

Speech: Coping with Russia

I'm delighted to be here tonight to accept Sir Hew's invitation to return to my alma mater and speak on the topic of Russian Resurgence.

I'm sure it would make Professor Christian, who led the Russian department in my day, proud to see it ranked first in the UK for Teaching, Quality, and Experience. It forms a principal plank in the bridge between British and Russian academia. Scholarship, culture and history have always brought Britain and Russia together.

In recent times we've seen renewed interest in Russian scientific and artistic achievement. Last year saw the Cosmonaut exhibition at the Science Museum. This year the Royal Academy focuses on Russian art.

However, you'll be relieved to hear that I'm not about to launch into a lengthy discourse on Russia's artistic renaissance. Rather my focus is Russia's military resurgence – our response to which is a key factor in the formulation of our defence policy.

Resurgence isn't really the issue. Every nation has the right to compete on the global stage. The danger comes when that behaviour becomes aggressive.

President Trump has spoken about the need for engagement with Russia – he's right.

Great nations like the US and Russia will talk. Indeed, they must talk to preserve the rules based international system underpinning our security and prosperity. The UK too needs to engage with Russia, including military to military.

Yet President Trump is a realist. He knows engagement is an equation of risk versus reward with the outcome decided by a nation's deeds not its words.

So this evening I hope to offer a sober assessment of Russia's recent actions, our response as a leading member of NATO, and the prospects for the future.

CLEAR-EYED ASSESSMENT

Let me begin with Russian behaviour.

We are all familiar with its principal theatres of involvement – Ukraine and Syria.

I was in Ukraine two weeks ago and, as this month marks three years on from the events leading to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, it's instructive to reflect on what's happened since.

In February 2014, President Yanukovich fled Ukraine in the wake of the Euromaidan protests.

The Ukrainian Rada elected an interim president and prepared for fresh presidential elections – won, in May 2014, by Petro Poroshenko.

But Russia did not allow Ukraine to decide its own destiny like any other sovereign country.

Instead, under the guise of ambiguous and deniable instruments it annexed Crimea.

Similarly deniable tactics were tried in the Donbas before it was forced to resort to sponsoring militias and deploying conventional forces.

A nadir was reached in June 2014 – two days after I became Defence Secretary – when MH-17 was shot down killing, 283 passengers, ten of them British.

Yet despite an inquiry showing that the plane was shot down by a Russian provided missile, Russia denied it and continues to do so.

Since then, in the Donbas, almost 10,000 people have been killed and nearly 1.5 million displaced. Despite the Minsk Agreements and successive ceasefires, the conflict not only continues, but also intensifies.

Ordinary people suffer as the ceasefire is violated every day while Russian land mines and artillery take their toll. In January the US Mission to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission identified over 238 weapons in separatist-held Miusynsk, including over 40 multiple launch rocket systems.

So to Russia's second theatre – Syria. Its intervention in September 2015 was not to target Daesh terrorists but to shore up the ailing Assad regime – demonstrated by 80 per cent of its air strikes being conducted against non-Daesh targets.

Since then Russia has targeted the Syrian opposition in Aleppo with little regard for innocent lives.

Yet Russian efforts have not been confined to Syria and Ukraine, nor limited to military means. Russia's doctrine advocates co-ordinating multiple instruments – military and non-military – as part of a hybrid approach.

Snap exercises

A favoured technique is the use of “no-notice” exercises, often of very large formations.

OSCE rules state that when the number of troops equals or exceeds 13,000 they are subject to notification and observation.

But Russia has managed to avoid tripping the 13,000 threshold for a mandatory observation since the dissolution of the Soviet Union despite annually boasting of exercises more than a hundred thousand strong. In 2016, the Kremlin said 12,500 troops were to be involved in its summer exercise (called KAVKAZ). Later Russia bragged that ten times as many took part.

Critically, these snap exercises are frequently held near international borders with every intent to intimidate.

Hybrid

Another feature of Russian activity is the elevation of what Churchill called the “terminological inexactitude”, to an art form.

There is a special Russian word for this.... Not “maskirovka”...the old deception perpetrated by its intelligence agencies...but “vranyo” where the listener knows the speaker is lying, and the speaker knows the listener knows he is lying, but keeps lying anyway.

Last year we saw Russia dismissing the Dutch forensic report into MH-17. Having first denied the plane was shot down – it used third parties to blame Ukrainian air-to-air missiles or US drone strikes.

Meanwhile Russia labelled the independent inquiry into the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London – which found Russia responsible – a “theatre of the absurd”.

The Swedish Institute of Strategic Studies revealed Russia’s use of a “wide array of active measures” – including fake news – designed to “frame NATO as an aggressor and military threat, the EU as in terminal decline, and Russia as under siege from hostile Western governments.”

