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IN THIS ISSUE...

CAN YOUR BEAR IT?

GENERAL ARTICLES

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REVIEWS

FROM THE EDITOR

STAND ALONE, STAND AT *UN*EASE

Quiz question. In light of two NATO nations invoking Article 4 meetings in the space of just nine days during September of this year, and noting that only seven such requests had previously been made in the entirety of the Alliance's 75-plus year history, how deep does one's head currently need to be buried in the sand to dismiss out of hand the prospect of a wider war involving Russia? Admittedly, this is perhaps not the most taxing of challenges to pose to a readership heavily invested in the security of our nation and that of our near neighbours and international allies, so any responses along the theme of 'do not attempt, there's no desert dune big enough' will satisfy this examiner.

A far less straightforward question to tackle was that asked to this publication's editorial team by CHACR's Management Board at the start of the summer – "what do the Russians think of the British Army?". Responding with a definitive answer has been difficult for many reasons, not least because Kremlin insiders willing to share notes on what they really know and think about the British Army are in incredibly short supply; nevertheless our 'revision' was thorough and canvassed a cast of prominent Russologists.

On the pages that follow, these experts share their 'workings out' and, for those in the British Army, many of the opinions on Russian opinions do not make for particularly easy reading, with this issue's coverline – "can you bear it?" – serving as a warning to any who are expecting a detailed and glowing review of the British Army from the outside. Size, it seems, very much matters in Moscow and, frankly, our adversaries are not convinced that we measure up in that respect.

But without wishing to copy over the shoulder of Dr Andrew Sharpe (pages 4-6), while the Service – if stood alone – does not have the requisite numbers to match Putin's mass, it can still be a veritable force multiplier, deterrent, and cause of Russian concern if it takes seriously, and subscribes to, the roadmap laid out in the Strategic Defence Review.

If you're not swotting up on NATO and all-things Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, it's time to get cramming. **– Andrew Simms**

'WHAT DO THE RUSSIANS THINK OF US?'

AT the quarterly CHACR Management Board meeting in July this year, a meeting that is chaired by the Assistant Chief of the General Staff and attended by eight other officers of 2-star and 1-star rank, the content and lead topics of the *British Army Review* were, as usual, discussed. The view of the generals was that it would be very useful, after a string of publications giving the British Army's opinion of itself, if the *British Army Review* were to reverse the telescope and offer thoughts upon its opponents' view. "What," the generals asked us to consider, "do the Russians think of the British Army?". So, a number of expert opinions on the subject were sought, and the first part of this issue of *The British Army Review* offers those views.

Interestingly, as you will find as you read through this publication, one of the immediate answers to the question "what do the Russians think of the British Army?" would seem to be: "not a lot!". To be clear, though, that is not to say that the Russian military do not think much of the British Army, but rather that they do not think of the British Army much. Thus, perhaps the most striking conclusion that one can draw from the following articles is that the British Army may be flattering itself if it thinks that Russia is carefully watching it, and making considered judgements in how they design and move their strategic chess pieces according to how they see the British Army in terms of its present position, activity, structure, doctrine and projected capability development. This fact, alone, can offer us considerable food for thought, if we pause to unpack it a little.

AUTHOR

Major General (Retd) Dr Andrew Sharpe is Director of the British Army's CHACR.

SIZE MATTERS

First, size matters to Russia. Geography alone (both natural and human) means that Russia has to think, and act, especially in military terms, on an entirely different scale from Britain. For Russia, the old maxim (often attributed to both Lenin and to Stalin) that 'quantity has a quality all of its own' is not only a strategic truism, but is being palpably proven every day as they play out their gruelling long-game in Ukraine. In wars of attrition, the nations with the deepest pockets in terms of human capital tend to outlast those with less. Russia has an active-duty army (so not including reserves) of over 1.5 million personnel. Britain, if we include the reserve force with the regular force, can muster around 109,000. In the war in Ukraine, since February 2022, Russia has, as of August 2025, lost an estimated 1,085,000 soldiers (killed, wounded, captured or missing in action). That's akin to losing ten British Armies in three and a half years. At the same time, when considering scale, the armies of those who Russia now considers to be her 'friends' are equally large: China at around two million and North Korea with around 1.3 million soldiers (and now, of course, India enters the Russian calculus in a renewed way, with their 1.48 million-strong army).

But it's not just about numbers of people. Conceptually, Russia, on learning from its experience with Napoleon, rebuilt its army

to be what it considered to be an 'artillery army'. And, since 1942, learning from the Germans, it has structured itself to be what it thinks of as an 'artillery army, with tanks'. This concept sat at the heart of Soviet doctrine and tactics, and remains alive and well. Regardless of what Ukraine has taught in terms of tactics and capabilities, Russia, rightly or wrongly, still measures its military strength through that 'artillery army, with tanks' lens. The Russian Army has an estimated 4,780 artillery pieces and 1,130 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, and around 5,750 Main Battle Tanks. The British Army is in the process of replacing its remaining 219 Challenger 2 Tanks with 148 Challenger 3s, and is re-thinking its artillery capability to re-set from its current holding of 14 Archer and around 40 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems. So, point one, in terms both of numbers of people and amount of kit, the British Army is simply too small for Russia to give it, in isolation, much thought.

But the key point here, surely, is to be found in the words 'in isolation'. To Russia, the British Army alone is of little consequence. The British Army locked into NATO, however, holding a combined force of over 3.5 million military personnel, of whom more than two million are soldiers, and with around 11,500 tanks and just shy of a million artillery pieces, is a different calculus. So, there is a big message here for the British Army. If Russia is considered to be the primary threat, then the British Army has real leverage in this matter only as a key player in NATO.

Pursuing a strategy of dividing NATO, driving in wedges, separating out the constituent parts (especially if one of those wedges can push a Euro-isolationist US further west across the North Atlantic and increasingly towards the Pacific), allows Russia to separate the threats into NATO's constituent parts and address them (and, they hope, defeat them) in detail. Russian strategy has been for some time, and is likely to remain, centred upon attempting to get the members of NATO to think and act on divergent, self-centric (and thus non-collective) paths. And Russia, you can be sure, has watched British Defence, and, in particular, British Army, partnership behaviour over the last 30 years. The Cold War's NATO-centric tied-in approach to being an integral part of the Central Front 'Layer Cake' defence of Europe has become a thing of distant memory. The British soldier's reputation in Russia for toughness and skill in battle (still held from 19th century memories, and re-burnished by the Falklands War) was done no harm by the performance in combat of the last 30 years. But the demands of those three decades of counter-insurgency and country-building also made the British Army more inward-looking and -thinking than it had been, possibly, since the end-of-Empire. The British Army's contributions to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were seen by her allies (and especially the Americans) as being typified with a rather arrogant (and hubristic, as it turned out) separatism, characterised by accusations of running a 'Basra-shire' and a 'Helmand-shire' quite outside the common effort of the, normally US-led, NATO command structures.

And yet, throughout all of that time, despite the British Army's rather insular approach to itself and to operations, and despite the other pressing priorities on British Defence, a 'NATO First' doctrine stood at the centre of stated British Defence policy (regardless of how much attention the Army actually gave to NATO's raison d'être in terms of Euro-Atlantic security commitments). Russia will closely watch the British Army's behaviour over the next few years and judge whether, when it says "NATO First", this time, it means it. A coherent NATO threatens Russia. A fractured NATO, full of Brownian motion, does not. The big message from this first point garnered from our experts' opinions, therefore, is that if the British Army is to be relevant in deterring or countering Russian military aggression then, as the Security Defence Review again urges, NATO must sit at the centre of the Army's view of itself.

UTILITY

If the first point, therefore, is to understand the centrality of the NATO context, the second must be to examine the British Army's relevance to Russia within that context. Both the Security Defence Review and the revised NATO Force Model place the British-led Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) at the heart of the security of Central Europe. As the Supreme Allied Commander Europe's principal reserve force, the ARRC has been tasked, amongst other things, with being ready to restore any territory lost to a Russian incursion into NATO territory. This task is a 'must-succeed' task. If NATO is to retain any credibility as a deterrent alliance, then it must be clear that the likelihood of lasting success for Russia in an attempted land-grab (in, for example, the Baltic region or the Suwalki Corridor) is vanishingly small. If deterrence fails, then, equally, if NATO is to prevail on the battlefield in terms of positive operational and strategic outcomes, any ARRC-led 'Restore' mission will be critical. This means that the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, should he need to deploy the ARRC, would deploy it as his Main Effort, and with that would come the full weight of NATO capability in support of its efforts. That makes the ARRC (and with it, therefore,

"The Russian Army has an estimated 4,780 artillery pieces and 1,130 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, and around 5,750 Main Battle Tanks. The British Army is in the process of replacing its remaining 219 Challenger 2 Tanks with 148 Challenger 3s, and is re-thinking its artillery capability to re-set from its current holding of 14 Archer and around 40 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems."

the British Army) newly significant to Russian military thinkers and planners.

The ARRC Headquarters, leadership and support elements are, at heart, provided by the British Army. Of the ARRC's four dedicated divisions, two are British (the other two coming from Italy and Canada). This total contribution accounts for approximately half of the total number of soldiers in the British Army and the vast majority of its warfighting capability. In this sense, therefore, the British Army matters a great deal to Russia, and forms a very serious element of its calculations, both in terms of deterrence from acting, and in terms of planning for acting. So, the answers to the question "what do the Russians think of the British Army?" start to change, in terms of quantity, quality and relevance, as soon as it becomes crystal clear that the centrality of the ARRC to British Army structures, thinking and, indeed, culture is a real and positive thing.

And if both Russia and Britain put the ARRC in the strategically important place in their thinking and planning that the above analysis suggests they should, then a third major thought emerges. The ARRC can only conduct its NATO-crucial role if it gets from where it is to where it is needed. The British Army therefore matters to Russia only if it can get to where it can have an effect on Russia. If not, not. The logical conclusion for Russia, therefore, is that it would be much easier to defeat the ARRC by making sure that it does not get off its island than to wait for it to arrive on the eastern borders of Europe before confronting it. Stopping the ARRC from deploying would be better than fighting the ARRC once deployed.

This third thought is very much at the front of the minds of the British Army's (and, indeed Ministry of Defence and wider Defence's) operational planners. The implications, in terms of threat, planning, capabilities and capacities are many and far-reaching. Homeland security, strategic outload, defence industrial capacity, critical infrastructure resilience and many other (neglected) operational and strategic keystones are being revisited, revised and revitalised.

THINKING MATTERS

Beyond the practical implications of the answers to the posed question, which have been unpacked above, there is one final thought worth a moment's consideration. Russians read British Defence concepts and doctrine, and, by extension, British Army doctrine and tactical notes. They do this for three reasons. First, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Russians think that the British are good at military thinking, and that what they write is therefore worth reading. Whether this is a true reflection of the quality of British military thinking or not doesn't really matter. (The British Army, perhaps a little flippantly, could be divided into two camps on this subject: those who are quite sure that British military thinking is superior to almost everyone else's; and those who don't really indulge in military thinking. Both caricatures are perhaps unfair, but whether the British Army are interested in their own thinking or not does not matter here: the Russians are. They think that what they read is interesting and useful.)

"The answers to the question 'what do the Russians think of the British Army?' start to change, in terms of quantity, quality and relevance, as soon as it becomes crystal clear that the centrality of the ARRC to Army structures, thinking and, indeed, culture is a real and positive thing."

Second, the Russians are close scrutineers of NATO concepts and doctrine and see the hand of British authors in much of what they read. And, third, Russians have, for a very long time, considered one of Britain's fortés to be their ability to get others to do their fighting for them. In this respect, they consider the British Army's skill in training, advising, equipping and otherwise preparing those who are in direct confrontation with their opponents to be a constant irritant. So, by reading up on British concepts, doctrine and tactics the Russians feel that they are getting a reasonable insight into what their opponents are being taught and how they are being encouraged to think and to fight.

At the CHACR a constant reminder of the interest that Russia pays to British military thinking can be found in the countries of origin of our online readership. This publication, for example, has maintained a steady followership in Russia, fluctuating with the US between second and third place (behind its British readership) in its online 'hits'.

CONCLUSIONS

The articles that come immediately after this introductory piece will reflect the fact that Russian thinking about British Defence pays little heed to the Army. Naval power, nuclear capability and Britain as a North Atlantic strategic bridge occupy most of their thinking-space in defence terms. In wider strategic terms, Britain's global role in the Russian mind is, and always has been, as an international Grima Wormtongue, whispering in the ears of others and manoeuvring and manipulating them to act against Russia's interests. In that respect, I will leave you to draw your own conclusions from the collection of truly excellent expert views that constitute this Russian-focused *British Army Review*.

From my perspective, the British Army-focused conclusion from this issue of the *British Army Review* has been very clear. Russia has, recently, put less thought into what it thinks of the British Army than the British Army might imagine. This has been so, simply, because it has seen the British Army as both too small and too irrelevant to occupy much of its thinking space. In as much as Russia has thought about the British Army at all, it would give it grudging respect and admiration for its gritty fighting ability, for its capacity for clever military thinking, and for its track record of training (and force-generating) others to 'do their dirty work' for them. More than anything else, Russian thinking has been a reflection of their view of the British Army's relative relevance.

If the Army is now, however, genuinely putting NATO first, then that Russian attitude is likely to change. The implications in this change of emphasis are clear on two fronts. First, the Army has been refocussed, and will continue to refocus, on its core purpose of being ready to fight and win the nation's wars, at scale, from and on the land. Second, and by both direction and by logical inference, the Army will re-invest in the ARRC and its fighting divisions; and it will invest in strategic outload to make sure that, despite the enemy's best efforts, the ARRC will get to where it needs to be, as rapidly as its name implies, to allow NATO to use it as its 'must succeed' Main Effort. And, in the background, the Army (alongside every other of the multiple elements of a genuinely integrated approach) will secure the home base to enable all of the above to have meaning.

Providing the Army is serious about this change of emphasis, the question posed to the *British Army Review's* Editor by the CHACR Management Board is likely to find a new answer. If the British Army's role in deterring military action against the nation's interests finds new strength in a reinvigorated corps, equipped with modern, ready, fighting divisions, sitting at the heart of NATO's operational plans, the answer to the generals' question "what do the Russians think of the British Army?", would likely switch, in both qualitative and relevance terms, from "not much" to "quite a lot".

THE VIEW FROM MOSCOW

AUTHOR

Tracey German is a Professor of Conflict and Security in the Defence Studies Department at King's College London. Her research focuses on Russian foreign and security policies, particularly Russia's use of force, as well as Russian strategic culture and military thought.

SPEAKING in May 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymr Zelensky characterised Russia's war against Ukraine as a war of two worldviews, rather than a war of two armies.[1] This prompts the question: what is Russia's worldview and what shapes it? This article will examine Russia's perception of, and its relations with, the outside world, how the country's security elites view its place within the international system and declaratory policy, before briefly examining Moscow's view of the UK.

A range of interrelated geographic, historical and identity-related factors shape how Russia – both its elites and wider population – view the world around it. The worldview of the political and security elites is shaped by the sheer size of territory, which has endured a number of invasions over the centuries, prompting a sense of strategic vulnerability. This has contributed to the notion of Russia as a 'besieged fortress' that is surrounded by enemies and needs to be prepared for an attack at any time: the narrative of adversaries seeking to surround and isolate Russia is common. The perpetuation of a siege mentality enables the Russian leadership to take actions that may be unpopular internally, but which can be justified by reference to the country's historical experience (particularly of invasion) and the narrative of adversaries always being 'out there', ready to exploit any weakness.[2] These enduring leitmotifs in Russian strategic discourse are reflected in a number of formal policy documents, including the Foreign Policy Concept and National Security Strategy.[3] These documents reiterate long-running themes in Russian foreign and security policy, notably continued opposition to NATO's global reach, a perception that global competition is intensifying and a desire to strengthen relations with China, India and other non-Western states.

The 2023 iteration of the Foreign Policy Concept is a clear articulation of official Russia's worldview, characterising the country as a "unique country-civilisation and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power" that has deep historical ties "with the traditional European culture and other Eurasian cultures". This characterisation emphasises the vast territorial size of the country, stretching from Europe to the Pacific. Russia borders a wide range of different regions, from Europe to East Asia, a geographical factor that fosters a globalist perspective.

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[1] *President of Ukraine, 'Address by the President of Ukraine on the Day of Victory over Nazism in World War II', 9 May 2022.*

[2] *Tracey German, 'Harnessing Protest Potential: Russian strategic culture and the coloured revolutions', Contemporary Security Policy, May 2020 DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2020.1757251*

[3] *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, approved by decree of the President of the Russian Federation No 229, 31 March 2023; National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2021). Approved by decree of the President of the Russian Federation, July 2.*

A GREAT POWER?

