

## **Professor Michael Clarke - Written evidence (IUD0014)**

Submission to House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee

### **The Implications of the War in Ukraine for the Security of the United Kingdom**

Michael Clarke

1. The second Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a pivotal moment in European security. Following his earlier military interventions in Georgia in 2008, Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, and Syria in 2015, President Putin crossed his own Rubicon in 2022 in what he intended to be a lightning military-backed coup that would seize the government in Kyiv and replace it with his own client leaders. It spectacularly failed and his actions represent a historical political blunder. But that blunder has left Putin doubling down on his intentions – turning his war in Ukraine into a war he maintains Russia must fight against a fascist and aggressive western alliance, interpreting it increasingly as a war to tip the balance of world politics decisively away from the western powers towards the ‘liberating’ forces of China and Russia that will free the ‘Global South’ from the US-led imperialist yoke. Putin’s blunder has turned him from a piecemeal regional imperialist into an ideologue for a new global order, built around the undemocratic and anti-democratic forces that have arisen on every continent over the last two decades.<sup>1</sup>
2. European security will, therefore, not be the same again. Whatever the outcome in Ukraine, Europe will not be able to resume any sense of pre-2022 ‘normality’ in the decades to come, as long as this vision of Russian leaders – with or without Putin as President – remains on its current trajectory.
3. In this context, the implications of the war in Ukraine for the United Kingdom’s own security are considerable. They are both abstract, in relation to political perceptions and international law – and no less important for that – but also very tangible in ways UK security could be affected seriously and immediately. For the sake of clarity, they can be analysed in terms of what ‘success’ or ‘failure’ might look like in this war, and hence, what consequences might follow from each outcome.

#### **Success in the War in Ukraine**

4. The Kyiv government has understandably maintained that it is prepared to fight until all Ukrainian territory is liberated to restore its legal

---

<sup>1</sup> Maria Snegovaya, Michael Kimmage, Jade McGlynn, ‘Putin the Ideologue’, *Foreign Affairs*, 16 November 2023.

borders of 1991, as specified in the Belovezha Accords of 8 December 1991, which created the Commonwealth of Independent States. It will not willingly relinquish any of its legal territorial jurisdiction to Russian aggression.<sup>2</sup> Western observers have maintained that even this would leave Crimea as a knotty political problem within a restored Ukraine and may not be conducive to a stable peace for Kyiv.<sup>3</sup> There will be no return to a pre-2022, still less a pre-2014, normality for Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> And the future status of Crimea may have the effect of making Kyiv's maximalist interpretation of success less than optimal for the establishment of a secure future for the country.

5. For the United Kingdom and its European partners, however, the definition of success might be something less extensive – namely, the widespread international perception that Putin's imperialist adventure in Ukraine had effectively failed and that he and Russia had paid an enormous price for it. This perception might arise in a range of ways that would not necessarily meet Kyiv's maximalist demands, but nevertheless restore a great deal of territory, credibility and dignity to Ukrainian sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> It might arise if Russian forces were penned back to their original starting points of February 2022 (effectively occupying a third of the Donbas region and all of the Crimean Peninsula). In such an outcome, Ukrainian forces would necessarily also have created an open-ended vulnerability for Crimea, cutting off its road and rail access routes and bringing it within rocket and artillery range, such as to make it unviable to house Russian military bases, and extremely uncomfortable for the Russian Federation residents who successfully re-colonized it after 2014.<sup>6</sup> After three years of bitter warfare, such an outcome – Russian forces holding onto the two small self-declared 'republics' in parts of Luhansk and Donetsk, and only precariously present in Crimea – would expose Putin's strategic blunder in 2022 for what it was; gaining nothing, losing Crimean security into the bargain, and paying a very high price to emerge from the war with even this intact. Whatever Kyiv says – and may hope for the future – that would look like an important victory to most leaders in the west and across the wider world for the western-backed Ukrainian forces.
6. From the beginning, China appeared determined to ensure that Russia would not 'lose' this war, but is only prepared to offer a certain level of assistance to help Russia win it.<sup>7</sup> There is some evident dismay in Beijing that its client in Moscow has created the present situation,

---

<sup>2</sup> Andriy Zagorodnyuk, 'Ukraine's Path to Victory', *Foreign Affairs*, 12 October 2022. See also President Zelenskyy's statements in Berlin in May 2023, as reported on PBSO Newshour, 14 May 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Liana Fix & Michael Kimmage, 'Go Slow on Crimea', *Foreign Affairs*, 7 December 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, 'What Victory Will Look Like in Ukraine', *The Atlantic*, 11 May 2022.

