thinking about a credible force for a high-intensity scenario. We are basically deterring Russia by being able to credibly fight a high-intensity war with them if necessary.¹⁰⁴

94. In the Integrated Review and Defence Command paper, the Government sets out its future commitments, which include:

- A shift to a more robust position on security and deterrence alongside a renewed commitment to the UK as a force for good in the world.¹⁰⁵
- To play a leading international role in conflict resolution and prevention.¹⁰⁶
- To create armed forces that are both prepared for warfighting and more persistently engaged worldwide through forward deployment, training, capacity-building and education.¹⁰⁷
- To be the greatest single European contributor to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area to 2030. To work with our partners to defend our common values, counter shared threats and build resilience in our neighbourhood.¹⁰⁸

99 UK Government, [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#) (16 March 2021)

100 UK Government, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#) (22 March 2021)

101 UK Government, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#), (22 March 2021), P9–10

102 UK Government, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#) (22 March 2021), P12

103 UK Government, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#) (22 March 2021), P12

104 [Q42](#) [Henry Boyd]

105 UK Government, [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#) (16 March 2021), P14

106 UK Government, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#) (22 March 2021), P15

107 UK Government, [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#) (16 March 2021), P22

108 UK Government, [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#) (16 March 2021), P60

- To actively deter and defend against the full spectrum of threats emanating from Russia. Through NATO, we will ensure a united Western response, combining our military, diplomatic and intelligence assets in support of collective security.¹⁰⁹
- To support others in the Eastern European neighbourhood and beyond to build their resilience to state threats. This includes Ukraine, where we will continue to build the capacity of its armed forces.¹¹⁰
- To ensure freedom of navigation and security. As part of this we will continue to exercise our freedom to operate in the Black Sea.¹¹¹

95. **We believe the UK Government’s response to the Ukraine crisis, demonstrates a commitment to the overarching themes for Global Britain set out above in the Integrated Review and the Defence Command paper. This can be evidenced in UK military aid, intelligence sharing, vocal political and diplomatic support for Ukraine, and the carrier strike deployment, as part of a co-ordinated approach alongside NATO allies.**

96. **However, Britain’s global ambitions now include a tilt to the Indo-Pacific, with the Government promising to deepen engagement by our armed forces and establish a greater and more persistent presence there as well.**

97. *The Integrated Review identifies Russia as “the most acute direct threat to the UK”.¹¹² The UK Government should clarify how its global ambitions, in particular its proposed tilt to the Indo-Pacific, will be balanced with deterring the threat from Russia to UK security in the Euro-Atlantic region.*

109 UK Government, [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#) (16 March 2021), P61

110 UK Government, [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#) (16 March 2021), P61

111 UK Government, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#) (22 March 2021), P29

112 UK Government, [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#) (16 March 2021), P18

5 Lessons learnt

History repeated

98. Many parallels can be drawn from Russia's actions in the Georgia conflict in 2008, the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

99. Russia's provocation towards its neighbours, Georgia and Ukraine can be observed over many years:

- Russia fuelled Pro-Russian separatism in the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine.
- Russia distributed passports to Russian speakers in the separatist-controlled territories in Georgia and Ukraine.
- Russia used proxy forces and built up its military on the borders with the breakaway regions in Georgia and Ukraine.
- Russia formally recognises the separatist territories in Georgia and Ukraine, despite international rejection of their lawful existence as independent republics.
- Russia has failed to honour ceasefire commitments in Georgia and Ukraine.
- Russia has extensively used information warfare to promote its own narratives.
- Russia has denied direct involvement in both conflicts despite evidence that Russian forces and military equipment have been identified.

100. There are also some differences. Russia has embarked on a large-scale military modernisation programme since the conflict in Georgia. Henry Boyd pointed out “the Russian armed forces you are looking at today are some distance away from their capability problems they demonstrated in 2008 in Georgia”.¹¹³

101. He attributed this to upgrades to their main battle tank, armoured fighting vehicle fleet and artillery forces, the growth in professional contractor personnel, which has led to better ground force deployability and a more modern Russian air force capability.¹¹⁴

102. Sarah Lain commented that Russia used electronic warfare a lot in the Donbas¹¹⁵ and had taken a “full-spectrum approach”.¹¹⁶

103. The outcome of Russia's interventions was different in Crimea than in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and the Donbas. Russia annexed Crimea, whereas South Ossetia, Abkhazia and the Donbas became disputed territories locked in “frozen conflict.” Henry Boyd said:

The Crimea was a different case in point. Crimea occupies a very clear strategic logic in Russian military thinking. Its geographical position is

113 [Q3](#) [Henry Boyd]

114 [Q3](#) [Henry Boyd]

115 [Q5](#) [Sarah Lain]

116 [Q6](#) [Sarah Lain]

almost ideal to provide Russia with the potential capability to deny Black Sea access or at least really hold NATO maritime assets at risk should they enter the Black Sea.¹¹⁷

104. South Ossetia, Abkhazia and the Donbas do not hold the same strategic importance for Russia's military and Russia's intentions appear to be to destabilise these regions rather than to occupy them.