Russia's sense of 'derzhavnost', its belief that the country is destined to always be a great power (derzhava) based on factors such as its history and territorial size, has been a consistent feature of Russian foreign policy since the disintegration of the Soviet Union.[4] Having witnessed the loss of Soviet hegemony and superpower status in 1991, Putin's long-standing objective has been to "establish Russia as a nation that acts in accordance with formal and informal norms of traditional great power politics and is recognised as a major state by the outside world".[5] Speaking when he was prime minister in 1999, Putin emphasised that Russia "was and will remain a great power", a status that was, according to him, preconditioned by geopolitical, economic and cultural realities.[6] The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept reiterated the view of Russia as a country that plays a leading role within the international system: "Russia, taking into account its decisive contribution to the victory in World War II and its active role in shaping the contemporary system of international relations and eliminating the global system of colonialism, is one of the sovereign centres of global development performing a historically unique mission aimed at maintaining global balance of power and building a multipolar international system, as well as ensuring conditions for the peaceful progressive development of humanity."[7]

GLOBAL COMPETITION

The new Foreign Policy Concept also included a clear articulation of Moscow's view that a global competition for power and influence is ongoing between the Western world (the US and its allies) and the rest of the world. Russian foreign policy is imbued with the notion of strategic competition between major powers, who are perceived to be competing both geopolitically and geoeconomically by all available means. The Foreign Policy Concept refers to a blurring of the lines between military and non-military means of inter-state confrontation, and asserts that the US and its allies are seeking to undermine Russia in every possible way, including economic. In response, Russia intends to defend itself using "all means available". International relations and global competition are considered to be zero-sum in nature, reflecting a bleak view of politics and international relations as a permanent struggle for power and resources; war and peace are just different stages of the same process, different ends of the same continuum. According to this logic, the struggle for power and resources necessitates the integration of all instruments of national power. The narrative of competition and contestation reflects a belief that powerful states will exploit whatever means possible to undermine their adversaries, in what is perceived to be an ongoing, covert struggle for global power and dominance.

A key priority for Russian foreign policy is the "rejection and elimination of hegemony in international affairs, and a transition towards multipolarity". For more than a decade, Russia has been voicing its opposition to the predominance of US power and Western liberal values within the international system, emphasising the importance of a multipolar world. In 2019, President Vladimir Putin declared that the liberal idea had outlived its purpose, pointing to growing public opposition across the Western world to immigration, open borders and multiculturalism: "The liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population." Putin heralded the growth of national populist movements in Europe and America, arguing that "liberals" are no longer able to "dictate anything to anyone".

PIVOT TO THE EAST (AND SOUTH)

A number of Russian observers and officials have proclaimed a shift of global power away from the West towards the East. The West has been described as a "shrinking minority" by one Russian analyst, who proclaimed the rise of the "non-West" or the "world majority".[8] Moscow's continued opposition to the predominance of US power within the international system finds support with many

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[4] *Jeffrey Mankoff, Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).*

[5] *Tsygankov, A. (2015) 'The Kremlin's Syria gamble is risky, but could have a big payoff', Russia Direct, 3 October.*

[6] *Putin, V. (2000) First Person. London: Random House.*

[7] *Article 5. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, approved by decree of the President of the Russian Federation No 229, 31 March 2023.*

[8] *Sergei Karaganov, 'From the Non-West to the World Majority', Russia in Global Affairs, 5 (2022), pp. 6-18.*

"The Foreign Policy Concept refers to a blurring of the lines between military and non-military means of inter-state confrontation, and asserts that the US and its allies are seeking to undermine Russia in every possible way, including economic. In response, Russia intends to defend itself using 'all means available'."

states around the world and it will continue to strengthen its cooperation with powers such as China and India. While the post-Soviet space has long been a priority, over the past decade Russia has demonstrated a capacity and willingness to project its power and influence around the world, including the Middle East and North Africa, in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia. Russia's power vis-à-vis the West may be perceived to be dwindling, but it has continued to seek to build and consolidate relations with the non-Western world, exploiting power vacuums triggered by US and Western withdrawal or inaction. Putin has also sought to position Russia as an anti-colonial power, appealing to the Global South to join its "emancipatory, anti-colonial movement" against unipolar hegemony and Western "colonisers".[9]

Russian interests in the countries of the Global South have traditionally been economic, especially in the arms trade, energy and strategic cooperation. One of the drivers for its increased foreign policy activism over the past decade was the search for new 'client states' in markets not covered by sanctions imposed by the EU and US since 2014. In the wake of its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this has continued apace, as Moscow seeks to consolidate existing economic ties and develop new ones. Russia's growing presence across Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere is an attempt to expand its global influence, using a wide array of tools ranging from arms sales to energy deals, diplomacy and political and military advisers. The renewed focus on Africa and Latin America/the Caribbean as regional priorities, as well as references to neo-colonialism, represent a significant hardening of Russia's position on the international stage and its determination to challenge perceived US (and Western) dominance.[10]

The order of Russia's regional priorities identified in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept emphasises Moscow's wish to pivot away from Europe and the US, with these regions dropping to the bottom of the list, whilst China, India and the Global South more broadly, move closer to the top. Key areas of interest (and concern) are the post-Soviet space and the Global South. The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept sets outs a list of ten regional priorities, from most important to least. The top priority is what Moscow refers to as the Near Abroad, the post-Soviet space, i.e. those countries on Russia's periphery that used to be a part of the USSR. The Arctic is second on the list, followed by the "Eurasian continent", with China and India specifically referenced. The Asia-Pacific region, Islamic world, Africa and Latin America/Caribbean all come above Western countries. Europe is grouped separately to the "US and other Anglo-Saxon states", a dismissive term that includes the UK.

"The UK is perceived to be very hawkish vis-à-vis Russia: it was a vocal supporter of the sanctions regime imposed against Russia in the wake of Moscow's annexation of Crimea and, since 2022, has been a leading member of the international coalition supporting Ukraine both militarily and diplomatically."

THE UK: AN IRRELEVANT HAWK?

The inclusion of the UK in the category of "other Anglo-Saxon states", alongside the US, at the bottom of the regional priorities list accentuates the poor state of relations between the two. Moscow tends to dismiss the UK as Washington's lapdog, lacking the international power and influence of the US, China and Russia. As discussed above, Moscow considers the international system to be dominated by major powers; smaller states are viewed as irrelevant, as objects or instruments of the strategies of larger powers. The UK is not considered to be a major power, meaning it is often dismissed as irrelevant by Russian politicians.[11]

However, it is also criticised for being 'Russophobic' and seeking to destabilise Russia and its neighbours.[12] The UK is perceived to be very hawkish vis-à-vis Russia: it was a vocal supporter of the sanctions regime imposed against Russia in the wake of Moscow's annexation of Crimea and, since 2022, has been a leading member of the international coalition supporting Ukraine both militarily and diplomatically. Russia's ambassador to the UK, Andrei Kelin, has accused the UK of leading a "witch-hunt" against Moscow, comparing the establishment of a new Foreign Influence Registration Scheme to McCarthyism.[13] The FSB [Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation] has also described the UK as the "principal source of global crises, a provocateur and instigator of wars" that is also "weakening its closest allies".[14] Quite an achievement for a country dismissed as an insignificant minion of the US.

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[9] *President of Russia, 'Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia', 30 September 2022.*

[10] *Neither the 2016 or 2013 FPCs made any reference to colonialism/neo-colonialism, and Africa came at the bottom of the list of regional priorities, after Latin America and the Caribbean. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on 30 November 2016.*

[11] *For more detail see Emily Ferris, 'The Kremlin Views the UK's SDR as a Declaration of War', RUSI Commentary, 19 June 2025.*

[12] *http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2025/06/o-linii-velikobritanii-v-otnoshenii-gruzii.htm 5 June 2025*

[13] *RIA Novosti, 'Posol Rossii v Britanii predrek novy vitok 'okhotyi na ved'm', 24 May 2025.*

[14] *RIA Novosti, 'FSB nazvala Britaniyu istochnikom bol'shinstva mirovykh krizisov', 5 June 2025.*

RUSSIAN VIEWS ON BRITAIN'S ARMED FORCES

AUTHOR

John Foreman, a retired Royal Navy captain, was the UK's Defence Attaché in Moscow from 2019-2022 and previously the UK's Defence Attaché in Kyiv (2008-2011).

IN February 2022, two weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the then Defence Secretary Ben Wallace and Chief of Defence Staff Admiral Sir Tony Radakin posed for a final photograph with their Russian counterparts at the end of frank talks in Moscow. The backdrop was a painting of a meeting in Berlin in June 1945 of the 'Big Four' allied generals: Montgomery, Zhukov, Eisenhower and de Tassigny. It was deliberately chosen by the Russian side as a respectful nod to the high-water mark of Anglo-Russian military relations: joint victory over Nazi Germany.

The Russians also organised a small exhibition of archive material on the complicated bilateral military relationship. Experience of cooperation, competition and occasional conflict has shaped and continues to shape how Russia perceives the British military. This combines respect for its professionalism, concern about its ability to deploy force globally, a perception of cunning, and a tendency to rely on allies. This article explores consistencies in Russian views of the British military from the 19th century to the present.

The relationship between Russia and Britain has fluctuated for over 450 years. It has been marked by transactional dynastic and trade ties, formal alliance during three great European wars in the 19th and 20th centuries against Napoleon and Germany,[1] imperial competition – in particular in the Black Sea and Central Asia, ideological differences over "liberal capitalism and representative liberal politics",[2] and mutual suspicion. Historically as

[1] *Oxford Research Group, Evidence to Parliament, January 2016.*

[2] *Jonathan Parry, Dancing the Mazurka, London Review of Books dated 17 April 2025.*

Inset: UK MOD © Crown copyright

the distant bookends of Europe, "Britain and Russia were powerful enough to be in each other's thoughts, yet distant enough to remain exotic".[3] Both shared a common interest in preventing the domination of the continent by a single power. "Beyond that, they had distinct spheres of influence where neither was very interested in supporting the other."[4] Although the relationship has often been adversarial, these erstwhile allies have never been mortal enemies.

From its position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Russia, a vast continental power, has naturally seen insular Britain as a maritime power, one prepared to contain Russian access to the global commons. This is justified. Britain has repeatedly used its naval power against Russia to impose economic pressure, block exports, deny access to technology and strangle revenue.[5] During the brief, faintly remembered, Anglo-Russian war between 1807-1811, Britain blockaded the Baltic, denied Russia access to alternative markets and left it virtually bankrupt. During the Crimean War, Anglo-French naval pressure in the Baltic, Black and White Seas and Pacific damaged Russia's economy and helped inflict a painful strategic defeat. There are obvious echoes of this economic warfare today with Russia protesting Britain's action against its 'shadow' oil fleet, and the UK's ambition to "restore Britain's position as the foremost naval power in Europe"[6] to confront its "most pressing and immediate threat": Putin's revanchist Russia.

Russia's perception of Britain as a maritime power also shapes its understanding of our military doctrine. Trotsky noted that this combines recognition of the need for maritime strength with a "negative attitude to a standing army and toward conscription for military service". Connected with this is maintenance of a capable albeit "small army of volunteers" and "support of such an order in Europe as would not allow any one land power to obtain decisive preponderance on the Continent".[7] This approach contrasts sharply with Russia's own maintenance of the largest army in Europe since the end of the 17th century to protect its territory against invaders. The Russian Navy's own fortunes have waxed and waned, with it considered secondary to the army, and generally focused on operations in support of it.[8]

Through this maritime prism, Russian and Soviet military thinkers have respected Britain's ability to deploy and sustain well-trained land forces globally via secure maritime lines of communication, mobilising coalition, local or colonial troops to play a decisive role

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"Although Britain was understood to be one of NATO's most important European members, it was and is perceived as being heavily dependent on the United States for both defence and deterrence. That said, it was seen as retaining significant maritime power, especially submarines, an independent nuclear deterrent, a capable army, modern equipment and an expeditionary mindset. The Army's reputation for pluck was burnished during the Falklands War."

beyond its relatively small size. This approach brought mixed feelings during both World Wars when Russia respected Britain's naval, air and industrial strength but resented its cautious land approach. Zhukov was irritated by Montgomery's hubristic insistence that his victory at El Alamein was the equal of the Soviet triumph at Stalingrad. El Alamein however helped reverse "the Soviet General Staff poor opinion of the British Army as a result of the fall of Singapore, Hong Kong and Tobruk",[9] an important reminder then and now that it is operational credibility not past glories that shape opinions.

Britain and Russia have fortunately rarely crossed swords on the battlefield. The armed clash in the Crimean Peninsula from 1853 to 1856 directly shaped how the British Army is perceived today. Russian generals recognised the fighting spirit of the British troops at the Battle of Inkerman when facing numerically superior Russian forces in terrible conditions. It cemented a reputation of the British Army in the Russian imagination as proud, professional and stubborn, and occasionally reckless in tactics, organisation and preparation. Dmitry Miliutin, the driving force for Russian military reforms after the war emphasised in his memoirs that British troops had displayed skill, discipline and determination, making them a formidable opponent despite their smaller numbers. He recognised the "need to reform and modernize the military on the model of western forces that had so roundly beaten Russia's backward serf army".[10] His reforms – including compulsory military service, reserves, peacetime military districts and professional military education – set the course for today's Russian army.

Britain and Russia are not the great powers they once were. In Britain's case "its post-imperial decline has been offset by becoming the US's closest ally, buying in to Washington's vision of world order".[11] During the Cold War, Soviet military doctrine focused on the United States and NATO as collective adversaries. Although Britain was understood to be one of NATO's most important European members, it was and is perceived as being heavily dependent on the United States for both defence and deterrence. That said, it was seen as retaining significant maritime power, especially submarines, an independent nuclear deterrent, a capable army, modern equipment and an expeditionary mindset. The Army's reputation for pluck was burnished during the Falklands War. The legacy of the 19th Great Game together with Cold War espionage led the Soviets to respect the quality of British intelligence and 'special services', including Special Forces.

As importantly, although no longer deemed a military peer of the Soviet Union, Britain was perceived as an implacable ideological and political opponent of the USSR, and one of NATO's most hawkish voices. As Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev reportedly once said, Britain was "an old lion, but one that got old by being more crafty" than the rest of the

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[3] *Mark Galeotti, Why the Kremlin sees Britain as its greatest foe, The Spectator dated 20 August 2020.*

[4] *Jonathan Parry, Dancing the Mazurka, London Review of Books dated 17 April 2025.*

[5] *Andrew Lambert, Russia's long war with the maritime powers, Englesberg Ideas dated 3 December 2024.*

[6] *Dominic Raab, A force for good: Global Britain in a competitive age, dated 17 March 2021.*

[7] *Leon Trotsky, Military Doctrine or Pseudo-Military Doctrinairism, Moscow 1921.*

[8] *John Foreman, No, the Russian Navy isn't coming, Naval Review November 2017.*

[9] *Martin Folly, They treat us with scant respect: prejudice and pride in British Military Liaison with the Soviet Union in the Second World War, International History Review, dated 16 November 2021.*

[10] *Orlando Figes, Crimea the Last Crusade, (London, 2010), p.450.*

[11] *Oxford Research Group, Evidence to Parliament, January 2016..*

[12] *Mark Galeotti, Why the Kremlin sees Britain as its greatest foe, The Spectator dated 20 August 2020.*

pride.[12] It retained an outsized reputation in Moscow for being the subtle Greece to the American Rome, as Harold Macmillan put it in 1944.

Today, there is duality in the Russian view of Britain. On the one hand, especially before the invasion of Ukraine, Russian officials fell over themselves to dismiss Britain (including to my face) as inter alia 'a small island no one listens to', a puppet of the US and as a provocateur, such as for conducting the transit of HMS *Defender* through occupied Ukrainian waters in 2021. At the same time, Britain has been also described as Russia's 'main bastard', the secret instigator of the war and Russia's implacable ideological opponent which has stiffened the spine of NATO's response to Putin's invasion, steadfastly supported the Ukrainian armed forces, and which is striving, as it has for 200 years, "to limit the power of Russia".[13] Britain has been blamed for falsifying evidence of Russian war crimes in Ukraine, for derailing efforts at peace, for striking targets in occupied Ukraine and even being behind the Crocus City terrorist attacks in Moscow in 2024.

There is also duality in Russian opinions towards the British armed forces. Media talking heads dismiss the modest size of the army in comparison to its 'mighty' (sic) Russian counterpart and frame it as a junior partner to the US with limited independent power. They delight in visible Russian military operations near British airspace and territorial waters. The Russian Ambassador has scoffed at Britain's "very old outdated nuclear warheads".[14] At the same time, Russian military experts note – with grudging respect – British military experience, professionalism, competence, military education, technical ingenuity, supply of weapons and know how to Ukraine, and ability to move fast in extremis. Britain is seen as "doing everything to further fan the flames of military conflict on the border of the Russian Federation".[15]

"Whether in the 19th century or today, Russian observers see British forces as too small to pose a decisive independent threat."

There has been a lot less crowing of late. Reaction to the Strategic Defence Review is illustrative and was a mixture of "derision and caution".[16] A more sober assessment of it in an authoritative journal noted that "the UK's threat potential, especially in submarine construction, should not be underestimated".[17] It acknowledged "recapitalisation" of the nuclear industry and long-term investment in it. It highlighted return of a tactical nuclear role to the Royal Air Force (albeit one dependent like Trident on the US), acquisition of a sovereign sixth generation aircraft with Italy and Japan, new long-range precision missiles, further digitisation, and Britain's leading role in NATO. Yet "it particularly emphasized that Great Britain will never wage war against a major military power alone". As another anonymous Russian military expert put it last year, "one should not be deceived by the military weakness of the United Kingdom, despite their apparent weakness, the British will use their strengths: reputation (fighting with the hands of others) and intelligence (covert influence and irregular operations)".[18]

In summary, Britain today, as it has for centuries, is seen as a subtle and cunning antagonist behind Russian woes. Several continuities stand out in Russian views of the British military:

- **Respect for professionalism and courage.** From infantry at Inkerman to modern UK special forces, Russians have consistently acknowledged the discipline and bravery of the British soldier.
- **Scepticism about size and sustainability.** Whether in the 19th century or today, Russian observers see British forces as too small to pose a decisive independent threat.
- **Emphasis on naval and nuclear strength.** Britain's maritime and later nuclear power have always been treated with respect.
- **Dependence on allies.** From cooperation with the French in Crimea to reliance on the United States in NATO, Britain is often portrayed as unwilling to act entirely alone, preferring to work with others.