<sup>5</sup> See, 'Ukraine War: What Does Victory Look Like?' *The Economist*, 13 October 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Hodges, et.al., 'Putin's Weak Link to Crimea', *Foreign Affairs*, 5 December 2023.

<sup>7</sup> See, for an early assessment, Fei Su & Jingdong Yuan, 'China's Dilemma in the Russia-Ukrainian War', *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network*, 30 May 2022.

presenting Beijing with economic and geopolitical challenges as well as evident opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Based on its floated 12-point Peace Plan of February 2023– directed chiefly at the Global South and the United States – there is some reason to suppose that if Moscow were driven to it, Beijing would settle for a military fait accompli along these lines. It would still look to play a mediator role in any long-term cease-fire but would, in effect, be bending Moscow to its will – and China is the only external power that has the leverage to do this.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, it could still support a Moscow propaganda narrative that the outcome was acceptable in the broader scheme of anti-western competition, though it would have little credibility in the wider world. But Beijing might accept this if it received the plaudits as the peace-maker. Moscow will have been seen to lose; Beijing to have enhanced its standing for being internationally effective.

7. This paper does not attempt to deal with the ways in which this sort of outcome might be stabilized over the medium to long-term – which would certainly be required in the case of such success. Many possibilities are conceivable, but are not dealt with here. The intention here is look only at the implication of a widely perceived military ‘success’, and then alternatively of ‘failure’, for Ukraine and its western allies.

### **Implications for the Western Allies of Military Success in Ukraine**

8. The implications of such military success could be summarized as follows.
  - **Political credibility** A demonstration of the underlying power and resilience of the liberal democratic western world in the face of outright aggression against an important, new, member of the broader European family. A reinforcement of the Rules Based International Order would also probably occur, so important in the stances of western leaders.
  - **Self-belief** An important reinforcement of resolve and commitment within western societies whose own self-image has been greatly diminished by events in the last decade.
  - **Dealing with Russian reactions** The effect on Russia as an officially-acknowledged strategic adversary of the western allies would probably be prolonged:
    - Major implications for the Putin leadership clique, who would try to interpret its failure as merely a setback and increase repression

---

<sup>8</sup> Valerie M Hudson, ‘Is Russia a Problem or an Opportunity for China?’, *The National Interest*, 19 April 2023; Steve Lee Myers & Chris Buckley, ‘China Sees at Least One Winner Emerging from Ukraine War: China’, *New York Times*, 14 March 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Liana Fix & Michael Kimmage, ‘How China Could Save Putin’s War in Ukraine’, *Foreign Affairs*, 26 April 2023. Also, Jo Inge Bekkevold, ‘China’s “Peace Plan” for Ukraine Isn’t for Peace’, *Foreign Policy*, 4 April 2023.

inside Russia and/or possibly turn Russian military attention to other targets as part of the ongoing narrative of 'patriotic defence' – perhaps seeking to provoke crises in Moldova, Georgia, the Baltic States, North Kazakhstan or the western Balkans.