105. The Defence Command paper states that Russia poses the greatest threat to European security, and warns:

Modernisation of the Russian armed forces, the ability to integrate whole of state activity and a greater appetite for risk, makes Russia both a capable and unpredictable actor.¹¹⁸

Lessons learnt

106. In the Committee's report from 2009, *Russia: a new confrontation?* our predecessors said, following the Georgia conflict, that:

There was a collective international failure at a political level to read the warning signs of an escalating conflict.¹¹⁹

107. This was echoed in the 2016 report, which said the West "was taken by surprise" by Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014 and that NATO should:

reassess NATO's doctrine and capability to respond to both the speed of Russian deployment, and the implications of Russia's ability to keep the West in the dark until it is ready to initiate military action.¹²⁰

108. In chapter three of this report, we documented a rapid and united diplomatic response from the UK and Western allies to Russia's most recent aggressive behaviour towards Ukraine. In the current situation, the US and UK engaged early on in surveillance and intelligence sharing and continue to monitor the situation closely.¹²¹

109. The UK Government sets out a commitment in the Defence Command Paper to act more assertively, "to demonstrate the will and capability—lethal and non-lethal - to confront threats early".¹²²

110. We commend the UK Government for their role in intelligence sharing and monitoring the situation in the Donbas and Crimea.

117 [Q11](#) [Henry Boyd]

118 UK Government, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#) (22 March 2021), P5

119 Defence Committee, Tenth report of Session 2008–09, [Russia: a new confrontation?](#) HC276, para 75

120 Defence Committee, First Report of Session 2016–17, [Russia: Implications for UK defence and security](#); HC107, para 67

121 [Q31](#) [Sarah Lain]

122 UK Government, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#) (22 March 2021), P13

111. **The International community has reacted quickly and united behind a clear message to Russia that the world is watching and there will be consequences for illegal military action. Lessons have been learnt from the Georgia crisis in 2008 and the Ukraine crisis in 2014, primarily that the international response must be decisive and unanimous in the face of Russian aggression.**

112. *The UK and NATO must decide what their red lines are and the appropriate action which could be taken, if Russia crosses a red line.*

Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

1. The UK, working with NATO allies and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), should encourage Ukraine, Russia and the separatists in the Donbas region to enforce the ceasefire and additional measures agreed in July 2020 by the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group. (Paragraph 5)
2. The UK, working with NATO allies and other UN Member states, should insist Russia lifts restrictions on the movement of foreign vessels in the Black Sea, particularly in the Kerch Strait, which is in violation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and Russia's agreement with Ukraine on maritime cooperation in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait. If Russia does not comply with UNCLOS rules, the UK should support Ukraine's efforts to seek resolution through the dispute mechanism under Part XV of the UNCLOS, either through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea or to the International Court of Justice or an arbitral tribunal. (Paragraph 13)
3. The 1 May deadline, by when Russia said it would pull back additional troops exercising on the border with Ukraine, has passed; the UK, working with NATO allies and other OSCE Member states, should insist Russia withdraws all its additional troops and equipment from the border with Ukraine and from the Crimea. There are legitimate concerns about the underlying nature of Russia's actions. (Paragraph 16)

Russia's motivation

4. The large scale of the Russian military build-up is unusual for a normal exercise, but our evidence suggests that based on where troops are positioned in Crimea, it is unlikely to be a preparation for a full-scale Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine. (Paragraph 33)
5. Russia has a right to deploy troops on its own territory but also has a duty to regional security and stability to be transparent about military exercises and military activity close to her borders, as set out in Section 1 of the OSCE's Helsinki Final Act on exchange of military information on exercises. (Paragraph 34)
6. Russia prefers to keep the West in the dark about its military activities and the strategic goals, which underpin them. However, it is unlikely that Russia would want to provoke further Western economic sanctions or military assistance to Ukraine. (Paragraph 47)
7. Russia has several probable motives for escalating tensions on the border with Ukraine, driven by regional insecurities and President Putin's willingness to engage in power politics. Russia is using its military for coercive diplomacy, to pressure the Ukrainian Government to make concessions in the political settlements for the Donbas and to test Western allies' resolve to come to Ukraine's aid. (Paragraph 48)