Today, Russian military analysts recognise Britain's professionalism, technology and global ambition, but stress its small size, dependence on NATO and political hostility. This dual perception – Britain is both dangerous and limited – continues to shape Russian assessments and will likely persist as long as Anglo-Russian rivalry endures.

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[13] *Lord Ellenborough, a senior figure in the Duke of Wellington's cabinet in the 1820s, cited by W Dalrymple, Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan (London, 2013), pp. 50-1.*

[14] *Andrei Kelin, Interview with Laura Kuenssberg, BBC 12 April 2025.*

[15] *Shapovalov, Tkachenko, Maksimov, Views of the UK's military-political leadership on the application of national armed forces in 21st century wars and armed conflicts (RU), Military Thought, 12- 2022, pp 130 – 138.*

[16] *Emily Ferris, The Kremlin Views the UK's SDR as a Declaration of War, RUSI dated 19 June 2025.*

[17] *Tebin and Stefanovich, Make Britain Great Again? New Strategic Defence Review: Assessing the Reality of Plans, Russia in Global Politics dated 1 August 2025.*

[18] *Top War, Вооружённые силы Великобритании — подстрекательские войска в Северной Европе, dated 29 June 2024.*

RUSSIA'S VIEW OF THE UK IN A 'POST-WEST' WORLD

AUTHOR

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A GEOSTRATEGIC outlook characterises Moscow's interpretation of international affairs. This view emerged in the early 1990s, but has become much more pronounced since the mid 2000s, with a broad consensus across the Russian policy-making community about intensifying geopolitical and geoeconomic competition lasting into the 2030s.

This is the lens through which the Russian leadership sees both the wider transformation of international affairs towards a 'post-West' world order, and the roles and activities of the Euro-Atlantic community and its member states, including the United Kingdom. President Putin recently stated, for instance, that "contradictions between Russia and the West arise from geopolitics", and that the UK (among others) "still blames the dismantling of their colonial might on Russia".[1]

MOSCOW'S WORLD VIEW: TOWARDS A "POST-WEST" WORLD ORDER

The Russian leadership sees a structural transformation underway in the international architecture, and, consequently, intensifying instability and conflict. As Putin put it in 2014, "changes in the world order – and what we are seeing today are events on this scale – have usually been accompanied by if not global war and conflict, then by chains of intensive local-level conflicts".[2]

Moscow describes this as transition to a 'post-West' era,[3] characterised by the simultaneous emergence of new global and regional leaders alongside the stagnation and then long-term decline in the influence of the Euro-Atlantic community; indeed, Moscow asserts the (socio-economic) crisis of the western liberal model. In this context, the Kremlin's goals are to establish Russia as an influential, sovereign centre of world development, and a global power.

This is all set out in Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, which states that the "revolutionary changes" underway in the world order are "not welcomed by a number of states used to the logic of global dominance and neo-colonialism". This 'small group of states' (which includes the USA and its 'satellites') "refuse[s] to recognise the realities of a multipolar world", and are "attempting to restrain the natural course of history" through the imposition of "destructive neoliberal attitudes". This policy, characterised by "confrontation and hegemonic ambitions", is now deemed to be both "comprehensive" and "enshrined at the doctrinal level".[4]

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[1] *"Contradictions between Russia, West, Arise from Geopolitics, Putin Believes", Tass, 13 July 2025, tass.com/politics/1988935.*

[2] *Website of the Presidential Administration, 10 February 2007, kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034; Website of the Presidential Administration, 24 October 2014, kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860; Novosti VPK, 18 February 2013, vpk.name/news/84463_v_period_do_2030_goda_uroven_potencialnoi_voennoi_opasnosti_znachitelno_povysitsya_valerii_gerasimov.html*

[3] *"Foreign Minister S. Lavrov's interview with Channel 4, Moscow, June 29, 2018", Website of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 29 June 2018, mid.ru/en/press_service/photos/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/1573850*

[4] *The Concept of the Foreign Policy. See also Strategiya natsionalnoi bezopasnossti Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Ukaz No. 400, 2 July 2021, Website of the Security Council, scrf.gov.ru/media/files/file/l4wGRPqJvETSkUTYmhepzRochb1j1jqh.pdf*

The UK itself is not explicitly named in the Concept or other main strategic planning documents. Nonetheless, its implicit role – whether through NATO or as a US 'satellite' – is clear. The Concept includes, for instance, a separate category for the US and "other Anglo-Saxon States". The US is described as the "main inspirer, organiser and executor of aggressive anti-Russian policy of the collective West"; Russia will build its relations with other Anglo-Saxon states depending on the "degree of their willingness to abandon their unfriendly course towards Russia and to respect its legitimate interests".[5]

Notable, though, is Moscow's view of a US-led NATO opposing the "strengthening of the multipolar world" and "most actively... in the Asia-Pacific region". The AUKUS initiative exemplifies this, they argue, since it is intended to "merge with NATO". Indeed, AUKUS is seen to pose a substantive threat to the global strategic balance;[6] the UK's role in it is explicit, and the signing of the bilateral partnership between the UK and Australia in July was reported in Russian media.[7]

RUSSIA'S VIEW OF THE UK

If the UK is not explicitly mentioned – let alone as a priority – in Russian strategic documents, Moscow's view of the UK is nonetheless clear in less high-profile but important government legislation, including its list of "unfriendly countries".[8] Moreover, senior Russian officials are unequivocal that the UK not only threatens Russian security, but that London seeks to be at the forefront of Russophobia and to 'lead' the anti-Russian coalition.[9]

Consideration of Russian views of the UK's role in international affairs must therefore recognise the long-standing antagonism between Moscow and London, with deep divergences over values and a wide range of policies. If one Russian official observed in 2010 that relations had "dropped to a point close to freezing", this remains the case: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in 2022 that UK-Russia relations had deteriorated such that there was "no room for manoeuvre".[10]

Bilateral relations are characterised by chronic disagreement, with regular, not to say frequent, acute crises. These range from (repeated) mutual accusations of interference in each other's domestic politics and espionage scandals: each persistently accuses the other of destabilising behaviour and malign actions. The murder of Alexander Litvinenko and attack on Sergei Skripal feature particularly prominently among these profound differences, but the list of disputes is lengthy.

The wars in Chechnya, Iraq, Georgia and Syria further indicate the long-running disagreement about the causes and conduct of international instability, conflict and war. Moscow has, for instance, repeatedly accused the UK of supporting separatist movements in the Caucasus, especially in Chechnya, and also more recently in Azerbaijan.[11] Moscow has likewise accused the UK of supporting the White Helmets (Syrian Civil Defence group) to stage a fake chemical attack in Syria, as well as planning terrorist attacks on Russian military facilities in Syria through the use of ISIS militants.[12]

Senior Russian officials also criticise London as Kyiv's 'main sponsor'. Indeed, Moscow asserts that the UK not only provides weapons and other assistance to Ukraine, but that the British intelligence services train Ukrainian saboteurs, and that the Royal Navy was involved in blowing up the Nord Stream pipeline in 2022 and helped to attack Crimea.[13] Moscow accuses London of seeking to "defeat Russia", to "force it to its knees" ("go on then, do it!" said Lavrov in 2022).[14] Senior officials voice their opposition to western – including British – peacekeeping forces being deployed to Ukraine: Putin indicated that were troops to appear, especially during combat operations, Moscow would "deem them legitimate targets for destruction".[15]

At the same time, despite all the activities set out above, Russian officials and observers also consider the UK to be in structural decline, dropping out of the top ten leading industrial

"Senior Russian officials are unequivocal that the UK not only threatens Russian security, but that London seeks to be at the forefront of Russophobia and to 'lead' the anti-Russian coalition."

[5] *The Concept of the Foreign Policy.*

[6] *"Speech by Defence Minister of Russia Sergei Shoigu at X Moscow Conference on International Security", Website of the Russian Embassy in Kenya, 16 August 2022, russembkenya.mid.ru/en/press-centre/news/speech_by_russian_defence_minister_general_of_the_army_sergei_shoigu_at_x_moscow_conference_on_inter*

[7] *"Britaniya i Avstraliya podpisali soglashenie po atomnym podvodnym lodkam", Tass, 26 July 2025, tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/24619739*

[8] *"The Government approves the list of unfriendly countries and territories", Government Directive 430-r, 7 March 2022, Website of the Russian Government, government.ru/en/docs/44745*

[9] *"Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova's answer to a media question on British Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss' anti-Russia rhetoric", Website of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 14 July 2022, mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1822074*

[10] *"Russia Hopes for Better Ties with Britain as Cameron Becomes PM", RIA Novosti, 12 May 2010, en.rian.ru/russia/20100512/158987965.html; "The Interview: Sergei Lavrov", BBC podcast, 22 June 2022, bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0cgfpqp*

[11] *"Moscow Accuses London of Worsening Relations with Azerbaijan", New Dosh, 9 September 2025, newdosh.media/en/news/moskva-obvinila-london-v-uhudsenii-otnosenij-s-azerbajdzanom?categoryAlias=*

[12] *"Embassy Press Officer's reply to a media question concerning the meeting of the Minister for the Middle East Mr Alistair Burt with the White Helmets group", 20 September 2018, Website of the Russian Embassy to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, london.mid.ru/en/press-centre/gb_en_fnapr_6656/; "Spetssluzhby SSHA i Velikobritanii gotovyat terroristicheskie ataki na voennye bazy Rossii v Syrii", Website of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, 28 December 2024, svr.gov.ru/smi/2024/12/spetssluzhby-ssha-i-velikobritanii-gotovyat-terroristicheskie-ataki-na-voennye-bazy-rossii-v-sirii.htm*

[13] *"Speech by Defence Minister of Russia Sergei Shoigu"; "Ukrainian saboteurs who plotted to seize Zaporozhye plant were MI6 trained – authorities", Tass, 1 September 2022, tass.com/politics/1501127; "Russia says UK navy blew up Nord Stream, London denies involvement", Reuters, 29 October 2022, reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-british-navy-personnel-blew-up-nord-stream-gas-pipelines-2022-10-29*

[14] *"The Interview: Sergei Lavrov".*

[15] *"Plenarnoe zasedanie X Vostochnovo ekonomicheskovo foruma", Website of the Presidential Administration, 5 September 2025, kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77927*

"The [British] Army itself receives only limited Russian attention. Partly because of the Russian view that warfare is waged at scale, and is costly in terms of lives and equipment. In other words, size still matters... technologically advanced but small armed forces are simply consumed by larger forces."

states and facing socio-economic challenges. This shapes Russian views of both British defence reform and the armed forces.

Three main points can be drawn from the Russian discussion about the Strategic Defence Review (and the National Security Strategy). The first is that the main points of both "turned out to be predictable and obvious in pointing to Russia as a threat". The second is that the intent to develop the armed forces focuses not on quantity but quality and the development of technological superiority. The third, and perhaps most important, is that analysis pointedly notes the (persistent) gaps between the stated intent and obligations of reform and the lack of economic capacity to implement these plans. As one observer put it, "Britain has no money", these plans are "high on ambition, but low on resources"; another stated that "it is easy to see that even after all the recommendations from the review are implemented, [the UK's] defence capability will remain at a low level".[16]

The primary point that emerges from the Russian policy discussion about the British armed forces is that officials and observers persistently note the shrinking size and capacity of the Army and the Royal Navy. Often echoing public debate in the UK, for instance, Russian observers underline that the Army's size is now the smallest since the early 19th century.[17] And despite anxiety about the potential threat of AUKUS and some concern about the Royal Navy's activity in the Baltic Sea, the Navy is now deemed to be only "at the very end of the top ten strongest fleets in the world", and that "it will almost inevitably fall out of it in the foreseeable future".[18]

CONCLUSIONS

There is some ambiguity, therefore, in how Moscow sees the UK's role in international affairs. The UK is seen as a declining power in the context of what is understood to be a wider global geostrategic contest that is likely to continue through into the 2030s and result in a new, post-West world order. At the same time, Russian officials repeatedly emphasise that London seeks to lead Russophobic states, and appear to acknowledge that it has some success in this endeavour, especially in Ukraine. As far as Moscow is concerned, the UK therefore may be said to be a declining strategic power retaining some important regional influence, especially as part of the US-led "Anglo-Saxon" coalition.

Similarly, the hostility with which Moscow views London is clear: official statements or releases often lead with variations on the theme of "perfidious Albion stokes conflict" and London instigating conflict and using proxies to wage its campaigns for it.[19] At the same time, Russian views of British military capability are not flattering, with limited economic capacity shaping a long-term reduction in defence capacity. It is the intelligence and security services and special forces that receive most attention. The Royal Navy also warrants some consideration, especially in Russia's Baltic Sea crisis scenarios.

The Army itself receives only limited Russian attention. Partly, this is because the Russian ground forces have much else to be thinking about, from their campaigning to their own internal questions (such as on extensive reforms and technological development, and regarding the budget as the State Armaments Programme is prepared). Partly, however, it is because of the Russian view that warfare is waged at scale, and is costly in terms of lives and equipment. In other words, size still matters; to paraphrase past Russian discussions of the British Army, technologically advanced but small armed forces are simply consumed by larger forces.

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[16] *"Analiz novoi voennoi doktriny Velikobritanii", CAST, undated, cast.ru/products/articles/analiz-novoy-voennoy-doktriny-velikobritanii.html?clear_cache=Y; "Obzor Strategicheskoi oborony Velikobritanii, 2025", RSMD, 10 July 2025, russiancouncil.ru/blogs/e-makarov/obzor-strategicheskoy-oborony-velikobritanii-2025-izbrannye-momenty; "Velikobritaniya vystupila obzor oborony Strategic Defence Review 2025", Voennoe obozrenie, 5 June 2025, topwar.ru/265749-velikobritanija-vypustila-obzor-oborony-strategic-defence-review-2025.html*

[17] *"Times: chislennost britanskoi armii cherez 10 let mozhet sokratitsya na tret", Tass, 20 January 2024, tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/19774333*

[18] *"Tak prokhodit morskaya slava', Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie, 23 November 2023, nvo.ng.ru/forces/2023-11-23/6_1263_fleet.html*

[19] *"Kovarny Albion snova vtyagivayet mir v voinu", Website of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, 10 March 2025, svr.gov.ru/smi/2025/03/kovarnyy-albion-snova-vtyagivaet-mir-v-voynu.htm*

RUSSIA, THE UNITED KINGDOM AND ITS DEFENCE POLICY

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THERE is an erstwhile antagonism between Russia and the United Kingdom that goes straight back to the 1917 Russian Revolution. But it is more structural than that. Policy specialists in London understand there are deep geopolitical and historical roots to Moscow's attitude, and the sharp contemporary enmity of the last 20 years draws directly from them.[1]

In a geopolitical context, Russia – whether as the Russia that emerged under Ivan the Terrible, the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation of today – has always been an internal empire as well as an external imperialist power. From the fifth to the late 14th century, Kyiv, Novgorod and then Moscow all had their golden ages, in that order, until Moscow emerged from the retreat of the Mongol empire as the unifying force among Russian peoples. Today, with 190 different nationalities, albeit with 80 per cent ethnic Russians, and 11 time zones from Kaliningrad to Kamchatka, the Russian Federation remains as much an internal empire as Ivan the Terrible's Russia. It is an internal empire that can only be maintained with a federal structure driven by a highly centralised government in Moscow. And with no obvious natural boundaries in any direction except for that along the Arctic Sea, the Russian peoples have always found themselves either under pressure from their neighbours or else pushing outwards to establish territorial buffer zones behind which they felt safer. Russia's own internal empire is all of a piece with its natural instincts to expand into such foreign buffer zones.

Russian history reinforces the geopolitics. For religious and ethnic Slavic reasons, Russian leaders always assumed their country had an historic role in Western Christian civilisation. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, Moscow saw itself as the 'Third Rome' to keep the flame of Western civilization alive. That sense of a special mission interacted perfectly with the internal/external imperial dynamic. All the Romanov tsars after the Napoleonic wars offered different versions of the same conundrum. They represented repression and autocracy at home – and occasionally botched attempts at reform – while joining the imperialist powers of Europe in territorial aggrandisement and the suppression of liberal nationalism, long after the other European powers had adjusted to the victory of such forces. Nicholas I joined with the other powers in suppressing European liberalism, just as he cracked down on it at home. In that respect he behaved like a European leader of the time. But if he was like them, he didn't want to be one of them. He strove to insulate Russia from the European mainstream, to protect it from the social and democratic contagion he saw growing in Western societies. In this respect, the Romanovs set the pattern that every Soviet leader from Lenin to Gorbachev and then Russia's Yeltsin to Putin have followed. They all aimed to draw what they valued from Western societies without taking on the evolving liberal democratic capitalism from which such advantages sprang. If Peter the Great and Catherine the Great sought to open Russia to the West, subsequent Tsars and Soviet leaders had always been very wary of the costs to their own repressed, social cohesion of doing so. Modern interdependence is not for Russia – even with the Central Asian and Chinese societies to

[1] *For a general history of these deeper trends see, Mark Galleotti, Forged in War: A military history of Russia from its beginnings to today, London, Osprey/Bloomsbury, 2024.*

which Putin's Russia increasingly leans. And the Moscow elites now regard the long years of 'peaceful coexistence' during the Cold War as a trap – simply a competition that Russia was always destined to lose as long as Western economies remained the dominant force in global politics. By extension, that idea goes even deeper. In 2014, justifying the annexation of Crimea, Putin characterised the Western policy of 'containment' not as something developed very specifically in 1946-7 but as something that had existed throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. "They," Western countries, he said, "are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position".[2]

The influential Sergey Karaganov, who heads Russia's Council for Foreign and Defence Policy, intellectualises much of this complex outlook. Russia has no choice but to move outwards, he believes, into its natural buffer zones, thereby to increase its own internal strength and integration. It must break decisively from Western Europe, he argues. It must only work with explicitly friendly states in Asia and among the BRICS countries (therefore, Brazil, India, China and South Africa).[3] It should be prepared to engage in pre-emptive war against the West,

"In February 2022, Putin crossed his own Rubicon with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. There was no way back after that either for him or for the rest of Europe."

including with nuclear weapons. Indeed, he has long argued that Russia would be justified in launching pre-emptive nuclear attacks against Western Europe simply to shock those countries into dropping all support for Kyiv. And he is convinced the US would not respond if it did.[4]

Nor is Moscow's current cynicism about the West only about strategic and economic competition. The 'Western contagion' that current Russian leaders claim to fear is of a modern Western moral degeneracy – the gays, the effete and the drug addicts of society – whom they think undermine the true values of the Orthodox Church and proper government. This is all embodied in Moscow's current, repressive version of Christian civilisation. Harking back a thousand years (ironically) to the Grand Prince of Kyiv, contemporary Russian leaders see themselves all at once as rightful imperialists, defenders of the motherland and, in so doing, acting as the true saviours of Western civilisation. The parallels between Vladimir Putin and Tsar Nicolas I are sometimes remarkable.