- The Putin leadership might implode in the face of this failure, provoking a period of governmental instability inside Russia that would be very unlikely to bring a more liberal clique to power, but one that might (or might not) be more pragmatic. Such an implosion might plausibly begin in the Caucasus.
- The western allies would have no significant influence over the course of events in Russia or the instability they might provoke, but would nevertheless be in an immeasurably stronger position than at present to react to them. So too, in reacting to related instability outside Russia.
- Volatility would likely be increased, even without any deliberate Russian provocation, in territories such as Nagorno-Karabakh, in Armenia – in relation to Azeri Nakhichevan – in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in Moldova's Transnistria, within Ukraine's Donbas self-declared republics and in Crimea; and not excluding within the Russian Federation's own Caucasian Republics.
- The Russian economy would continue for some years to be disrupted by its conversion to a war economy, even if Moscow tried to reverse the process, which would not be likely in the short-term. The Russian Federal budget already devotes over 33% (by some calculations over 40%) to war production, and this would take some time for the effects of this to reverse. A great deal would depend on trends in global energy prices in the later 2020s, providing – or not – a safety valve for otherwise heavily constrained governmental revenues.
- Russia would very likely continue for some time to be subject to western sanctions, even if they were lifted gradually as a quid pro quo for some aspect of Russia's return to mainstream world political norms of behaviour.
- Russian attempts to disrupt western societies and electoral processes by hybrid means and cyberattack would likely continue, perhaps in a more aggressive form as Moscow seeks to mitigate the effects of failure – since the Putin regime takes a 'zero-sum game' attitude to its international diplomacy. (This is also dealt with under paragraph 14, bullet 7 below.)
- Russia's loss of its European gas market is effectively permanent – since European customers will no longer believe in the primacy of market conditions when dealing with Russian suppliers. It will take a long time for Russian suppliers to restore trust. Correspondingly, the Asian market for Russian gas will certainly expand, but this will

require a great deal of new capital investment. It will not be an easy or swift process from Moscow's perspective.

- Russia's client relationship with China – already very evident – will become more pronounced in the event of Russian military failure in Ukraine.

### **In the Wider World**

9. The wider world context is more difficult to anticipate but certain key trends would be evident.

- **Russian regional influence** Defeat would likely inhibit, or even halt, Russia's recent momentum and reputational growth in its operations in Central Africa, the Sahel and in Latin America. Chinese influence in these regions may increase proportionately in this case, as many of the current undemocratic and anti-democratic leadership groups in these countries will not willingly turn back towards the western powers for political support.
- **Russian global influence** The perception of rapidly growing Russian power and influence would be largely reversed across the global south. Russia would still be seen as a potential mentor for many regimes but its military instruments would be exposed as deficient against western training and military equipment.
- **Putin's narrative** Putin's insistent political narrative in which he re-casts the history of Europe, Russia and the west since the end of the Cold War would also be undermined by such a self-evident setback.
- **China** The effect in Beijing might be sobering to Chinese leaders; seeing how impressive collective western military and economic power can be when it is mobilised. Chinese leaders might think more carefully about the wider consequences of their own expansionist plans in Asia and the Pacific.

### **For the United Kingdom in Particular**

10. Particular implications would be heightened for the UK.

- **Political credit** The UK would gain international credit as one of the earliest and most erstwhile supporters of Kyiv's war of resistance to Russian aggression. There is a credible claim that the UK led the European response to the war and, backing up US action, gave Kyiv the immediate military assistance it most needed to help resist the first Russian offensive.
- **Relations with the United States** The UK's role in partnering US action in Ukraine from 2019 through to a military success would reinforce a traditional model of unique US/UK cooperation in the intelligence, defence and security fields.
- **NATO** The UK's role within NATO – gradually diminished because of successive defence cutbacks – would be strengthened, at least in the political arena. In the event that the US is naturally moving towards a

military reorientation to Pacific Asia, and that the political stresses of the Ukraine war may make a NATO consensus harder to maintain, the countries of 'northern NATO' may evolve to become a more potent European military core of the alliance – the Scandinavian states, the Baltic States, Poland, Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK and Germany. In this grouping the UK might have a unique opportunity to take a greater politico-military leadership role in a rapidly-evolving NATO. If so, it would also represent a good investment in the UK's future security relationship with the United States.

## **Failure in the War in Ukraine**

11. Failure in the war in Ukraine could take many forms. Though Putin's ultimate imperialist ambitions are clearly set out in his speeches since 2014, and his long 2021 essay on Russian history,<sup>10</sup> Russia's specific war aims in Ukraine – once Putin's military-backed coup had failed – have been unspecific and shifting.<sup>11</sup> Many highly-placed Russian sources, however, have defined the minimum acceptable outcome for Moscow as full control of the five oblasts Russia claims – Crimea, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson – and control of the territories of Odesa and the other two commercial ports of Chornomorsk and Yuzhny. It might also include the ports further south-west on the Danube Basin, and/or a push due west from Odesa to Transnistria in Moldova.<sup>12</sup> This would land-lock Ukraine and make it an essentially unviable rump state, liable to political instability and external subversion. A more extensive version of this outcome would be Russian occupation of all Ukrainian territory east of the Dnieper River and again, across the northern shores of the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea, leaving the rump of Ukraine, with less than two thirds of its legal territory. It would remain controlled from Kyiv, but would be far more agricultural than industrial, and landlocked with few easy links to the global market. The expectation in either case would presumably be that the rump Ukrainian state would eventually fall, or be pushed, back into the Russian Federation.
12. Any negotiation with Moscow – under the duress of military collapse – that approached one of these outcomes would represent evident military

---

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir V. Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', Office of the President of Russia, 12 July 2021.