The international response

8. Russia must honour its commitments under the Vienna Document as an OSCE participating State and fully co-operate in OSCE meetings to support confidence and security-building measures and de-escalate conflict. The UK should, with its Allies, use the OSCE mechanisms in the Helsinki Final Act to hold Russia to account, and if necessary, bring the dispute before the OSCE's Court of Conciliation and Arbitration. (Paragraph 51)
9. The UK, with the US, should insist Russia stand by the international agreements it has signed up to and its commitment, made in 1994, to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. (Paragraph 53)
10. In contrast to Georgia's response in 2008 to send in troops to counter Russian aggression, Ukraine has demonstrated restraint and sought to resolve the escalating situation through political and diplomatic channels. (Paragraph 59)
11. The UK's presidency of the G7 is an opportunity for the UK to demonstrate global leadership in security, diplomacy and conflict resolution, consistent with its expressed strategic intentions set out in the Integrated Review. (Paragraph 66)
12. UK Ministers should continue to support and encourage Ukraine to seek peaceful resolution to the conflict with Russia, through political settlement and implementation of the Minsk agreements. (Paragraph 67)
13. The UK Government should continue to work closely with Ukraine, NATO and other allies to monitor the situation on the ground, share intelligence and plan a co-ordinated approach for joint action to promote collective security in the region. (Paragraph 68)
14. The UK and NATO must push back on Russia's narrative, that Ukrainian membership of NATO, and NATO enlargement in general, would present a threat to Russia's security, pointing out, for example, that Russia, not Ukraine or NATO, has taken or supported activities that destabilise the region. (Paragraph 71)

UK Military Support to Ukraine

15. We welcome the new Memorandum of Intention for naval projects with Ukraine and endorse the UK Government putting in place a much longer-term package of support, beyond the conclusion of Operation Orbital in 2023, to assist Ukraine in building up the capability and resilience of the Ukrainian armed forces, particularly the navy. We would like to receive annual updates on the progress of the naval capabilities enhancement programme. (Paragraph 83)
16. The UK and NATO should continue to maximise efforts to help Ukraine reform to meet NATO standards and to become more interoperable with NATO and its equipment, for example through regular joint training exercises. (Paragraph 89)
17. We believe the UK Government's response to the Ukraine crisis, demonstrates a commitment to the overarching themes for Global Britain set out above in the Integrated Review and the Defence Command paper. This can be evidenced in

UK military aid, intelligence sharing, vocal political and diplomatic support for Ukraine, and the carrier strike deployment, as part of a co-ordinated approach alongside NATO allies. (Paragraph 95)

18. However, Britain's global ambitions now include a tilt to the Indo-Pacific, with the Government promising to deepen engagement by our armed forces and establish a greater and more persistent presence there as well. (Paragraph 96)
19. The Integrated Review identifies Russia as "the most acute direct threat to the UK". The UK Government should clarify how its global ambitions, in particular its proposed tilt to the Indo-Pacific, will be balanced with deterring the threat from Russia to UK security in the Euro-Atlantic region. (Paragraph 97)

Lessons learnt

20. We commend the UK Government for their role in intelligence sharing and monitoring the situation in the Donbas and Crimea. (Paragraph 110)
21. The International community has reacted quickly and united behind a clear message to Russia that the world is watching and there will be consequences for illegal military action. Lessons have been learnt from the Georgia crisis in 2008 and the Ukraine crisis in 2014, primarily that the international response must be decisive and unanimous in the face of Russian aggression. (Paragraph 111)
22. The UK and NATO must decide what their red lines are and the appropriate action which could be taken, if Russia crosses a red line. (Paragraph 112)

Formal Minutes

Tuesday 29 June 2020

Virtual meeting

Members present

Tobias Ellwood, in the Chair

Sarah Atherton

Mark Francois

Kevan Jones

Emma Lewell-Buck

Derek Twigg

Russia and Ukraine border tensions

Draft Report (*Russia and Ukraine border tensions*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 112 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned till Tuesday 6 July 2021 at 2.00pm.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 21 April 2021

Sarah Lain, Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI); **Henry Boyd**, Research Fellow for Defence and Military Analysis, International Institute for Strategic Studies

[Q1-42](#)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st Special	Obsolescent and outgunned: the British Army's armoured vehicle capability: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2019–21	HC 221

Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st	In Search of Strategy—The 2020 Integrated Review	HC 165
2nd	The Security of 5G	HC 201
3rd	Pre-appointment hearing for the Service Complaints Ombudsman	HC 989
4th	Foreign Involvement in the Defence Supply Chain	HC 699
5th	Obsolescent and outgunned: the British Army's armoured vehicle capability	HC 659
6th	Manpower or mindset: Defence's contribution to the UK's pandemic response	HC 357
1st Special	Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2018: Government Response to the Committee's Eighteenth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 162
2nd Special	Drawing a Line: Protecting Veterans by a Statute of Limitations: Government Response to the Defence Committee's Seventeenth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 325
3rd Special	In Search of Strategy—The 2020 Integrated Review: Government Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 910
4th Special	The Security of 5G: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report	HC 1091
5th Special	Foreign Involvement in the Defence Supply Chain: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report	HC 1380