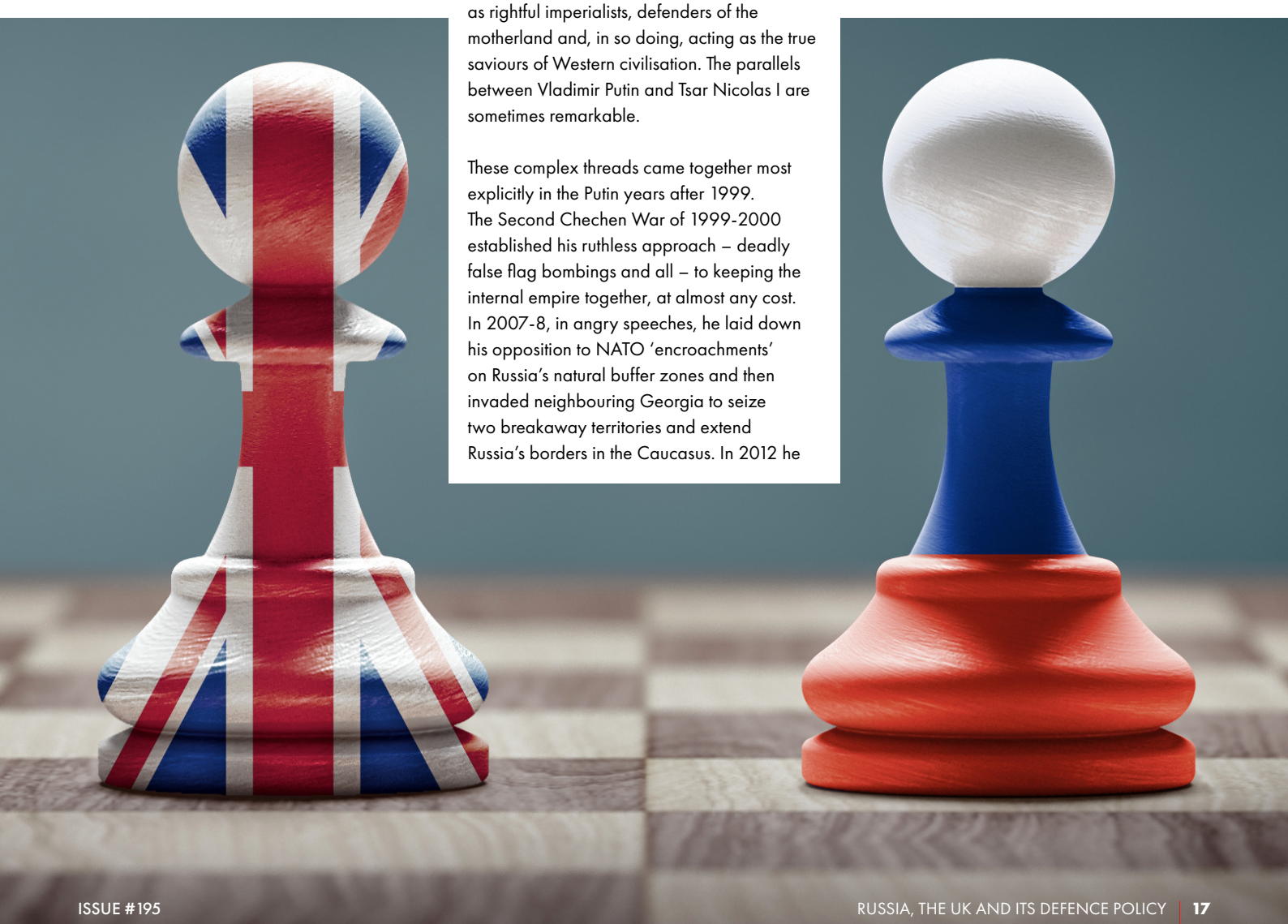
These complex threads came together most explicitly in the Putin years after 1999. The Second Chechen War of 1999-2000 established his ruthless approach – deadly false flag bombings and all – to keeping the internal empire together, at almost any cost. In 2007-8, in angry speeches, he laid down his opposition to NATO 'encroachments' on Russia's natural buffer zones and then invaded neighbouring Georgia to seize two breakaway territories and extend Russia's borders in the Caucasus. In 2012 he suppressed mass protests across Russian cities when he took on a third, unconstitutional, Presidential term and in 2014 took the opportunities offered by chaos in Ukraine to seize first Crimea and then – a few months later – about a third of the Ukrainian Donbas region. From that year, he aligned himself with the brutal President Assad of Syria, with the warlord insurgent General Haftar in Libya and – using his Wagner mercenary forces – made common cause with anyone in Africa, in or out of government, who attempted to undermine the existing order. In February 2022, Putin crossed his own Rubicon with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. There was no way back after that either for him or for the rest of Europe.

Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian Prime Minister and President, says many wild things, but he expressed a post-invasion truth for

[2] *Vladimir Putin, Speech to Duma, Federation Council and Heads of Russia's Regions 18 March 2014.*

[3] *Sergey Karaganov, 'An age of wars? Article Two. What is to be done?' Russia in Global Affairs, 21 February 2024.*

[4] *Stephen J. Cimbala and Lawrence J. Korb, 'Karaganov's case for Russian nuclear pre-emption: responsible strategizing or dangerous delusion', Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 21 August 2023.*

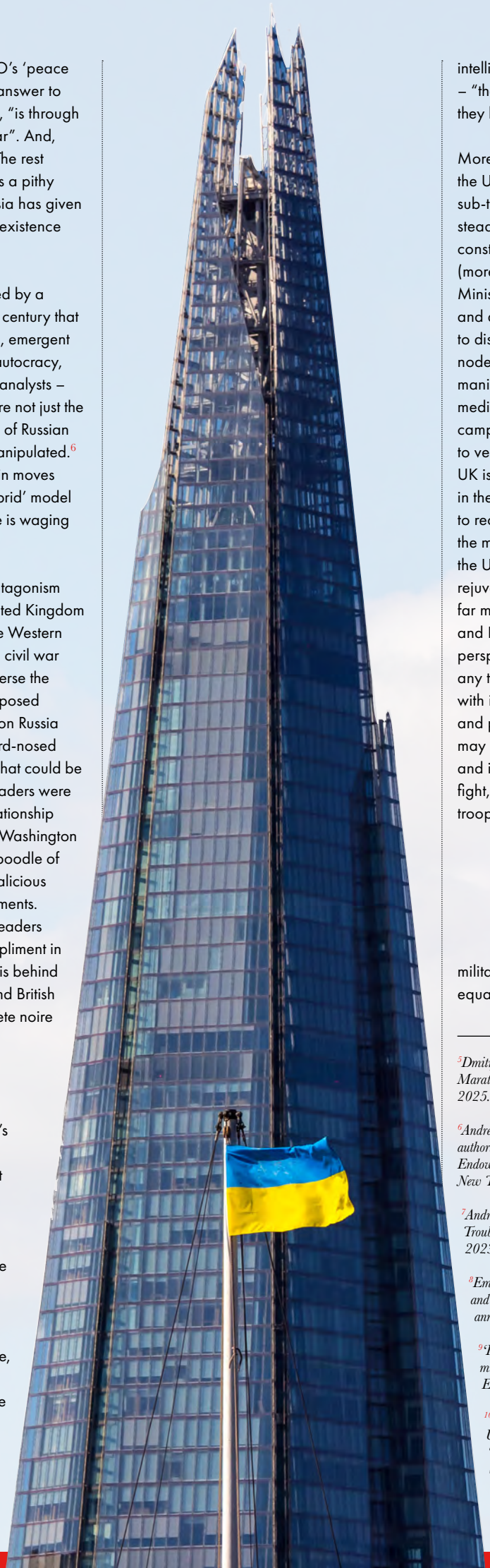


Moscow when he ridiculed NATO's 'peace through strength' motto. Russia's answer to "their vaunted principle," he said, "is through the doctrine of peace through fear". And, he added: "Fear is still working. The rest is zero."[5] 'Peace through fear'. It's a pithy expression of how far Putin's Russia has given up on any notion of peaceful co-existence with Western Europe.

And all this has been accompanied by a domestic transition over a quarter century that has taken Russia from a struggling, emergent democracy to a full, kleptocratic autocracy, and now – in the opinion of most analysts – into a 'hybrid totalitarianism' where not just the actions, but the individual thinking of Russian citizens must be controlled and manipulated.[6] Nor is it a coincidence that as Putin moves his country apparently from a 'hybrid' model towards straight totalitarianism, he is waging his fifth war in 25 years.

Set against all these trends, the antagonism Moscow displays towards the United Kingdom is hardly surprising. The UK led the Western world in intervening in the Russian civil war from 1918-22 in an attempt to reverse the Russian revolution. It staunchly opposed the Bolsheviks until Hitler's attack on Russia in 1941, and after 1945 it was hard-nosed throughout the Cold War about what could be expected from Moscow. Soviet leaders were always suspicious of the close relationship that London seemed to have with Washington – the British were seen both as a poodle of American presidents as well as malicious whisperers in their ears at key moments. Soviet leaders then, and Russian leaders now, pay the UK an inverted compliment in professing to believe that London is behind every conspiracy against them, and British intelligence remains a favourite bete noire for analysts in Russia.

Most immediately, the UK led the Europeans in bolstering the Biden Administration's reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and subsequently emerged as the most consistent European supporter of President Zelensky's attempts to fend off the Russian invasion. The Kremlin dubbed Boris Johnson "the most active anti-Russian leader" and that became a label of which subsequent prime ministers have been proud.[7] For that reason alone, state-controlled TV picks out the UK almost on a nightly basis as the country that should be attacked, nuked and made to pay for its hostility. As one Ukrainian intelligence chief remarked privately last year – "the Russians oppose the Americans because they have to; but they really hate you guys".



More than any other European country, the UK is now in the cross-hairs of Russia's sub-threshold, hybrid warfare which is steadily increasing. It operates through constant cyberattacks on UK defence assets (more than 90,000 to date according to the Ministry of Defence), attempted sabotage and assassination, subversion, preparations to disable cables, pipelines and infrastructure nodes and an onslaught of disinformation and manipulation of public opinion through social media. Moscow's strategic motives behind this campaign are not hard to imagine. In addition to vengeance, Moscow perceives that the UK isolated itself from its European partners in the Brexit process and will take some time to recover the political ground it lost among the major European powers. Simultaneously, the UK has found the alternative pole of a rejuvenated strategic relationship with the US far more difficult to sustain with both Trump and Biden Administrations. So from Moscow's perspective, the UK is more isolated than at any time since 1914 and can be picked off with increasingly active sub-threshold attacks, and plausibly threatened with attacks that may cross the threshold, especially at sea and in the air. To weaken the UK's ability to fight, or to complicate its ability to deploy troops and other forces, or to distract it with military problems that make it difficult for the UK to meet any urgent NATO commitments, would take an important military player out of Europe's strategic equation, perhaps at a time when the Alliance

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[5] *Dmitry Medvedev, speech to the Federal Educational Marathon: Knowledge First, reported in TASS, 29 April 2025.*

[6] *Andrew Kolesnikov, 'Putin's war has moved from Russian authoritarianism to hybrid totalitarianism', Carnegie Endowment Briefing, 19 April 2022 (first published in New Times in Russian).*

[7] *Andrew Gimson, Boris Johnson: The Rise and Fall of a Troublemaker at Number 10, London, Simon and Schuster, 2023, p. 390.*

[8] *Emma Soteriou, 'Putin vows to "finish off" Ukraine and mocks size of British Army after "reassurance force" announced', reported on LBC, 28 March 2025.*

[9] *'Russian anchor mocks British Army after UK pledges military aid to Ukraine, here's what he said', The Economic Times, 3 March 2025.*

[10] *Claire Gilbody Dickerson, 'Russia calls meeting with UK Ambassador after Lord Cameron says Ukraine "has right" to strike inside Russia with UK weapons', Sky News, 6 May 2024.*

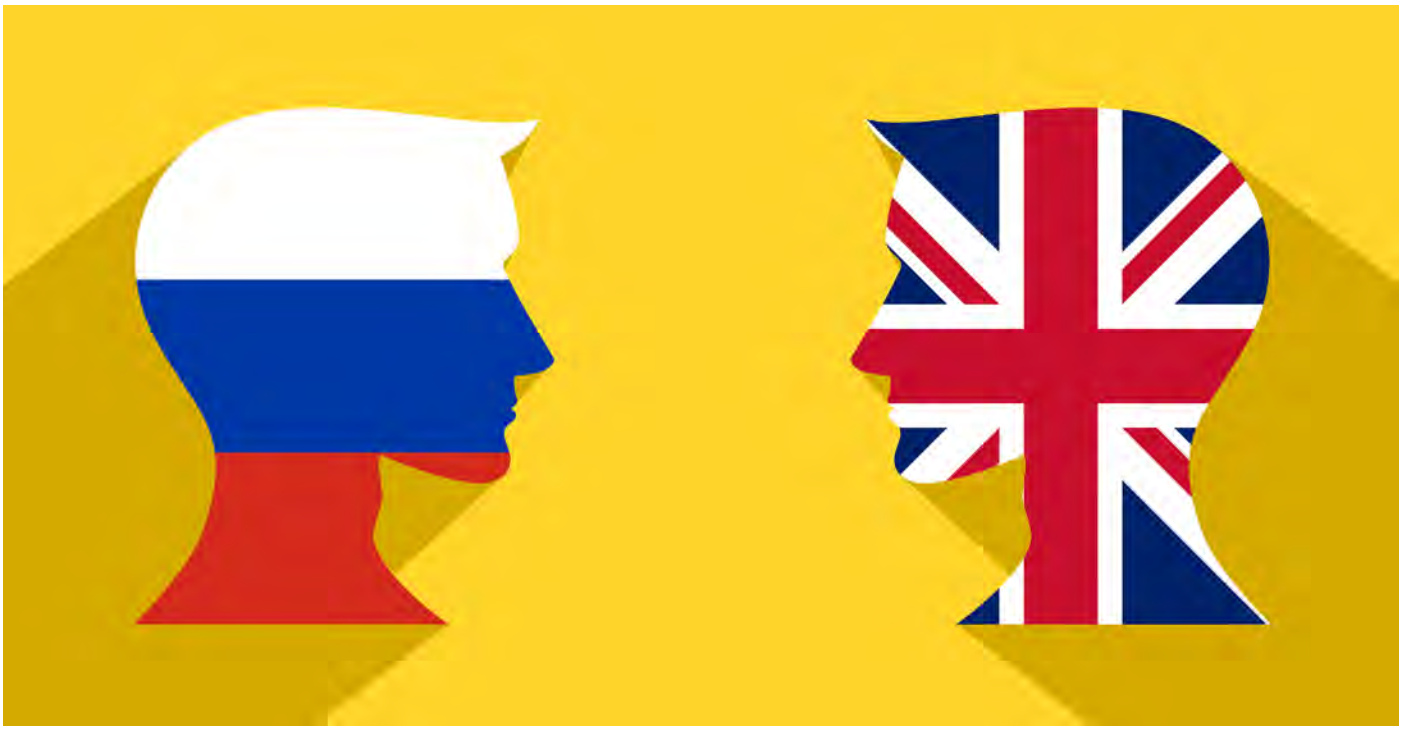
"The Kremlin dubbed Boris Johnson 'the most active anti-Russian leader' and that became a label of which subsequent prime ministers have been proud. For that reason alone, state-controlled TV picks out the UK almost on a nightly basis as the country that should be attacked, nuked and made to pay for its hostility. As one Ukrainian intelligence chief remarked privately last year – 'the Russians oppose the Americans because they have to; but they really hate you guys'."

most needs it. Not least, hurting the UK in some visible and meaningful way in the next couple of years – making an example of it – would, in Moscow's view, act as a warning to other European powers, particularly the smaller ones, of the consequences of erstwhile opposition to Russia's strategic ambitions; better to adjust somehow to Russian assertiveness than oppose it outright. Putting the UK in the cross-hairs in this way makes strategic sense in Moscow whether or not there is any ceasefire in Ukraine. If Russia gets a break from the war, it has the capacity to turn more resources against the UK. If it does not, it increases the immediate incentive to disrupt the UK as the strongest pillar of Europe's resolve to support Ukraine.