<sup>11</sup> See the excellent early analysis by Max Fisher, 'Putin's Case for War, Annotated', *New York Times*, 24 February 2022. Also, Lawrence Norman and Stephen Fidler, 'Vladimir Putin's Red Lines, War Aims Shift in Ukraine', *Wall Street Journal*, 27 November 2022.

<sup>12</sup> George Gotev, 'Russian general says Moscow aim is to leave Ukraine as a landlocked country', *Euractiv*, 22 April 2022; Laurin-Whitney Gottbrath & Dave Lawler, 'Lavrov says Russia's territorial ambitions in Ukraine go beyond the Donbas', *Axios*, 20 July 2022. Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *Russian Military Objectives and Capacity in Ukraine Through 2024*, Royal United Services Institute, 13 February 2024. Information also from personal interviews.

failure for Ukraine and its western backers. It is realistic to assume that some version of Ukraine could now survive as a state, even if it had to give up trying to regain the territory it has lost so far. But the viability of a Ukrainian state, reduced in the way outlined above, and as Moscow evidently intends, would be in severe doubt. It is also realistic to assume that any negotiation Moscow entered into, on the basis of its military dominance on the battlefields, would be designed to leave a greatly weakened Kyiv government that would be vulnerable to another 'push' to restore all Ukrainian territory to Russia's historic empire.

13. For the outside world, any negotiated end to the fighting that appeared to be largely on Moscow's terms, would look like a Putin victory. To some, it might appear a pyrrhic victory. And some analysts have speculated that Russia will, in any case, be exhausted by this war, whatever the outcome. But the expectation would certainly be that it would not represent the end of Putin's demands on Ukraine, or other territories that formerly comprised the Russian empire or the Soviet state and its 'near abroad'. In January 2024 all three Baltic States began to construct a joint 'special defence zone' on their contiguous borders with Russia and Belarus and have put a number of new defence and civil defence programmes into operation.<sup>13</sup> The sense that Putin was still making progress in his long-stated imperialist ambitions would almost certainly be predominant around the world. Indeed, any negotiation that left Russia with more territory than it had seized before 2022 would likely be seen as 'progress' – even an expensive victory – towards Putin's broad and clearly-stated geopolitical objectives.

### **Implications for the Western Allies of Military Failure in Ukraine**

14. The implications of failure would likely be more immediate, and cumulative, than those of success.

- **Western credibility** The credibility of the western allies would be uniquely, perhaps fatally, diminished. It would be diminished far more than in the case of the Afghan withdrawal of 2021. Western leaders had almost unanimously signed up to the early British mantra propounded by Prime Minister Johnson that 'Putin must fail'.<sup>14</sup> They had repeatedly stated that they would support Ukraine 'for as long as it takes'.<sup>15</sup> With a combined NATO GDP 20 times greater than that of Russia – 12 times greater in the case of the Europeans alone – with 5 times more aircraft, 3 times more ships, 3 times more ground troops, better military equipment

---

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, 'Russia puts Baltic officials on wanted list as Estonia warns of war plans', *Al Jazeera*, 13 February 2024; 'Prepare your homes for war, Latvians told' *Daily Telegraph*, 30 April 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Toby Helm, 'From partygate to Putin's war: Boris Johnson rides a rare wave of unity', *Guardian*, 26 February 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Repeated many times at the 2023 Munich Security Conference, [Munich Security Conference](#)

in every category, and many geographical basing advantages from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, the failure to prevent Ukraine's defeat after such repeated statements would suggest a failure of western political will on a grand scale that would be long-lasting.