In his year of exile 43 years ago Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote “In our country the daily lie is not the whim of corrupt nature, but a mode of existence.”

Today we see a country that in weaponising misinformation has created what we might now see as the post-truth age.

Cyber attacks

Finally, there is the use of cyber weaponry to disrupt critical infrastructure and disable democratic machinery.

France knows this. In April 2015 TV5Monde was taken off air by a group calling itself the Cyber Caliphate. French investigators suggested the Kremlin was behind the cyber-attack.

Months later Germany was targeted too. Its lower house of parliament’s network was shut down by a hacker group the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) said was “steered by the Russian state.”

What is concerning is that in 2016 we saw a step change in Russian behaviour.

In April, the Dutch referendum was targeted. A Washington Post journalist noted, “Many of the no campaign’s themes, headlines and even photographs were lifted directly from Russia Today and Sputnik.”

In October, Bulgaria was subject to what President Plevneliev called “the

most heaviest and intense cyber attack...conducted in south-east Europe...an attack on Bulgarian democracy...conducted with a high probability from Russia.”

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence found that Russia targeted the US Presidential election and that its “intelligence services conducted cyber operations against targets associated with the 2016 US presidential election, including targets associated with both major US political parties.”

And Russia involved itself in Montenegro’s sovereign affairs. On 16 October, Parliamentary elections were held but overshadowed by the arrest of 20 Serbian nationals – accused of planning attacks on state institutions. The Montenegrin investigation showed the attempted coup was organised by two Russian ‘nationalists’. Montenegro has never been considered part of Russia’s near-abroad. It is, however, about to become a NATO member.

Meanwhile, the Head of the German BfV intelligence agency warned the Kremlin is “seeking to influence public opinion and decision-making processes” ahead of this year’s German elections.

RUSSIA TESTING THE ALLIANCE

What should we make of this persistent behaviour?

Russia is clearly testing NATO and the West.

It is seeking to expand its sphere of influence, destabilise countries, and weaken the Alliance. It is undermining national security for many allies and the international rules-based system.

Therefore it is in our interest and Europe’s to keep NATO strong and to deter and dissuade Russia from this course.

It hopes to stay below the threshold for response.

But we must be clear-eyed in exposing its actions and calling on all NATO members to recommit to strengthening our collective defence.

It’s vital we demonstrate NATO is as essential to peace now as it was then. President Trump is 100% backing NATO and Europe needs show that it does too. 19 of the 28 EU member states don’t spend 1.5% of GDP on defence; five (and by no means the poorest five) don’t spend 1%. After we leave, EU countries will pay only 20% of NATO’s bills.

So he is right to challenge NATO to raise its game. All members need to step up to ensure NATO fulfils its role as the cornerstone of the West’s defence as effectively as possible.

That means, not five, but all members making a step change by meeting the 2 per cent commitment. We’re doing that, others need to too.

It means supporting reform to make NATO more agile, resilient, and better configured to operate in the contemporary environment including

against hybrid and cyber attacks.

Cyber defence is now part of NATO's core task. NATO must defend itself as effectively in the cyber sphere as it does in the air, on land, and at sea. So adversaries know there is a price to pay if they use cyber weapons.

Alliance members are strengthening their capability, collectively and individual, to resist any form of attack. The UK is playing its part by almost doubling our investment on defensive and offensive cyber capability to £1.9 billion.

Above all it means accepting that we need to commit our forces to defend other nations. Public support for NATO requires political leadership; it places a duty on us to keep making the case for the Alliance and to keep explaining its obligations.

Multinational institutions need commitment, reform and leadership to command loyalty.

Ultimately Britain's national security rests on NATO's security.

That is why I deplore the Leader of the Opposition's failure to support the deployment of British troops to Estonia and Poland – and Article 5.

By contrast, the government is responding in three ways to the testing of NATO and the challenge to the international order:

1. NOT BUSINESS AS USUAL

First, by showing that Russia's actions cannot be regarded as business as usual.

Our hope was to have a partnership with Russia that recognised nations' pursuit of their self-interest within the framework of the rules-based international order.

But Russia has chosen to become a strategic competitor of the West.

So realism must be our watchword, with guarded engagement. As the Prime Minister put it in Philadelphia – "engage but beware."

There is nothing inevitable about a retreat to the days of the Cold War.

Russia can take a different approach

But, as the new US Defense Secretary, Jim Mattis, said: "I'm all for engagement, but we also have to recognize reality in what Russia is up to."

Part of our response is for NATO and the West to do more to tackle the false reality promoted through Soviet-style misinformation. Whatever else we do on deterrence and dialogue we must counter Putin's Pravda with a faster truth.

A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting its boots on.