As Moscow contemplates such a generalised offensive against the UK, it is not clear how seriously it yet takes the 2025 Strategic Defence Review. For public consumption, Putin has mocked the size of the UK's Armed Forces, as being irrelevant to any 'reassurance' mission they might contemplate for Ukraine,[8] and Dmitry Kiselev, a well-known Russian news anchor, laughed at the British Army, since it would all fit inside Wembley Stadium and still leave room for some French troops.[9]

Moscow commentators and Russian defence ministry sources, of course, show consistent interest in UK submarine forces, deep strike evolution, in its Arctic missions and its abilities to offer high-readiness expeditionary forces to NATO operations. And its diplomats continue to maintain that UK weapons support for Ukraine is an ongoing British 'provocation' to Moscow that will potentially trigger dire consequences, such as direct attacks on UK military facilities abroad or even inside the UK itself.[10] But lacking the sort of numbers that Russia would now expect to field in any ground-based operations in Europe, it is so far unclear whether Russian analysts take seriously Britain's Strategic Defence Review ambition for the British Army to increase its lethality ten-fold by 2035 in a process of era-defining transformation.

The decade until then will, in any case, be era-defining in other strategic ways. If the analysis offered here is broadly correct, the UK (and probably its main European allies) have little choice over whether they will confront Russia in a militarised crisis well before 2035. We can only choose 'where', and perhaps 'when' – at sea over pipelines and cables, or Russia's 'dark fleet'; in the air over intrusions, operating a no-fly zone over the Black Sea or Ukraine directly, or attacks on NATO bases supporting Ukraine; or on the ground operating against irregular Russian forces inside one of the Baltic states, or similarly inside Moldova, right on Romania's border? There are so many potential crisis points. If Russia maintains its current course, the strategic problem for European leaders – almost certainly acting largely without the US – will be to decide where, and under what circumstances, our countries dig in their toes and confront the consequences.



MOSCOW'S MISREADING OF THE UK IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

AUTHOR

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WITH the war in Ukraine now in its fourth year, Russia has hardened its views on the fast-transforming world order and persists in overestimating its role in it. The long-promoted proposition of a multipolar world freed from Western domination remains a vision rather than an operational concept and Moscow demonstrates little appreciation of the intensity of competition that is likely to exist in such a power-centric construct of international relations – and certainly little in the way of acknowledgement that Russia could be a loser in this competition. The basic assumption in the official discourse is that all goals of the 'special military operation' will be achieved and no deviation from this assertion of victory, elusive as it is in reality, is allowed in domestic debates.[1] Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, experienced professional as he is, is reduced to amplifying crude propaganda and Russia's community of experts is increasingly disciplined and instructed to elaborate on his narratives.[2]

The war with Ukraine is perceived and presented as a key theatre in an existential confrontation with the inherently hostile West, and this eschatological worldview has acquired some important nuances since the start of 2025.[3] The much abused (and still ridiculously misconstrued) thesis about the 'Anglo-Saxon' hegemony in the Western coalition has disappeared, and the malevolence of condemnation of US policy has been radically toned down.[4] President Vladimir Putin's desire to cultivate a personal connection with President Donald Trump is a major driver of this change, but a greater goal is to exploit new tensions in transatlantic relations and to deepen divisions between the USA and Europe. Efforts to achieve this long-standing goal in Russian foreign and security policy have grown in intensity, and while Europe is castigated as a "war party", it is the UK that is singled out for particular criticism, primarily because of its role as a major promoter of continuing US involvement with European security.[5]

The discord between the UK and the EU was presumed to be a major fault-line in the Western coalition, but presently these relations are perceived as effectively restored, particularly in strategic terms, so London is seen as a key supporter and enabler of US engagement with Europe. The UK defence industry is fully integrated, according to Russian assessments, in the plans for European rearmament developed by the European Commission, while the funding for these ambitions is questioned.[6] High-level officials, such as Sergei Shoigu, Secretary

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[1] *Ivan Timofeev, "Three years of stress-test: Provisional results for Russia", Valdai club (in Russian), 19 March 2025.*

[2] *"Lavrov's top 5 fakes in the interview with Carlson", StopFake.org (in Russian), 7 December 2024; Andrei Kortunov, "Coalitions against blocks", RIAC (in Russian), 12 May 2025.*

[3] *Dmitri Trenin, "World War III has already begun", RIAC (in Russian), 16 July 2025.*

[4] *Graeme Herd, "The Atlanticist Anglo-Saxon Reich and all that: How Russia understands strategic confrontation", Connections, no. 2, 2024; Pavel Baev, "Moscow changes war rhetoric but stays war course", Eurasia Daily Monitor, 24 February 2025.*

[5] *Sergei Karaganov & Dmitri Vydrin, "We must subject Europe to long 'healing' starting from Ukraine", Russia in Global Affairs (in Russian), 14 March 2025; Natalya Eremina, "The causes of UK aggressiveness toward Russia", RIAC (in Russian), 2 June 2025.*

of the Security Council and former Minister of Defence, claim that European leaders are trying to deceive Trump and will cheat on their promises to increase military spending.[7] A propensity for dodging fiscal commitments is ascribed primarily to France and Southern European states, while the UK is believed to be fully committed to the guidelines set at the June 2025 NATO summit, which – if met – will provide a strong boost to the collective rearmament programme and, accordingly, be seen by Moscow as a serious escalation in direct military threats to Russia's security.[8]

The issue of the costs of expanding the defence-industrial base and building-up of armed forces is eagerly amplified by Russian commentators in anticipation of deepening political divisions and even social unrest in Europe.[9] As far as the UK is concerned, however, this matter is perceived as less divisive because of the firm support the priority of strengthening defence has received from all key political players. As a result, the analyses of think tanks such as the Russian International Affairs Council and the Institute of Europe, focus more on Germany and France as potential channels for derailing rearmament plans.[10] President Emmanuel Macron, for instance, is frequently ridiculed by Russian pundits. In respect of UK politicians, Boris Johnson remains the principal target for invective as Putin blames the former prime minister for sabotaging the Russia-Ukraine talks in Istanbul in spring 2022.[11]

The assumption of solid political support underpins Russian evaluations of the Strategic Defence Review 2025, which is seen as a much more realistic set of guidelines than the EU ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 plan.[12] The main focus of these assessments (of which there are few) is on the plans for modernising the UK's nuclear capabilities, and the opinions are ambivalent and inconclusive. On the one hand, the proposition for increasing the fleet of nuclear submarines to 12 is interpreted as an acceptance of a deeper dependency upon the USA, as is the modification of F-35A fighters for carrying B61 nuclear bombs.[13] On the other hand, the intention to strengthen nuclear cooperation with France and to provide nuclear guarantees to Germany under the framework of a new bilateral treaty are seen as manifestations of a desire to play a major role in the reconfigured European deterrence system.[14] The latter corresponds with Russia's long-standing demand for including the UK and France's nuclear capabilities in the general framework of strategic arms control, while the former explains Putin's preference for direct and open

"In respect of UK politicians, Boris Johnson remains the principal target for invective as Putin blames the former prime minister for sabotaging the Russia-Ukraine talks in Istanbul in spring 2022."

communications with his counterpart in the White House.

Moscow tends to underestimate the UK influence in global affairs and to downplay its work as part of the UN Security Council, assuming it to follow the US lead with few exceptions. In the Russia-centric grand geopolitical picture, the main dynamics (reinforced by the August 2025 Tianjin summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) can be found at play in the Asia-Pacific, and the UK is not seen as an influencer of any significance there. In Russia's immediate neighbourhood, one strategic theatre where the UK role is monitored with much concern – aggravated by Russia's new position of weakness – is the Baltic Sea region.[15] The coalition of Nordic and Baltic states has organised effective maritime counter-measures against Russian 'hybrid' operations and movements of its 'shadow fleet' of tankers, and officials – such as Nikolai Patrushev, Putin's aide and the chair of the Maritime Board – threaten forceful responses knowing very well the pitiful state of the Russian Baltic Fleet.[16] This coalition of small states is apparently leaderless, and Moscow is concerned that the UK can play a key role in ensuring its cohesion and determination.[17]

The main lens in Russian analysis of the UK's foreign and security policy remains the Ukraine war, and London is perceived as one of the staunchest supporters of both Kyiv's maximalist demands and President Volodymyr Zelensky. The UK leadership in building a coalition of those willing to deploy peacekeeping troops to Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire is particularly deplored given the presence of any NATO forces on their doorstep is resolutely unacceptable to Russia.[18]

This view contradicts the traditional perception of the UK as the most loyal and dependable US ally in Europe, and Russian analysts cannot quite reconcile the assumption of the UK government's unwavering readiness to follow guidelines drawn in Washington D.C. with the apparent difference between the firmly pro-Ukrainian position in London and the ambivalent course of the Trump administration.

The persistent propaganda portrayal of UK policy being malignantly 'Russophobic' influences not only war-deformed public opinion but also the perceptions and expectations of Russia's ruling elite, which has lost all illusions about London being a safe haven for depositing the fruits of corruption. The UK is presumed to be resistant to nuclear blackmail, fortified against 'hybrid' attacks and immune to interference in domestic politics, which makes it a more formidable strategic opponent than the size of its economy and the numerical measures of its military capabilities would warrant.

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[6] *"European Rearmament. How the European Commission plans relate to the budget realities and capacities of the defense-industrial complex", Report of the RosCongress Foundation (in Russian), 14 April 2025.*

[7] *Sergei Shoigu, "NATO is one of the key threats to the Russian Federation national security", interview with Kommersant (in Russian), 16 July 2025.*

[8] *Aleksandr Yakovenko, "Europe has begun preparations for war with Russia", RIA-Novosti (in Russian), 14 July 2025.*

[9] *Elizaveta Borisenko & Kirill Fenin, "Fruits of armament: Social programs in Europe will be cut down because of expenditures on NATO", Izvestiya (in Russian), 11 August 2025.*

[10] *Elena Ananyeva, "Will Keir Starmer get enough money for both guns and butter?", International Affairs (in Russian), 19 March 2025.*

[11] *Aleksei Podymov & Aleksei Chichkin, "How far is France from the Northern seas", TopWar.ru (in Russian), 18 July 2025; Dmitri Sokolov, "He said – Go fight. Putin blamed Johnson for breaking the talks in Istanbul", AiF.ru (in Russian), 19 December 2024.*

[12] *Evgeny Makarov, "Review of the UK Strategic Defence 2025", RIAC (in Russian), 10 July 2025; Kirill Ryabov, "The UK published Strategic Defence Review 2025", TopWar.ru, 5 June 2025.*

[13] *Prohor Tebin & Dmitri Stefanovich, "Make Britain great again? New Strategic Defence Review: Evaluation of Feasibility", Russia in Global Affairs (in Russian), 1 August 2025.*

[14] *Timofei Bordachev "The Berlin-London alliance adds to the absurdity of Western policy", Vzglyad (in Russian), 18 July 2025; Aleksei Chihachev, "Franco-British dialogue: Restoring Antante?" Valdai club (in Russian), 14 August 2025.*

[15] *Nadezhda Arbatova, "Escalation in the Baltic gears up", Nezavisimaya gazeta (in Russian), 1 June 2025.*

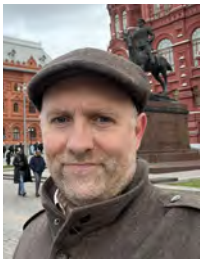
[16] *"The Baltic becomes an area of instability because of NATO, said Patrushev", RIA-Novosti (in Russian), 31 July 2025; Aleksandr Timohin, "Slowly but surely: The West prepares for war in the Baltic", TopWar.ru (in Russian), 12 August 2025.*

[17] *Evgeny Astapov, "British foreign policy on containing Russia in the Northern Europe", RIAC (in Russian), 19 March 2025.*

[18] *Vladimir Muhin, "London gathers a foundation for the coalition of the willing", Nezavisimaya gazeta (in Russian), 3 April 2025; Roman Sumin, "Crumbling 'coalition of the willing' invented a new plan for Ukraine", Ura.ru (in Russian), 19 August 2025.*

BRITAIN'S CULTURAL CACHET IN RUSSIA

AUTHOR



Alexander Hill gained his PhD from Peterhouse, Cambridge in 2001 and, since 2004, has been a member of faculty at the University of Calgary in Canada, where he is currently a Professor in Military History.

WHILE the author has interacted with many 'ordinary' Russians during three decades of research in – and engagement with – Russia, his dealings have been disproportionally with professional historians (particularly military historians), military veterans and more recently foreign affairs specialists. Many of the former and latter, themselves veterans of military service during the Soviet period, have close links with government circles or indeed conduct their academic activities under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence or Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Their opinions and attitudes can therefore be taken as having some influence on – and are also undoubtedly strongly influenced by – attitudes within government and the armed forces. They are, almost exclusively, of the author's generation or older in terms of age and therefore all had meaningful experience of the Soviet period, even if only the closing years in some cases.

Sadly, and as would be the case the other way round, the opinions of many of the above towards Britain and its armed forces have to be understood in the context of the time they were expressed. Consequently, Russian views shared during the mid-1990s often have to be considered through a lens of sadness or even bitterness over the collapse of the Soviet Union, and sometimes lingering suspicions from the first Cold War. Into the 2000s – as Russia's economic situation started to improve and in light of more than a decade of fairly open engagement with the West – we perhaps reached a point at which contemporary political factors had the lowest impact on opinions over the 30-year period in question. Of course, since the end of the first decade of the new millennium – as frictions between Russia and the West began to increase in intensity – tensions started to sway attitudes towards Britain and her armed forces, but that influence only became stark from the spring of 2022.

A good indicator of how current political context has influenced views in a broad sense is in attitudes towards the value of British 'Lend-Lease' aid to the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Perhaps the most balanced Russian appraisals of the value of that support were made during the late 1990s and into the 2000s – at a time when generally cordial relations (increasingly between equals) fostered reasonable assessment.[1] Indeed,

[1] *A late example is collected work to which the author contributed published in both English and Russian, is M.N. Suprun (ed.), Lend-Lease and [the] Arctic Convoys: From Regional Co-operation Towards Global Competition (Arkhangelsk: NARFU, 2021), the full version of which can be found at elibrary.ru/download/elibrary_47381892_13520791.pdf [Accessed 13 August 2025].*

it is only really since Putin launched his full-scale invasion of Ukraine that many Russian academic publications have switched to a noticeably more negative stance regarding Britain in general, and specifically aspects of her military history. To use the specific example of Lend-Lease, prior to the 'special operation' Russian authors were undoubtedly more likely than today to point out the strengths of British tanks supplied to the Red Army (reliability, systems and 'user friendliness' et al), rather than solely their weaknesses (such as the inadequacies of the two-pounder gun on Matildas and earlier Valentines or the fact that British tanks were not designed with ice and deep snow in mind). Of course, the Soviet Union and Russia quite rightly have had considerable pride in their wartime tanks, which is also a factor in this equation. When commenting on the quality of British naval equipment provided under Lend-Lease, however, regardless of when doing so, the trend has been towards the positive given the then clear British lead in shipbuilding and certain aspects of naval technology such as ASDIC [Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee].

In the current political climate, albeit still with the likely exception of naval equipment, the value of such wartime assistance is certainly more likely to be disparaged than it was. It is important to note, however, that the same politicised trends are evident in the English-language historiography. Hence, for example, since 2014 – and particularly 2022 – the tone of many English-language works on the Soviet contribution to victory over Nazi Germany (known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War) has become much more negative, with the Soviet role downplayed. This is evident in the works of Philipps O'Brien and Sean McMeekin (although, interestingly, neither of these is British by birth, even if the former was educated partly in the UK and teaches in a British university).[2] Indeed, the author of this piece has turned down collaborations with fellow Western (including British) historians on the grounds that they have allowed current events to influence the tone and sometimes content of their historical writing. To some extent Russian historians and other practitioners see themselves as responding to such trends in the Western historiography in what in reality is something of a chicken and egg situation. Nonetheless, with regards to Britain's history, in some ways the overall Russian response to current political circumstances is less extreme than that in the West towards Russia. Even during a recent visit to the Victory Park museum complex in Moscow there was a relatively new exhibit that provided some very reasonable elements in its assessment of the value of Lend-Lease, at a time when in the West a comparable exhibit would probably have simply been 'cancelled'.[3] Consistently intense and all-encompassing Russian ire – be it in the presentation of history or current events – is reserved for Ukraine.

Russian attitudes towards Britain and her armed forces – including her contribution to victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War – undoubtedly have to be understood in the context of what is often a favourable core disposition towards things British. To a large extent this isn't based on Britain as a contemporary military and political actor, but on Britain as an historical power and 'civilisation' – an important notion in contemporary Russian political discourse. A much wider range of older Russians are well versed in English literature and culture than would be the case for British people for Russian culture. Despite historical tensions between Russia and Britain at numerous points over the last few hundred years – be that during the Crimean War, 'Great Game' of the 19th century or during the long Cold War of the 20th century – there has certainly been a respect for Britain's cultural inheritance and history as a 'Great' and imperial power.

"Despite historical tensions between Russia and Britain at numerous points over the last few hundred years there has certainly been a respect for Britain's cultural inheritance and history as a 'Great' and imperial power."