- **NATO crisis** NATO, at least in its present 32-member form, would certainly suffer a crisis in its underlying consensus as some members would decide to hedge their policy and make bilateral deals and arrangements with an ascendant Russian leadership. On present trends, this would be the likely orientation in the cases of Hungary, Slovakia, Austria, Greece and probably in some of the smaller, new members such as Montenegro and North Macedonia. It might also apply – far more importantly – to Italy.<sup>16</sup> NATO might begin effectively to dismantle its prevailing political consensus as between many of its northern and southern members. In this case, the attitude of the UK would likely be to reinforce the more hardline anti-Putin instincts of northern members. But the stances adopted in Berlin and Paris would be more critical to NATO's subsequent political health. On present trends, it is possible that German leaders would be cautious in further antagonizing an assertive Moscow, while French leaders might well interpret such a NATO crisis as ultimate proof that Europe must move to an autonomous defence policy. However appalled Berlin and Paris might be with a Russian 'victory' in Ukraine, their bilateral axis would almost certainly suffer a period of deep hiatus during the early years of such a NATO crisis.
- **European territorial insecurity** Some NATO and non-NATO states already assume they would become acutely insecure as a result, either through increased Russian subversion or direct territorial intervention (subsequently or possibly immediately) by Russian forces. Such states include Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Similar pressures cannot be ruled out, either, in the cases of Azerbaijan, in northern Kazakhstan and – whenever Alexander Lukashenko departs the scene – in Belarus too. Of these states, the most vulnerable to a direct military intervention would be Moldova – partly for imperialist reasons, but also to bolster Russia's conquest of south-western Ukraine and more effectively land-lock it. Georgia would almost certainly be subjected to increased subversive pressures to undermine its pro-western public opinion, possibly prior to a manufactured coup that would bring it back into the Russian Federation. So, too, would Estonia and Latvia, though perhaps in a more gradual way, since they are both NATO members. Moscow could be expected to make the most of the status of significant Russian minorities in those states. The immediate objective would be unlikely to be territorial conquest, as such, but the subversion as far as possible of NATO's presence and

---

<sup>16</sup> The Ukraine war has been a highly divisive issue in Italian politics, more – and differently – than in Germany. See, for example, 'Italy links Ukraine aid to "negotiated settlement" efforts', *Financial Times*, 10 January 2024.



capabilities in the Baltic region. In the case of Lithuania, the Russian enclave in Kaliningrad and the 'Suwalki gap' route into Belarus, while not militarily favourable in themselves to Russian power, are nevertheless available as a focus for military tension or distraction as part of strategies elsewhere. Russia's natural and long-standing geo-strategic strengths in the Baltic region have been severely diminished, first by the admission of the three Baltic States into NATO in 2004 and then, in 2023-4, of Finland and Sweden. It is logical to suppose that an assertive Russia would try to mitigate or reverse these geo-strategic losses as soon as opportunities presented themselves after a victory in Ukraine.

- **Assertive Russia** The western allies and other European countries would face a confident and assertive Russian leadership, led by a President with an evident sense of historic mission to restore Russian imperial power in Eurasia and wield superpower influence in the wider world. Putin is 71 years old and, under present constitutional arrangements, could be in power until 2036, when he would be 83. It is reasonable to assume that if he gains a sense of Russian imperial momentum from events in Ukraine, he would regard the next five or six years – taking him through the 2030 election – as the optimum time to create his legacy in Russian history, following, as he explicitly sees it, in the steps of Peter the Great, Catherine the Great and Joseph Stalin.
- **Growing Russian military power** Russian military power would continue to increase. Russian military resources might face some immediate exhaustion in the light of success in Ukraine. But the tripling of the military budget in 2021-24 – adding 70% to the budget for 2024-5 than was planned in 2023-24 – would still be working through the system. That uplift is designed to create a mobilised army of over 1 million troops (as opposed to 280,000 in 2021). Russia's Armed Forces as a whole are planned to increase from 1.1 million to over 2 million by 2027. Given likely western reactions to a Russian victory – albeit lacking in collective unity – Russian motives to continue along its military growth trajectory would be high – for as long as the economy, and the Putin regime, could sustain it.
- **Permanent Russian war economy** Russia's war economy would still be operational and though its production is due to plateau in 2025, in the event of a continuation of Putin's current policies, it would likely find greater efficiencies to continue to grow, albeit more slowly, thereafter.<sup>17</sup> Russia's official defence and security budgets combined amounted to \$155 billion at the end of 2023 and will be considerably higher, in real terms, by 2025. Russia's war production 'plateau' at around that time would still represent the biggest increases in its defence production since the onset of the Cold War. Though its switch so decisively to a war economy certainly bends Russia's federal spending out of shape and stores up some