We need to call out messengers like RT and Sputnik. In 2015 Ofcom sanctioned RT for broadcasting content “either materially misleading or not duly impartial” regarding Syria and Ukraine. It is beyond irony that one of those programmes was called “Truthseeker”.

2. REINFORCING DETERRENCE

Second, we are reinforcing our deterrence.

Deterrence is often associated with nuclear weapons. But it applies across the spectrum from peace to war. It’s about ensuring that any potential adversary recognises that any benefits they may seek to gain by aggression will be outweighed by the consequences for them of its actions.

The United States and the European Union imposed sanctions following Russia’s action in Ukraine. They have weakened the Russian economy. This is the price it pays for its actions and by making that link it will deter them from similar actions in the future. Those sanctions remain in place today.

At the same time, NATO has responded to Russia’s behaviour with unity and resolve – with Britain having a leading role.

Following the Wales Summit in September 2014 the Alliance established its Very High Readiness Joint Taskforce – which the UK leads this year – to react in short order to security challenges.

At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO agreed to establish an Enhanced Forward Presence in Eastern Europe.

British troops will soon deploy to Estonia and Poland as part of that presence.

No one, save Sputnik, could pretend these measures are anything other than proportionate and defensive – Britain’s contribution is 950 troops.

But where we deploy battalions, Russia deploys whole divisions...tens of thousands of troops.

Whereas their deployments seem designed to intimidate, ours are designed to reassure allies – especially those most threatened by Russian behaviour. They show that we stand by our partners and reaffirm that an attack against one NATO member would be considered an attack against all.

We also support greater cooperation between NATO and the EU to ensure we can deter coordinated hybrid attack using military and non-military levers.

Have these measures constrained Russian activity?

We can’t prove a negative. But many feared Russia would push further into central and southern Ukraine.

So let’s not rule out the possibility that overwhelming international condemnation, sanctions, and above all the bravery Ukrainians, gave the

Kremlin pause for thought and dissuaded it from embarking on a wider conventional war.

3. DIALOGUE

My final point, something both President Trump and his new Secretary of State understand, is that deterrence and dialogue go hand in hand.

So we've kept our channels of communication open. This year marks the NATO Russia Council's 15th anniversary. Communication remains vital since, as our experience during the Cold War taught us, understanding is crucial even when trust seems in short supply.

We need to understand Russia better, and vice versa, because the risk of miscalculation is real.

December saw the passing of Thomas Schelling, noble prize winner...who devised the hotline between the White House and the Kremlin during the Cold War.

He understood that, while nations will always disagree on some subjects, to hold dialogue hostage would be folly since its value lies not just in preventing miscalculation, not just in stopping the ignorance and isolation but in opening up fresh opportunities.

Earlier I spoke about the future prospects for Russia/UK relations.

They are not as bleak as painted.

We had shared interests with the Iran nuclear deal.

Even in Syria where we disagree on so much we are deconflicting flights in a highly congested airspace.

And we have common regional and global concerns such as in Afghanistan, Islamist terror, and we all stand to gain by limiting weapons proliferation.

As a student here in the 70s, during the Cold War, I believed the Soviet Union would never change. Fifteen years later it did. It came about through the steadfast refusal of President Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to go along with the prevailing orthodoxy of quiet appeasement. It came too from the resilience of ordinary people, carrying messages beyond the Iron Curtain and linking hands across the Berlin Wall.

Last year our nations remembered our great Arctic convoys coming to Russia's aid in its hour of need and turning the tide of war.

Shakespeare's Twelfth Night and Tempest were performed by the Pushkin Drama Theatre in Moscow.

And Tim Peake shared a tiny capsule a Russian cosmonaut and US astronaut.

These interactions offer some hope for the future.

If the opportunities are out there to improve engagement Britain will do so – from a position of strength.

We accept that Russia with its vast geo-strategic span, like any major power, has legitimate interests

But we cannot accept the trading away of our interests and values or the continued violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and interference with the freedoms enjoyed by Eastern Europe.

Instead of weakening global stability, it's time to strengthen the security architecture that guarantees the international rules based system.

And above all we must not accept as any kind of new normal Russia's propaganda, whether overt or covert; its easy disregard for hard facts and numbers; or its blatant distortions and evasions.

On the contrary, we must continue calling Russia out on its activities, judging it on its deeds rather than words. As Bulgakov warned us: "The tongue may hide the truth but they eyes – never."

CONCLUSION

So there you have it. A clear eyed assessment of Russian behaviour.

We've seen a persistent pattern of behaviour that is becoming more pronounced.

We hope that Russia changes tack.

That it abides by the Minsk agreements, curbs the reckless military activity, and ditches the misinformation.

If it does, then there is the potential for a better relationship.

Russia could again become the partner the West always wished for. We could dare to hope that, to quote Bulgakov again, "everything will turn out right, the world is built like that."