In terms of Britain's military power, that respect has undoubtedly been strongest for those areas in which Russia has for much of the past been weaker, and especially in terms of naval power as previously highlighted. Indeed, even by the late Cold war period – when Soviet naval power was considerably greater than that of the UK alone – there has been a strong respect for Britain's naval traditions and capabilities. For example, the Russian language literature on the Falklands War tends to be positive about Britain's ability to recapture the islands despite the decline of British naval power after 1945, with an article on the government-linked Russian Historical Society going as far as suggesting that "the war helped Great Britain regain a position of confidence on the world stage, lost after declarations of independence of former colonies and defeat in the Suez Crisis".[4] Respect reserved for the Royal Navy – founded in part on success in that undertaking – has tended to be the most persistent amongst the branches of the British armed forces for a number of reasons beyond the Falklands War and the strength of Britain's naval traditions. One of those reasons is undoubtedly that interaction between the Royal Navy and Soviet or Russian navies has been more frequent and meaningful than interactions between the Royal Air Force or British Army and their Soviet and Russian equivalents. While David Fields and Robert Avery's recent book, *The Royal and Russian Navies: Co-operation, Competition and Confrontation*, adds some flesh to this assertion for the late 1980s onwards, it is important to note that prior to this interaction between the

[2] *See Philips Payson O'Brien, How the War was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II (Cambridge: CUP, 2015) and Sean McMeekin, Stalin's War: A New History Of World War II (New York: Basic Books, 2021).*

[3] *See victorymuseum.ru/projects/park-pobedy [Accessed 13 August 2025].*

[4] *See Дарья Денисова, "21 мая 1982 года английские войска высадились на Фолклендских островах", 21 May 2022, at historyrussia.org/sobytiya/21-maya-1982-goda-nachalas-bitva-pri-san-karlose.html [Accessed 13 August 2025].*

[5] *David Fields and Robert Avery, The Royal and Russian Navies: Co-operation, Competition and Confrontation (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025).*

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Royal Navy and Soviet Navy was often not only relatively frequent but more personal than contact between other branches.[5] Such interactions occurred on many levels – from face-to-face engagements during Ethiopia's Navy Days in the late 1960s and early 1970s to more distant but apparently still meaningful encounters during day-to-day operations at sea during the Cold War. For example, during a visit to the post-1945 Soviet naval archives in Gatchina in the late 1990s, the then head of the archive – a naval officer – waxed lyrical to the author about the often good-natured encounters he had with British ships and their captains at sea during his Cold War service.

This last anecdote starts to get at something significant in the attitudes of Russians in the groups concerned towards Britain prior to February 2022 – namely the fact that many of those concerned do not view Britain's participation in the first Cold War as overall being as committed as others. For many Russians the Cold War was primarily a struggle between the US and USSR – with Britain playing at best a supporting role. There are, of course, good factual reasons Russians concerned often hold such a view – from the post-1945 Labour government's sale of Rolls Royce Nene jet engines to the USSR through to the fact that the UK did not participate directly in the war in Vietnam, and indeed that a British team attended the Moscow Olympics in 1980. It is not an unreasonable argument to make that Britain was not quite as invested in the first Cold War as America. Many of the Russians that the author has spoken to over the years see Britain as having been a much more pragmatic – and less ideological – actor than the US (President Trump excepted). For many that pragmatism is perhaps best illustrated by Winston Churchill and Iosif Stalin's wartime percentages agreement of 1944. Which brings me to February 2022 – at which point Britain seems in the eyes of many of the Russians concerned to have lost its pragmatism and taken up an ideologically zealous position that is uncharacteristic and against its longer-term interests.

Under Boris Johnson's leadership wider attitudes towards Britain certainly reached something of a nadir in circles in Russia within which the author has mixed on numerous occasions since February 2022. Back in the autumn of 2022 Russia had suffered a number of battlefield reverses in Ukraine – and Britain was clearly at the forefront of efforts to support Ukraine militarily. Boris Johnson is widely seen, with good reason, as having played a major role in preventing Russia and Ukraine coming to some sort of peace agreement in the spring of 2022. During a visit to Russia during the autumn of 2022 I had a number of conversations that involved Russian colleagues expressing incredulity at Britain's stance. The British government was seen as not only being hypocritical (consider NATO operations in Yugoslavia and Libya) but also acting against its longer-term interests (in terms of access to Russian markets and cheap Russian energy). While the bemusement at Britain's position has not disappeared, since then Russia's battlefield position has improved considerably and fear of Western technology – such as Storm Shadow missiles and Challenger tanks – has subsided as the Russian armed forces have adapted to their presence on the battlefield and gained the upper hand in the war. The apparent failure (at times expressed by the Ukrainian side) of British and other European training of Ukrainian troops to ready them for conditions they will find on the battlefield in Ukraine has undoubtedly further contributed to a diminishing of overt respect for the British Army.

Finally, President Trump's election in 2024 has had a considerable impact on attitudes towards the importance of not only the UK but other European countries for the war in Ukraine. While Kier Starmer's attempts to keep Britain at the centre of a coalition to support Ukraine have garnered media attention in Russia, the lack of ability of smaller powers like Britain, France and Germany to provide meaningful ongoing assistance on their own has been widely stressed. Certainly, Trump's decision to negotiate with Putin without European involvement contributed to notions that Britain and increasingly close European allies have only very limited sway and significance.

While images of Britain and her armed forces in Russia have undoubtedly been damaged by Britain's position over the Ukraine War since February 2022, they both arguably still have considerable cultural capital and prestige on which they could draw within Russia should they wish to renew constructive engagement there in the future.

PLANES, TRAINS AND *ARMY*-MOBILES

AUTHORS

Major General Phil Prosser has been Director Joint Support since February 2023 and is the lead Joint User for the end-to-end Supply Chain.

Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Ekman (RLC) serves in Defence Supply Chain Operations and Movements, where he and his team support the strategic deployment, sustainment and recovery of UK Forces.

"The peace dividend encouraged strategic complacency; we must now regain the initiative."

AS the United Kingdom sharpens its defence posture in response to the most serious and unpredictable threats since the Cold War, the ability to project force at scale and pace from the country's mainland has become imperative. The 2025 Strategic Defence Review identifies warfighting readiness, NATO leadership and national resilience as core objectives.[1] At the heart of these ambitions lies a critical capability: the UK Strategic Base Outload (SBO).

SBO is the mechanism by which UK Defence deploys its land, air and maritime forces from national territory to theatres of operation. In a future characterised by contested logistics, congested infrastructure and hybrid threats, SBO must evolve into a multi-modal, multi-nodal system that is resilient, integrated and nationally enabled.

THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE

Deploying a brigade or division from the UK to continental Europe is a monumental logistical undertaking. A brigade deploying for 30 days may require 4,000 personnel, 2,400 vehicles and 700 containers. A division, such as 3(UK) Division, could exceed 20,000 personnel, 14,000 vehicles and 6,500 containers. This scale of movement cannot be supported by military ports and airbases alone. It demands a distributed, civilian-enabled network of seaports, airports and railheads across the UK.

THE THREAT: CONTESTED LOGISTICS

Adversaries are likely to attempt disruption of UK force projection even before operations begin. This could involve cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, sabotage and physical interference with supply chains. As a result, the UK must be prepared to conduct SBO operations in a contested environment

[1] *gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-defence-and-security-review-2025*

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"Exercise Hedgehog 25... successfully deployed more than 1,700 personnel and 500 vehicles across 1,500 miles using air, sea, road and rail. A key achievement was the UK's first Eurostar troop movement in 30 years, which saw 370 troops travel from St Pancras, London, to Brussels."

where speed, redundancy and national coordination are essential.

Logistic disruption activity may present itself in several forms. Disinformation and influence operations could exploit social media and digital platforms to spread false narratives, incite protests or workforce strikes, and create confusion around military movements. These actions might lead to road blockages, port disruptions or legal challenges to deployment activities. Cyber and electronic warfare could target logistics software, port control systems or rail networks, causing delays or misdirection of critical materiel. The vulnerability of the UK's military logistic information systems could make these outcomes more likely. Physical disruption might include sabotage of key infrastructure, insider threats or proxy actors targeting convoys and depots, all of which could slow operations and increase risk. Legal and bureaucratic mechanisms such as environmental regulations, labour laws or customs procedures might also be exploited to delay or obstruct military activities.

THE REALITY: CONGESTED INFRASTRUCTURE

Even without direct interference from adversaries, the UK's infrastructure will be under significant pressure during national mobilisation. Several factors will contribute to this congestion. Civilian demands will compete with military needs as industries bring in critical stocks, medical facilities procure supplies and commercial logistics continue at a high tempo. In a crisis, roads and transport hubs may become overwhelmed by displaced populations, making military convoy movements more difficult and less predictable. Resources such as fuel, power, transport assets and warehousing space will be in high demand, with both public and private actors competing for access. Infrastructure at ports, airfields, railheads and connecting road networks will likely be operating at or beyond capacity, increasing the risk of bottlenecks and delays.

The combination of contestation and congestion creates a uniquely complex operating environment. SBO must therefore be designed to function effectively under pressure, rather than relying on ideal conditions.

THE SOLUTION: NATIONAL INTEGRATION

SBO is not just a military responsibility. It is a national effort that requires coordinated convoy movements and force protection, synchronised use of national infrastructure and strong civil-military liaison with devolved governments and local authorities. It also involves hosting and supporting NATO allies on UK soil.

Exercise Hedgehog 25 demonstrated this integrated approach in practice.[2] Enabled by Defence Supply Chain Operations and Movements and Project Puma within Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Support Operations), the exercise successfully deployed more than 1,700 personnel and 500 vehicles across 1,500 miles using air, sea, road and rail. A key achievement was the UK's first Eurostar troop movement in 30 years, which saw 370 troops travel from St Pancras, London, to Brussels. This success was made possible through strategic planning, civil-military collaboration, diplomatic coordination and innovation in rail logistics.

THE ROLE OF INDUSTRY: PARTNERS IN POWER PROJECTION

The UK's new agreement with Associated British Ports marks a significant shift from Military Aid to Civil Authorities toward Civil Aid to Military Authorities.[3] The designation of the Port of Immingham as a strategic point of embarkation provides additional deployment options that enhance resilience and redundancy. It also increases speed and capacity while reducing risk through geographic dispersion. This partnership strengthens national resilience and supports the Strategic Defence Review's vision of Defence as a driver of national growth.

THE SBO HEADQUARTERS: COORDINATING THE NATIONAL EFFORT

The SBO Headquarters, led by Defence Supply Chain Operations and Movements, is responsible for planning and executing the Ministry of Defence's strategic outload in line with the operational plan set by the Permanent Joint Headquarters. Its responsibilities include producing the materiel breakout plan and the coupling bridge plan, coordinating national movements, regulating the flow of materiel and issuing orders to deliver the Joint Commander's

[2] *army.mod.uk/news-and-events/news/2025/05/exercise-hedgehog-25*

[3] *abports.co.uk/news-and-media/latest-news/2025/abp-sign-landmark-agreement-with-mod-to-boost-logistics-capability*

detailed deployment plan. It also maintains a logistics common operating picture to ensure situational awareness and coordination.

Recent SBO wargames have highlighted the importance of a pre-prepare phase, which is a period of activity before a formal activation order is issued. This phase enables early chartering, materiel preparation and regulatory flexibility. To be effective, it must be properly funded and governed, with the National Armaments Director proposed as the lead authority.

STRATEGIC FRICTION POINTS

The aforementioned wargames identified several unresolved challenges:

- Command ambiguity between National Defence (cross Government), Home Defence (Military), National Resilience and SBO.
- Funding constraints under the 'costs lie where they fall' model.
- Lack of realism in training, with limited use of war stocks and with short-notice planning and activation.

> "The Strategic Base Outload is the golden thread that links national resilience, NATO credibility and operational success. In a contested and congested environment, it must be reimagined as a whole-of-nation capability which is joint, distributed and resilient."

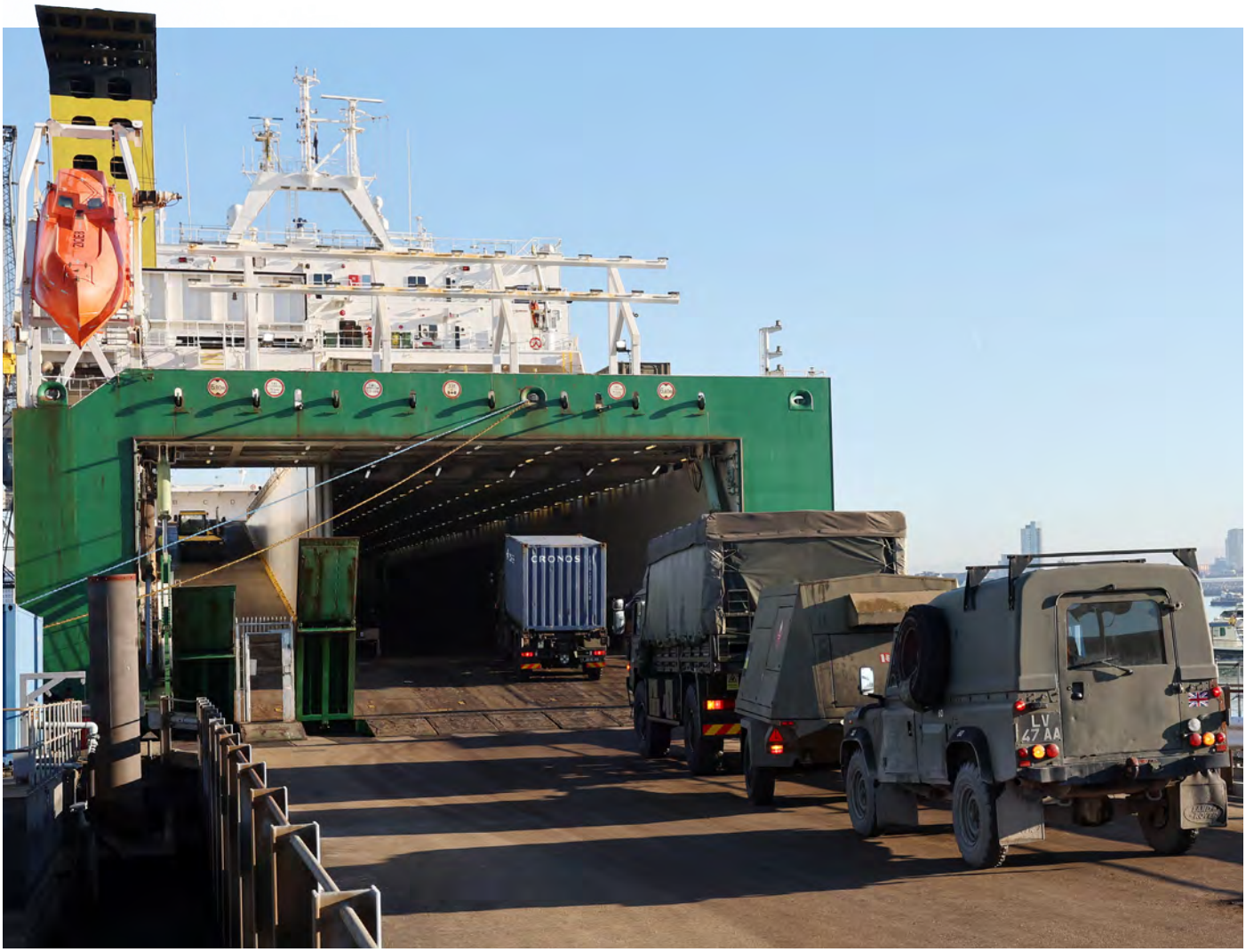
- Inadequate National Movements Coordination Centre capability, requiring a joint support enabler to coordinate national movements.
- Regulatory and legislative barriers, such as working-time directives and explosive limits, which may need to be lifted under Part 2 (Emergency Powers) of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

REFORM AND THE WAY AHEAD

With Defence Reform and the Strategic Defence Review providing a moment of reflection, coupled with SBO and industry wargame outcomes, we have an opportunity to deliver on a number of new initiatives that address our SBO risks, cohered through the redesigned Agile Stance Campaign Plan. We have the opportunity to bring about demonstrable change by giving the Agile Stance Campaign Plan's 2* and 1* leads the authority against a unifying goal, as set out in the Security Defence Review, to move to warfighting readiness. By seizing this opportunity, Defence can ensure that SBO becomes a fully integrated, nationally-enabled capability that is ready to meet the demands of future conflict.

CONCLUSION

The SBO is the golden thread that links national resilience, NATO credibility and operational success. In a contested and congested environment, it must be reimagined as a whole-of-nation capability which is joint, distributed and resilient. The UK has made significant strides, but more must be done to institutionalise SBO as a core Defence function, and a cross-Government activity. The time to act is now; credibility is deterrence. The threats are real, the scale is daunting and the stakes are high. But with the right partnerships, planning and political will, the UK can ensure that when the call comes, its forces will be able to deploy.



WARFIGHTING COROLLARIES: EXAMINING 20-40-40 AS A SYSTEM IN CONTACT

AUTHOR

Major Chris Adams has just finished commanding an armoured engineer squadron and is now in Pers Strat within Army HQ. He is a graduate of the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies and has operational experience from Afghanistan and Iraq.

AT Crecy in 1346, English longbowmen defeated a far larger force through shaping approaching enemies to set the conditions for an unfair fight in the close. In plain speak, they brought half a million bodkin arrows to the fight and used them at every opportunity. When the English forced echelon changes, they would use the ensuing lull to bound forward and collect spent arrows, treating them as more than mere ammunition, but rather a reusable resource that they would happily consume.[1] Very little of the force was survivable per se. The blind King John of Bohemia died in the battle, while King Phillip VI of France had two horses killed under him – demonstrating that even royalty was far from survivable in the 14th century.[2]

In the vast Napoleonic wars of the early 19th century, line infantry was at best attritable. Comprehensive histories – such as Chandler's – frequently recount the capturing of artillery pieces instead of people though, implying guns were deemed more valuable and survivable than people.[3] If the delineation between consumable, attritable and survivable is based on the comparative ease with which a country can regenerate capability, this makes sense in the context of levee-en-masse.[4]

Far more recently, the Russian Federation has treated convicts as consumables, showing that where human life sits on this scale can vary between sides in the same conflict.[5]

These examples highlight that a sliding scale of desired survivability, as described in the British Army's latest operating concept, consistently appears across space and time. A balance between consumption, attrition and survivability is thus a part of the nature of war. The ever-changing character is evident in where human lives sit on that scale.