---

<sup>17</sup> Watling and Reynolds, op, cit.

intractable longer-term economic challenges, the immediate stimulus of defence spending has given the country a higher than anticipated growth rate – 2.6% in 2024 as opposed to expectations of 1.1%.<sup>18</sup>

- **Heightened hybrid challenges** On the assumption that a victory for Russia would increase its momentum to further Putin's imperialist design, a steady intensification of Moscow's hybrid war on western societies should be anticipated, including cyberattacks, social media subversion, infrastructure disruption, the increased weaponization of migration into Europe both via Russia/Belarus and Ukraine itself, and constant testing of western resolve in other geographical areas, such as the western Balkans, the Baltic Sea, the Arctic and the High North. As part of its campaign to widen splits in NATO, a strategic communications campaign that threatened plausible nuclear action against some NATO states but offered others guarantees against nuclear attack, might be expected – since Russian nuclear threats during the Ukraine war have emerged in Moscow's thinking as politically effective.
- **Russian escalation dominance** For two years, the Ukraine war gave Russia 'escalation dominance' in relation to western and NATO reactions – setting the aggressive agenda, posing problems to which the western powers were continually having to react. Only in early 2024 did western leaders begin to try to undermine Russian control of the escalation dynamic – and then, not in a genuinely united and collective way. If, despite this belated western response, Russia emerged victorious in the Ukraine war, Putin's instinct that he could continue to exercise escalation dominance, in this and other areas of potential conflict, would only be increased. Heightened Russian military threats would probably accompany all other areas and issues of difference between Moscow and the western powers.
- **Western allies - hypocritical or deterred?** From the beginning, western leaders were clear that this crisis should be contained so that it did not mutate into a more general European war. Nevertheless, in response largely to Putin's escalating rhetoric and broadening geopolitical objectives, western leaders had become more explicit over what they now thought to be at stake in this conflict. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told the Ukrainian Rada in January 2024 'So be in no doubt: We are not walking away. Putin will never outlast us. We are here for Ukraine – as long as it takes'.<sup>19</sup> At the 2023 Munich Security Conference Chancellor Scholz had already made the same point equally clear; 'I think it is wise to be prepared for a long war and it is wise to give Putin the message that we are ready to just stay all the time together with Ukraine, and that we will constantly support the country.'<sup>20</sup> In April 2024 French President Macron said, 'We have to be lucid that our Europe today is mortal – it can

---

<sup>18</sup> 'IMF raises Russian growth outlook as war boosts economy', *Financial Times*, 30 January 2024.

<sup>19</sup> No. 10 Office, Press Service, *Statement*, 12 January 2024

<sup>20</sup> *CNN News*, 18 February 2023

die — and it depends on the choices that we make now. The rules of the game have changed.’<sup>21</sup> In urging the allies to meet their declared commitments, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg made it specifically clear; ‘the biggest cost will be if Russia wins in Ukraine. Because then we speak about enormous amounts of money the NATO allies would have to invest in security. Supporting Ukraine is the best way to ensure our security’.<sup>22</sup> And at the end of December 2023, President Biden was explicit before his Congressional leaders. ‘The stakes of this fight extend far beyond Ukraine’, he said. ‘They affect the entirety of the NATO Alliance, the security of Europe, and the future of the Transatlantic relationship...the consequences reverberate around the world. That’s why the United States has rallied a coalition of more than 50 countries to support the defense of Ukraine...History will judge harshly those who fail to answer freedom’s call.’<sup>23</sup>

To make such statements, repeatedly, and on the basis of such underlying geopolitical and military strength, but then lack the political will to make good on such objectives, would suggest to the rest of the world either; that western powers are unwilling to support even their own core objectives, or else that they are simply deterred from doing so by Russia’s aggression and its nuclear threats. In either case, the wider world and the Global South would be entitled to assume the western democracies were now firmly ‘on the wrong side of history’.

