

The problem of Ukraine

It is no surprise that President Putin is massing troops and weapons in support of Russian sympathisers in East Ukraine. The fighting season in that strife torn corner of Europe is coming upon us, and there is a new US President to test out. The West claims that Crimea was illegally taken by Russia and should be returned. Russia argues the people of Crimea by a large majority wished to be part of Russia, so they assisted them under the doctrine of self determination of peoples and held a confirmatory referendum. This the west says was not properly monitored and supervised by the international community, so is not accepted by the West. It was a Russian annexation. Since then pro Russian locals in parts of Eastern Ukraine have fought to reposition their part of Ukraine and bring it into Russia. The West thinks Russia has fomented these troubles and provided troops and weapons, whilst Russia argues they are spontaneous brought on by strong feelings of identity from people living in the area.

Mr Putin may well be looking for ways to repay President Biden for his tough language against Russia in his opening weeks in office. Mr Putin also knows that he is punching a bruise, with the President's own son having a Ukraine business connection and with the long US rows over possible Russian involvement in past US elections. He may gamble that he can get away with more, thinking Joe Biden will not take military action. Meanwhile the President is going through the usual escalation book, sending two warships to the neighbouring sea as a show of strength in support of the government of Ukraine whose forces are engaging with the pro Russian forces on the ground. With any luck neither man will overplay their hands, as neither would want a war between them over this issue. This is a conflict by proxy, where the Russian interest may be in having a bit more territory to extend its western frontier but where Russia has already achieved her main aim by taking Crimea with its warm water ports on the Black Sea.