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[1] *Andrew Ayton and Phillip Preston, The Battle of Crecy, 1346, Warfare in History (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2019), 359–61, web.archive.org/web/20190205171146/http://1.droppdf.com/files/dqXZZ/the-battle-of-crecy-1346.pdf*

[2] *Ayton and Preston, 150.*

[3] *David G. Chandler, The Campaigns of Napoleon (New York: Scribner, 1995), pts. 16, Chapter 83.*

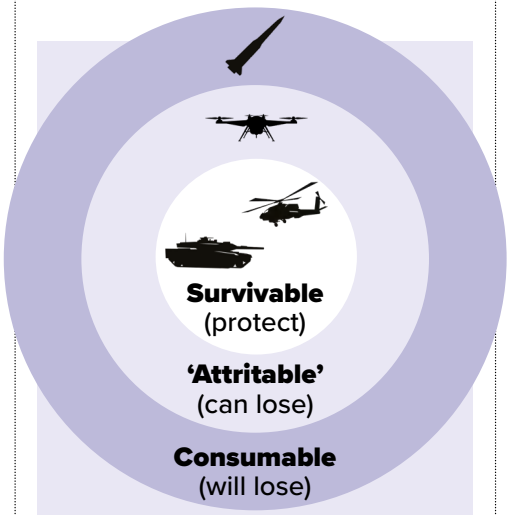
[4] *Macgregor Knox, "Mass Politics and Nationalism as Military Revolution: The French Revolution and After," in The Dynamics of Military Revolution 1300 - 2050, ed. Williamson Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 57–73.*

[5] *"Ukraine War: Russia's 'meat Assaults' Batter Ukraine's Defences," July 3, 2024, bbc.com/news/articles/c80xjne8ryxo*

This article explores the corollaries of warfighting with a force that is divided into consumable, attritable and survivable elements. First it analyses contemporary research to credit existing ideas and baseline the reader's knowledge. It then transitions to explore the 20-40-40 concept [see inset graphic right] from front to back, offering deductions and recommendations along the way, before concluding.

EXISTING IDEAS

An army that relies on uncrewed systems for the vast majority of its force is not necessarily smaller (as Jack Watling describes brilliantly in his *War on the Rocks* article *Automation does not lead to leaner land forces*).[6] This assertion applies both in terms of the team that operates an uncrewed platform and their associated force protection through to the maintenance and sustainment that allow such a capability as a whole to be truly consumable.



THREE RINGS OF LETHALITY

Survivable (20%) / Attritable (40%)
Consumable (40%)

One solution to increasing lethality per person is the promise of autonomous systems; platforms that can move, decide and possibly sustain themselves with little to no human interaction. But we are not there yet. Emma Bates and Ryan Quick describe how a truly autonomous system is a resilient self-contained distributed system that is not reliant on reach-back to a cloud for its computing power or decision making.[7]

How such systems connect with the rest of the force through the information dimension is integral to a successful 20-40-40 concept.

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[6] *Jack Watling, "Automation Does Not Lead to Leaner Land Forces," War on the Rocks, February 7, 2024, warontherocks.com/2024/02/automation-does-not-lead-to-leaner-land-forces*

[7] *Emma Bates and S. Ryan Quick, "Drones Aren't Swarming Yet — But They Could," War on the Rocks, August 4, 2025, warontherocks.com/2025/08/drones-arent-swarming-yet-but-they-could*

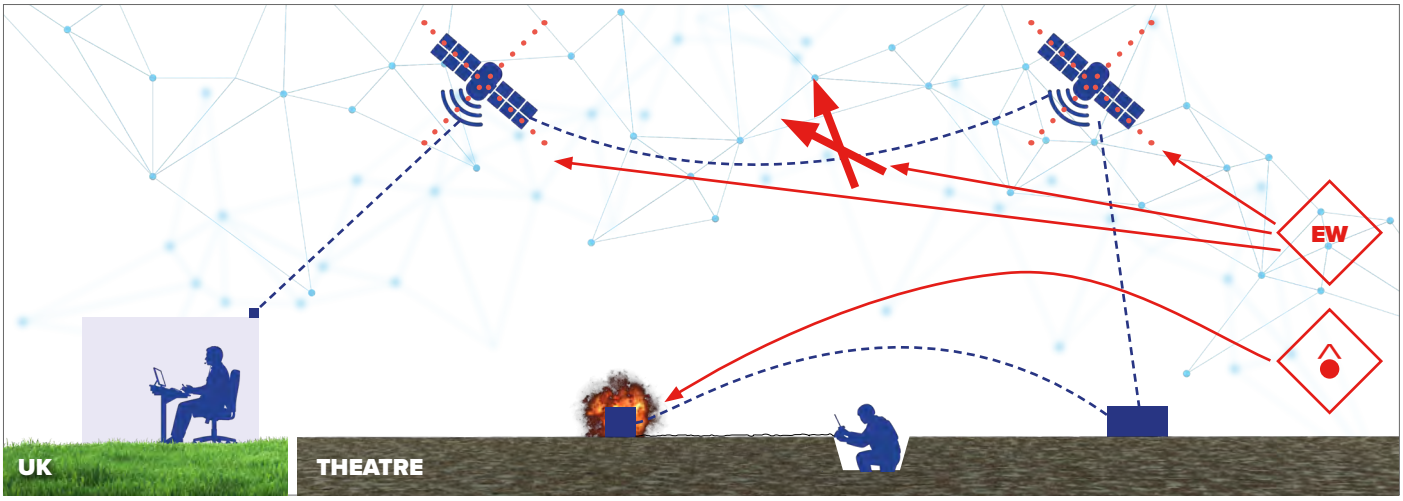

Figure 1: Visualisation of how ground control station locations define the British Army's critical vulnerabilities

In large part this is because the principles of electronic warfare, as described in a recent RUSI paper, are firmly anchored in physics and are unavoidable.[8] This matters for a force seeking to maximise the use of uncrewed attritable and consumable force elements because the structure of the force makes ground control stations critical requirements for mission success. Their associated emissions also make them critical vulnerabilities to be targeted and exploited.[9] This forces a significant design decision on the British Army; does it opt for ground control stations hundreds of miles away, where the critical vulnerability becomes the security of the communications network that connects operator to platform? Or does it opt for dispersed ground control stations closer to the front, that can rely more on dispersion and more traditional emissions control measures to survive? As it transitions from literature review to analysis, this article will offer a considered answer.

Of course, the British Army is not the only force trying to modernise. Russia and Ukraine are doing so at pace to claw for relative advantage, while partners and allies try to conduct more deliberate change.[10] Some of the best minds in the US Army are already conceptualising the doctrinal concepts that will help plan and execute operations with robotic and autonomous systems. For example, Doctor Jim Greer's research on inter-meshing human and autonomous systems includes battlespace management ideas such as the *Forward Line of Humans*, and the same for robotics, and autonomous systems. A central theme in this research is also mutual trust between human and machine decision makers, meaning the trust and cohesion of the moral component will become a lot more complex to understand, protect and target.[11]

The US Army's transformation from Vietnam to Iraq also provides a brilliant example of how true capability revolution is so much more than just equipment. The US Army rewrote doctrine through 1976's Active Defense and subsequent iterations of AirLand Battle in 1982, 1986 and 1993. They instilled this new doctrine (using MILES [Multiple Integrated Laser Enagement System]) in simultaneously created national training centres, that form the bedrock of how we collectively train today. They created Training and Doctrine Command to cohere the vast change in the conceptual component, and founded the School of Advanced Military Studies to generate disciples that could drag commanders and staffs into the future. Only in the context of this massive change did they develop new equipment capable of delivering the envisioned doctrine, known as the big five: Abrams, Bradley, Patriot, Blackhawk

"Which cap badge is best placed to own the evolution of the consumable capabilities? One answer is a new cap badge, with its own pay spine for the minds that can adapt algorithms and write code in contact."

and Apache.[12] Throughout all of this, and especially between 1976 and 1982, there was lively debate in professional journals that refined concepts. In a similar way, this article aspires to contribute to a comparable collaborative effort in the British Army. In short, if the Service is going to truly transform its way of war, its pan-Defence Lines of Development change efforts need to be of a similar scale and embrace debate.

With these ideas primed, the article now transitions to explore the 20-40-40 concept from front to back, emphasising key deductions or recommendations as it goes, leaning upon the ideas presented thus far.

CONSUMABLE

The vanguard of tomorrow's British Army must be an array of consumable sensors to find an enemy to synchronise effects against. The pacing threat is highly likely to be swarms of sensors collaborating as a distributed system that is resilient to interference and is not reliant on cloud computing power. Those requirements are most likely met by a 'swarm' of autonomous small uncrewed air systems. Today's methods are too slow and staff intensive to succeed against an automated adversary. Watling's ideas outlined previously describe how such a capability needs to include technicians who can continually evolve code and algorithms,[13] maintainers to recycle returning platforms for future use, and mission planners to integrate electronic warfare to create avenues of approach. No less important are the sustainers, who can ensure the 21st century equivalent of half a million bodkin arrows are in the right place at the right time.

And yet, the promise of autonomous swarms of small uncrewed air systems are quite rightly limited in potential by the Law of Armed Conflict. Introducing battlespace management tools such as the *Forward Line of Humans* might make targeting easier, but does not account for civilians within the operational environment. Distinction for an autonomous system is therefore extremely challenging. The limit of lethality for autonomous systems is consequently likely to be other aerial systems, and spikes in military radio and radar emissions. For this reason, a coherent flow of targeting information from autonomous sensors to uncrewed one-way-effectors such as consumable first-person view drones is essential. It is the future equivalent of battlegroup reconnaissance calling up a pair of tanks to handle an identified threat.

In limited wargaming[14] while researching these ideas, every tactical action against a peer enemy began with a clash of sensors, much like the counter-reconnaissance fights of 20th century ground manoeuvre, but at machine speed in the air-ground littoral.[15] This

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[8] *Jack Watling and Noah Sylvia, Competitive Electronic Warfare in Modern Land Operations (Royal United Services Institute, 30 Jan 25), 2–12, static.rusi.org/competitive-electronic-warfare-in-land-operations_1.pdf*

[9] *Dr Joe Strange, Centers of Gravity & Critical Vulnerabilities: Building on the Clausewitzian Foundation So That We Can All Speak the Same Language, Second Edition, Marine Corps Perspectives on Warfighting, Number Four (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 1997), 1–3, jfsc.ndu.edu/Portals/72/Documents/JC2IOS/Additional_Reading/3B_COG_and_Critical_Vulnerabilities.pdf*

[10] *"Continuous Transformation: Concept-Driven Transformation," Army University Press, accessed January 19, 2025, armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2024-OLE/Concept-Driven-Transformation*

[11] *James Greer, "Developing Leaders of Intermeshed Human and Autonomous Military Systems," US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, n.d.*

[12] *Richard W Stewart, ed., American Military History, Volume II: The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2008, Second (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, US Army, 2010), 381–96, tradoc.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/american-military-history-volume-2.pdf*

[13] *Colin Clark, "Write Algorithms, Wage EW, Share Data: Lessons from Ukraine War," Breaking Defense, May 30, 2023, breakingdefense.com/2023/05/write-algorithms-wage-ew-share-data-lessons-from-ukraine-war*

[14] *Modelling battlegroup to divisional tactical actions using a modified version of WARNO, and exploring company level and below using bespoke scenarios in ARMA 3; the civilian version of VBS.*

possibly means that the geographic framework will require updating too, as forward lines of humans, robotics and autonomous systems delineate the difference between a human close and autonomous close, where enemy small uncrewed air systems are less likely to adhere to the Law of Armed Conflict.

It will also demand a whole host of new skills and perspectives that arguably do not mesh into the organisational structures the British Army has today. For example, which cap badge is best placed to own the evolution of the consumable capabilities? One answer is a new cap badge, with its own pay spine for the minds that can adapt algorithms and write code in contact. In the same way that doctors wear the same rank but are paid differently, perhaps tomorrow's 'cyber-trained' soldiers need to wear a specific tactical recognition flash, and be financially retained through a unique pay supplement. Creating a new cap badge to handle new technology is nothing new. It is the genesis of the Royal Flying Corps, the Royal Signals and the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. The US Army example previously described highlights the scale of change required to modernise how an army fights, and creating a new cap badge allows the British Army to forge what will need to be an unique culture. A 'Royal Drone Corps' would need to meld the aggression of combat arms with the technical specialism of the various corps.

There is, however, real risk of a capability gap forming if the British Army is too ambitious. Autonomous systems are right at the top of the Gartner hype curve, where emergent technology typically over-promises.[16] Divesting capability too early, to then have the next-generation replacement not appear on time, would damage warfighting credibility, like the Royal Navy's long blink in mine-sweeping capability.[17] One solution is to buy something simpler with a higher technology readiness level as an interim capability. For example, what if Project Bodkin was to equip every dismounted close combat soldier with a consumable small uncrewed air system in the pouch next to their entrenching tool? Doing so would start to build a culture of integrating drones into tactical activity, and refine the concept of employment for future autonomous consumable capability.

> **"What if Project Bodkin was to equip every dismounted close combat soldier with a consumable small uncrewed air system in the pouch next to their entrenching tool?"**

ATTRITABLE

Behind this maelstrom of clashing sensors and one-way-effectors sits a more elaborate attritable 40 per cent of the warfighting force. At first glance, the key requirements for an attritable force are so open ended that detailed design is extremely tricky.

In contrast to the opening historical vignettes, this article assumes that the lives of British Service-persons are not explicitly attritable, but rather survivable. It therefore follows that the attritable part of the force is inherently uncrewed, and simple enough that the defence industrial base can build more as a future war continues. This is important because it is not the part that an enemy will want to target. Why attack the explicitly attritable uncrewed platform when you could target the operator or equipment that the British Army acknowledges cannot be regenerated? This means that during and after a clash of sensors in the autonomous close, the British Army can expect attempts to penetrate attritable platforms beyond a forward line of humans, to destroy the more important targets behind, such as ground control stations. Air defence and electronic warfare platforms beyond the forward line of humans are therefore essential for protection of critical vulnerabilities.

It is worth pointing out that consumable and autonomous are not synonymous. There are clear use cases for more advanced attritable autonomous systems. These might include sustaining beyond a forward line of humans, ground vehicles that can move independently and dominate the electromagnetic spectrum by roaming laterally and transmitting with their alignment towards the likely enemy direction. Rebro platforms could equally move without a remote crew directly controlling them.

For the survivable 20 per cent of the force to live up to its name, the attritable element needs to be able to find, fix, strike and exploit enemy combat power. It needs operational reach without reliance on scant survivable human-centric capabilities to enable it. Specifically, refuelling and mobility support.

As such, and as user requirements for attritable uncrewed ground vehicles evolve, there is likely to be a significant creative tension between the military engineering community and the Royal Armoured Corps. The latter will likely advocate for the most lethal blend of firepower, protection and mobility the defence industry can deliver. Conversely, the former will see the merits of lighter platforms, because a lower military load classification (MLC) typically means longer bridges with less deflection, which in turn means far better operational reach and tactical mobility, resulting in a reduction in friction and planning constraints. For example, the incoming Boxer bridge-layer can launch either a 14-metre

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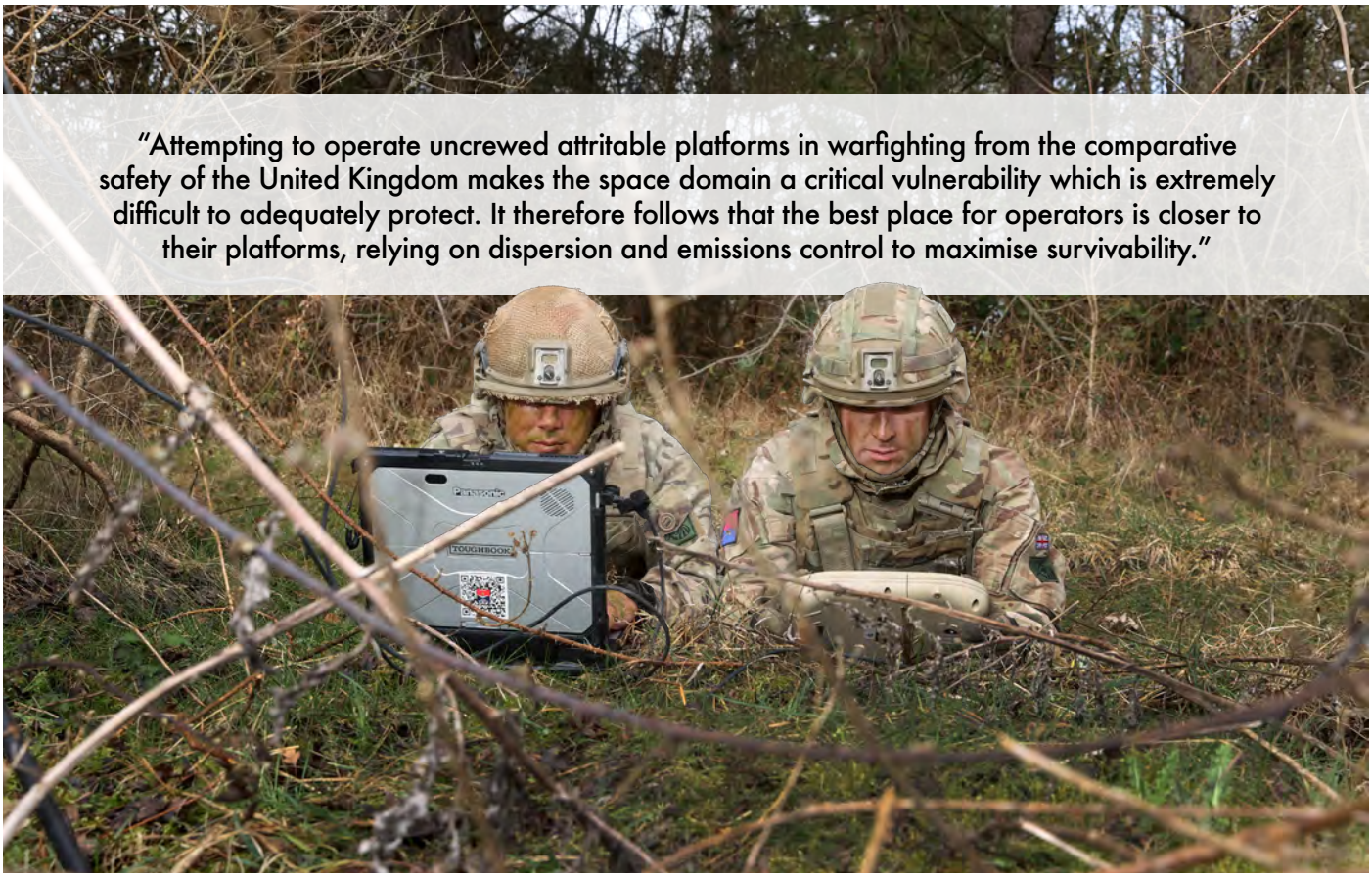
[15] *Gen Jim E. Rainey and Dr. James Greer, "Land Warfare and the Air-Ground Littoral," Army Aviation Magazine, 31 Dec 23, 14–17.*

[16] *"Gartner 2024 Hype Cycle for Emerging Technologies Highlights Developer Productivity, Total Experience, AI and Security," Gartner, accessed August 14, 2025, gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2024-08-21-gartner-2024-hype-cycle-for-emerging-technologies-highlights-developer-productivity-total-experience-ai-and-security*

[17] *"Royal Navy Accepts New Autonomous Mine Hunting System into Service," accessed August 14, 2025, royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2025/july/04/20250704-new-sweep-mine-hunting-capability-for-the-rn*

[18] *"BOXER Bridgelayer," KNDS Group, accessed August 9, 2025, knds.com/en/boxer-bridgelayer*



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"Attempting to operate uncrewed attritable platforms in warfighting from the comparative safety of the United Kingdom makes the space domain a critical vulnerability which is extremely difficult to adequately protect. It therefore follows that the best place for operators is closer to their platforms, relying on dispersion and emissions control to maximise survivability."