- **A different sort of subsequent war in Ukraine** The War in Ukraine would be transformed by an immediate Russian victory from a ‘war of liberation’ – of occupied territory, into a ‘war of resistance’ – against Russian occupation of up to 40% of Ukrainian territory. The Kremlin fundamentally under-estimated the degree of popular resistance to Russian invasion in 2022. After two to three years of war, extensive and continuing Russian war crimes, and the attendant brutality under Russian occupation, it would be almost inevitable that a strong – and probably vicious – Ukrainian guerrilla war of resistance would begin, probably lasting several years. This would be characterized by Moscow as a major, long-term, counter-terrorist campaign, nurtured and fed by the western world. It would certainly become a new political front in Russia’s antagonism towards the West, with all the attendant implications. It would also provide a tangible rationale for increased political repression inside Russia.

---

<sup>21</sup> Reported in *Financial Times*, 25 April 2024

<sup>22</sup> Reported in *Politico*, 29 April 2024

<sup>23</sup> White House Briefing Room, Statement from President Joe Biden on Russia’s Aerial Assault on Ukraine, 29 December 2023

## Implications for the United Kingdom Arising from this Failure

15. The United Kingdom would share in all the policy downsides outlined above. But it would be affected more distinctly in certain ways.

- A relatively greater loss to UK security of a transformative NATO crisis, since NATO has been the bedrock of UK security for eighty years, to a greater extent than among most other European allies. A similar disproportionate affect would apply to the close US/UK relationship in defence and security affairs. The massive loss of US credibility and military standing in European security, and Washington's likely rapid switch of attention to the Pacific, would diminish a second pillar of UK security to a greater extent than, say, in France or Italy, or even Germany.
- As a key player in the 'northern NATO' that might emerge from this crisis, and one that plays a key role in creating the Joint Expeditionary Force among northern allies, the UK should anticipate being a major target of hostile Russian action – through subversion and in hybrid attacks for distraction or intimidation. Potential vulnerabilities to hostile or disruptive acts would include:
  - Undersea pipelines and cables, given the place of UK territory in continental electricity grids, where it has been both a net importer and exporter of power. Five major electrical grid power links connect the UK with continental Europe, four more are under development, and two span the Irish Sea to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.<sup>24</sup>
  - Some 400 undersea cables account for over 97% of global internet traffic, and some 20 of the most critical cables connect Western Europe and North America, carrying 40% of all internet traffic.<sup>25</sup> Most of them come ashore off the Cornish coast. Indeed, in 2017 Rishi Sunak MP wrote a famous article in *Policy Exchange* pointing out their vulnerability.<sup>26</sup>
  - UK gas pipelines include three main arteries connecting Stafjord, the North Sea and Zeebrugge, with two more under development, plus two others to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The UK's gas supply is undergoing major reviews in line with green agendas but for the immediate future, the UK still expects to produce about 47% of its gas domestically, import around 22% by LNG carriers and obtain some 31% from continental sources, via pipeline.<sup>27</sup>
  - Satellite and space-based communication assets critical to UK infrastructure. Though the UK's defence-related space strategy is

---

<sup>24</sup> 'Britain's power grid provides electrical lifeline to Europe', *Financial Times*, 14 July 2022

<sup>25</sup> Helen Thomas, 'Threats to undersea cables should worry business as well as government' *Financial Times*, 26 April 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Rishi Sunak MP, Undersea Cables: Indispensable, insecure, *Policy Exchange*, 1 December 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Warren, 'Where does the UK get its gas from?' *Energyguide*, 24 January 2024.

regarded as generally conservative and under-funded, the vulnerability of satellites, both to the recent maturity of Anti-Satellite Weapons (ASATs) and also to cyberattack is now widely recognised and expected only to increase.<sup>28</sup> Russian ASAT weapons (as well as Chinese devices) have already been visibly tested in space.<sup>29</sup>

- Weak and outdated cyber security systems in the public sector and in areas of critical national infrastructure. Russia is already the greatest single source of ongoing cyberattack against the UK and the number and severity of attacks might increase exponentially.<sup>30</sup>
- Western sanctions would certainly remain in place after a Russian victory and there would be expectation of increasing them – though not with the same degree of unanimity that has seen US, UK and 13 rounds of EU sanctions take effect to date. But Russia would almost certainly begin stronger retaliatory action against sanctions in this scenario, in the form of more overt economic warfare against western powers. Russian economic warfare could take specific forms in the case of the UK.
  - In closer alliance with China, Moscow could target any western country with deprivation of access to the rare earth minerals crucial to high tech production. Over 90% of rare earth mineral reserves are tied up between China, Vietnam, Brazil, Russia and India. The US and Australia jointly have less than 5%. In 2022 China accounted for 72% of all mined rare earth production; India 1%, Russia less than 1%, the US 14% (dropping from 15% in 2020).<sup>31</sup> Chinese dominance in this market effectively binds Russia to it in this sphere and if it chose to support a Russian economic campaign against any western country the effects in the sector would be immediate.<sup>32</sup> There would be a heavy reliance on scarce supplies of rare earths mined in the US, or in the 7.3% of the total mined in Australia.
  - Strengthened Russian political influence across the Sahel region and in Central and some parts of southern Africa would give Moscow some ability selectively to restrict western market access to other resources, working with the dictatorial governments it is now supporting.

---

<sup>28</sup> Juliana Suess, *The UK Defence Space Strategy*, Royal United Services Institute, 11 February 2022; Sylvester Kaczmarek, 'We need cybersecurity in space to protect satellites', *Scientific American*, 5 February 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Chelsea Gohd, 'Russian anti-satellite missile test was the first of its kind', *Space.Com*, 10 August 2022; Carin Zissis, 'China's anti-satellite test', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 February 2007.

<sup>30</sup> See startling evidence in, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, *A Hostage to Fortune: ransomware and UK national security*, HC 194, HL 23, 4 December 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Sources: *World Population Review 2022*; US Geographical Survey, as reported in *Elements*, 22 Nov, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> In 2010 China imposed an embargo on rare earth exports to Japan, which showed that it is prepared to do this, and that Japanese industry was immediately affected as it sought rapidly to diversify its suppliers.

- As the Foreign Affairs Committee reported in December 2023, there are 18 minerals on the UK's 'critical minerals' list, and they are heavily concentrated in some specific geographic areas.<sup>33</sup> China is the primary producer of 12 of the 18 minerals on the critical list. The report offers a helpful Figure in this respect.

Country with the highest production of each critical mineral; refers to mined production, unless otherwise stated.  
5-year average production 2016-2020



- Any western country so targeted would certainly appeal to the WTO for redress and find some alternative suppliers, but the immediate effect would be inflationary – the more so for a targeted country than for the global economy, or regional sections of it.
- Geopolitical change has a relatively greater economic impact on the UK than its partner countries. Negative geopolitical change occasioned by a Russian victory, particularly across the emerging economies of the Global South, would have discernable, negative, impacts on UK economic growth. Over a 22-year period from 1997 to 2019 developments abroad are estimated by the Bank of England to have accounted for around half the variation in UK economic activity and almost all the variation in a summary measure of UK financial market conditions.<sup>34</sup> Events abroad were found to have a greater propensity – over two thirds of the variation in trend lines – to produce negative ('tail-risk') outcomes than 'average' economic outcomes. Market variations can, of course, be positive. But in the case of a Russian victory in Ukraine, resulting global events are more likely to be negative for UK interests. They are the natural downside risks of the UK's open, trading economy – making it more vulnerable not only to deliberate hostile economic policy across the wider world, but also rendering it

<sup>33</sup> Foreign Affairs Committee, *A Rock and a Hard Place: Building Critical Mineral Resilience*, 16 Dec 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Bank of England, *No Economy is an Island: How Foreign Shocks Affect UK Macrofinancial Stability*, Quarterly Bulletin 2021 Q3.

at more immediate economic risk from any geopolitical realignment of power that a Russian victory in Ukraine might provoke; allowing China and Russia to pursue more aggressive protectionist and neo-mercantilist global policies to the direct detriment of the UK economy.

Michael Clarke

Former Director General, now Distinguished Fellow, at RUSI

Visiting Professor in Defence Studies, King's College London

Fellow of the Royal College of Defence Studies

29 April 2024

*1 May 2024*