MLC 100 bridge, or a 22-metre MLC 50 variant.[18] A very important question that needs answering quickly, is how heavy does an attritable uncrewed ground vehicle need to be?

As a comparator, a Russian BMP-3 weighs less than 20 tonnes, is tracked, amphibious and has a 100mm 2A70 main gun, a 30mm 2A72 automatic coaxial cannon and a 7.62mm coaxial machine gun. It also carries eight 9M117 Bastion anti-tank guided missiles with a range of four kilometres.[19] It therefore seems reasonable that modern sensors and protection of critical systems mean an uncrewed ground vehicle could feasibly be well under 30 tonnes, lethal and amphibious.

Despite advances in battery technology, the attritable part of the force must remain primarily diesel powered. This is because the operational generation, movement and storage of electricity is extremely challenging. The author's 2022 thesis titled *Two Shades of Green* is ten times the length of this article, explores this problem in far greater detail and is readily available online.[20] Attritable equipment needs enough endurance to operate beyond the forward line of humans for multiple tactical actions. Perhaps the best solution is a form of diesel hybrid that is simple to sustain, brings plenty of endurance, but can also operate quietly when required.

Analysis of existing literature highlighted a tension between protected control stations hundred of miles from the operational environment and closer control stations relying on dispersion and traditional emissions control measures to maximise survivability. Today's information dimension is utterly dependent on the space domain. Content, data and processes flow through satellites continually. In peer warfighting it is therefore an obvious target; so much so that D3SOE as an abbreviation exists: a denied, degraded and disrupted space operational environment.[21]

The British Army has a proud history of expeditionary warfare, but the focus for now is on Europe, NATO and Russia. As such, attempting to operate uncrewed attritable platforms in warfighting from the comparative safety of the United Kingdom makes the space domain a critical vulnerability which is extremely difficult to adequately protect. It therefore follows that the best place for operators is closer to their platforms, relying on dispersion and emissions control to maximise survivability. Hopefully, however, the Russian threat is not forever. Against adversaries that cannot contest the space domain, non-deployed control stations could significantly reduce the risk to life, deployment size and ultimately cost of expeditionary warfare in the future.

To summarise the attritable element, uncrewed platforms are unlikely to be at the top of an enemy's high value target list. As such, air defence and electronic warfare are essential counter-penetration capabilities beyond the forward line of humans, to protect dispersed ground control stations in the rear. A creative tension between firepower, protection and mobility must be resolved sooner rather than later. A tracked diesel-hybrid that is amphibious and MLC 20-30 could still provide lethality, as evidenced by the BMP-3, while enjoying significant operational reach.

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[19] *TRADOC, "BMP-3 Russian Amphibious Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV)," Worldwide Equipment Guide, accessed August 9, 2025, odin.tradoc.army.mil/WEG/List/PRO_russian-federation-d267e5&DOM_infantry-fighting-vehicles--ifvs--6dc48d*

[20] *Christopher M. Adams, "Two Shades of Green: Can the British Army's Warfighting Division Fight and Win without Fossil Fuels in 2050?" (US Army Command and General Staff College, 2022), pt. abstract, apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1209886.pdf*

[21] *Center for Army Lessons Learned, Operating in a Denied, Degraded, and Disrupted Space Operational Environment, 18-28 (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: U.S. Army, 2018), 5, api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2023/01/19/7f7281ee/18-28-operating-in-a-denied-degraded-and-disrupted-space-operational-environment-handbook-jun-18-public.pdf*

[22] *"The Marine Air-Ground Task Force," accessed August 10, 2025, marines.mil/News/Marines-TV/videoid/863205/dvpTag/MAGTF*

[23] *By Citadel, "Marine Corps Structure Allows for Rapid Scalability of Forces during Crisis," Citadel, accessed August 10, 2025, centcomcitadel.com/en_GB/articles/ssc/features/2023/08/07/feature-02*

SURVIVABLE

The final part is the 20 per cent that is ostensibly survivable. It is worth noting here that 20-40-40 as a division is not explicitly in terms of workforce, ground effect vehicles or more abstract ideas such as combat power. This is a useful creative freedom as the Army redesigns itself. To make the most of our order of battle, dual-trading infantry to be equally proficient with rifle or drone might be a necessary transformation. This is nothing new. For example, Royal Engineer soldiers are triple traded. They are soldiers first, combat engineers second and artisans (such as bricklayer or carpenters) third. This multi-trading provides flexibility to commanders in the future, as particularly complex objectives might require a Zulu-mustering of uncrewed platforms and a temporary concentration of dismounted mass.

This would translate to an inability to simultaneously concentrate all attritable and survivable force at the same point in space and time, but such flexibility can generate uncertainty in an opponent. Equally, as the attritable element is degraded, there are likely to be deployed personnel waiting for a replacement. Dual-trading makes this down-time more effective.

The last point before concluding regards the command and control of such a force. The span of control to simultaneously plan and execute operations with the forces described so far is likely to be challenging. What the British Army will need is a scalable framework that helps a company, battlegroup, brigade or even divisional commander exercise command. Thankfully, the US Marine Corps has a framework that could be adapted for this purpose: the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF).[22] A MAGTF has four elements: a ground combat element, air combat element, command element and the logistics combat element. The concept is scalable in that a MAGTF could be a 46,000-person Marine Expeditionary Force commanded by a lieutenant general. Equally viable is a MAGTF composed of a Marine Expeditionary Brigade commanded by a brigadier. Finally, the smallest type of MAGTF is a Marine Expeditionary Unit commanded by a colonel.[23] Translating this to the future British Army, a company, battlegroup, brigade or division could be organised in terms of consumable, attritable, survivable and support combat elements (see Figure 2 below). Doing so would create a common framework that would make it easier for personnel to switch between echelons and still understand how to operate effectively.

> "Changing the British Army to a force that can fight and win with consumable, attritable and survivable elements demands wholesale cultural transformation. The US Army in the 1970s and 1980s provides a sense of the magnitude of change required."

CONCLUSION

Changing the British Army to a force that can fight and win with consumable, attritable and survivable elements demands wholesale cultural transformation. The US Army in the 1970s and 1980s provides a sense of the magnitude of change required. The Law of Armed Conflict's principle of distinction quite rightly limits the utility of autonomous systems, meaning the consumable element needs to be a mix of machine speed autonomous sensing and human on/in the loop uncrewed consumable systems to conduct more complex targeting.

The attritable element is unlikely to be at the top of anyone's high value target list, and has an implied task of counter-penetration, to protect critical vulnerabilities further to the rear. No less important is a potential creative tension between the Royal Armoured Corps and the military engineering community on balancing firepower, protection and weight. Lighter uncrewed ground vehicles will have far better mobility, and close support bridging beyond a forward line of humans could be significantly longer. Even better would be an attritable uncrewed capability that could swim. Either way, the weight of future uncrewed ground vehicles is a number that unlocks a whole series of design considerations and needs answering sooner rather than later.

Lastly, the survivable element will likely need to blur with the operators of uncrewed attritable systems. Dual trading combat arms would provide the flexibility commanders will need in a complex operational environment. Commanding all of these elements is likely to be a challenge, and having a scalable structure akin to a US Marine Air Ground Task Force might provide a useful point of departure for designing future command and control structures.

The points raised in this article by no means settle all of the opportunities and threats that come with such significant change. Hopefully, however, it has provoked thoughts and ideas that readers can challenge and refine further.

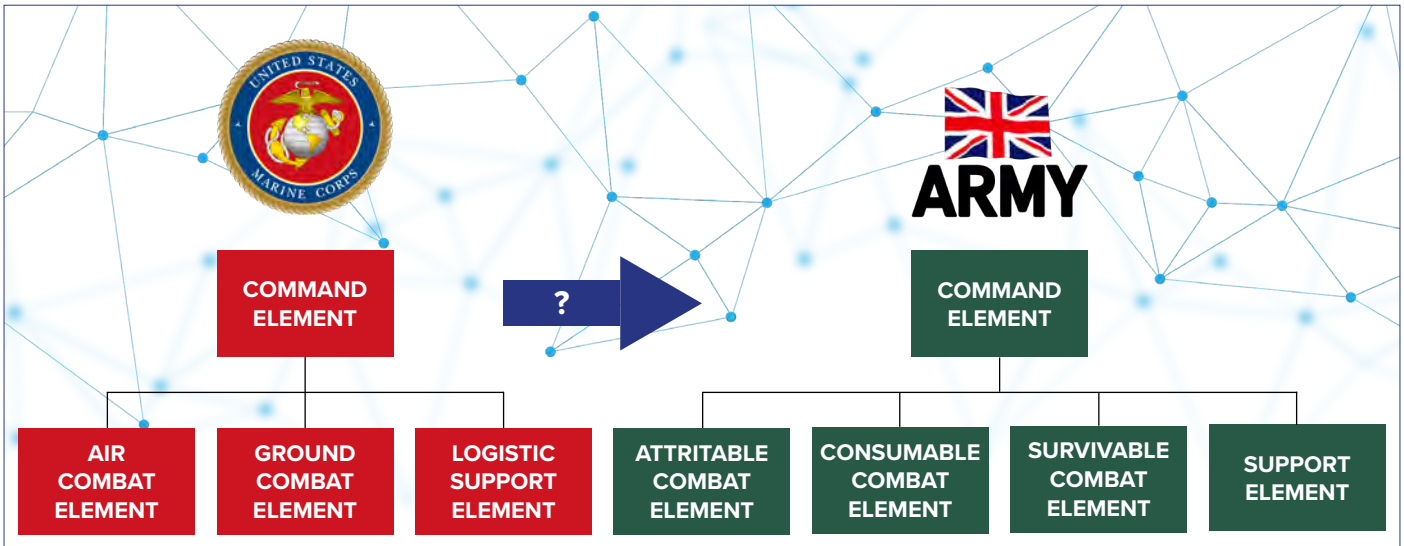

Figure 2: The scalable framework of a US Marine Air Ground Task Force might be a useful point of departure for designing command and control around a British 20-40-40 force

IN-FLIGHT FIGHT: MANOEUVRE IN THE NEAR SURFACE

AUTHORS

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TWELVE months ago, the British Army's 11th Brigade was still labelled as a Security Force Assistance Brigade. Over the intervening period, with support from Field Army Headquarters and Army Futures, the likely future of the Brigade has evolved into something more novel: a formation that will fight 'in and from the near-surface' or, what might in simpler terms be described as a drone brigade. This direction is bolder in concept than the drone warfare development that has been undertaken by the British Army to date, in that it proposes to use near-surface capabilities as the primary and supported form of manoeuvre rather than in an ancillary or supporting role to more traditional forms of land manoeuvre.

This article will introduce and explore the ideas around this change and will begin with a narrative of the development of the concept, before describing the relevant historical and contemporary case studies; the foundational tenets, the technological freedoms and direction of travel; and the resulting putative doctrine. Exploiting the advantage of insight into the current conflict in Ukraine but without the pressure of resourcing a current battle to generate the opportunity to build a near-surface combat system by design, it will posit that near-surface capabilities will be the supported manoeuvre arm/battlespace for the next epoch, with all other capabilities in the combined-arms manoeuvre force in the supporting role, and that this battlespace must be approached in a systematic way to achieve best effect.

THE STORY

The 11 Brigade near-surface project began through the confluence of three policy drivers set against the context of a force design failure that meant 11 Brigade was unfit to deliver meaningful Security Force Assistance. The catalysts were: the Army's need to deliver two coherent warfighting divisions; the need to hasten the delivery of the Land Operating Concept; and the future force direction determined by Army Futures. All of these were of course driven by the reality of war in Ukraine and the need to manage the enduring reality of the Russian threat.

The Army's requirement to field two fighting divisions meant 1st (UK) Division was required to return as a credible formation to the Army's

order of battle. This presented a range of issues, not just in workforce, but in doctrine; the Service's corps and divisional doctrine is explicitly based on armoured manoeuvre by largely homogeneous (armoured) brigade types. As a result, 1Division's first challenge was how to generate a combat system from the heterogeneous group of, largely light, capabilities it had, and make it useful for a NATO corps (specifically the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps). 1 Division's answer was to build a bespoke doctrine that exploited the mobility of light forces and mitigated their tactical weakness by focusing on the defence of complex terrain. As such the Division pitched to be used in an operationally offensive way at the beginning of a conflict to seize lightly/un-defended key/vital ground and thus exploit the strengths of being tactically defensive in terrain of its choosing.[1]

This doctrine allowed the Division to offer an option against one of the key demands of the Land Operating Concept: resourcing the first battle to 'blunt' Russian offensive action. In this model the Division would set the conditions for the successful deployment of the corps to fight a reclamation battle – and could do so, within reason, with the force it had; thus matching the demand for acceleration of Land Operating Concept implementation. Within this divisional concept 11 Brigade had to find a place.

The sponsorship of General Officer Commanding 1 Division and Commander Field Army to explore the Brigade's role at formation level allowed engagement with Army Futures, RUSI and the information streams emerging from Ukraine, such as Project Eagle. All of these sources cited the requirement to resource covering force functions, particularly counter-reconnaissance,[2] to be able to survive and succeed on a modern battlefield. As such, the Division required a formalised tactical 'covering force' both during deployment and whilst operating – something that would be a waste of the resources of the other more fully enabled brigades in the Division. The transition to Security Force Assistance had hollowed the Brigade's infantry unit structures but had maintained most of its support weapon capabilities – capabilities that had proved instrumental to 'blunt' the Russian invasion of Ukraine and capabilities that would prove useful in a defensive covering force battle. This 'covering force' role became the conceptual focus for the Brigade as it evolved its proposition.

With senior backing and with the promise of resource, the thinking within the Brigade moved on. It began to migrate from considering what it could do with what it had, to how it might best fulfil the role it was required to do and what those capabilities might look like given the evolving character of conflict[3] and the available historical models. The Army Futures sponsored Project Velocity had already highlighted the primary nature of near-surface capabilities as the character of warfare evolved, whilst in Ukraine the casualty figures attributed to near-surface effectors, and the associated resource cost, showed that something fundamental may have shifted in the way war could be waged. Key trends toward the primacy of near-surface warfare on the contemporary battlefield that emerged in 2024[4] were consolidated and accelerated in 2025. Significantly, drone warfare is being both centralised and systematised in the militaries of Ukraine and Russia, with the former generating a specialist cadre within the army force structure and the latter creating an entirely new arm. Key advances in the current evolution are:

- Contesting the near-surface from the near-surface (i.e fighter/interceptor drones).
- Use of near-surface assets to perform a manifold of 'heavy' battlefield tasks, including the emplacement of mines and the 'bombing' of adversary positions.
- The generation of a ground based near-surface early warning and command and control system.
- The 'holding'/denial of parts of the defensive line done entirely by drone units.

The growing comprehension of the opportunities of warfare using drones has made them increasingly lethal. This lethality borne of understanding has been enabled by a 'power' revolution that is extending the ranges and

[1] *A reversion to the Alconyeus principle.*

[2] *Echoed by Watling J (2023), Arms of the Future: Technology and Close Combat in the Twenty-First Century.*

[3] *The primary sources for the character of conflict in the Ukraine were those provided by Project Eagle, LWC WarDev team, the LPWT, and open-source publishers like the Institute for the Study of War. Meanwhile, the Project Velocity wargame results acted as a shadow for the conflict, pitting similar forces against each other in similar geography.*

[4] *Brigadier E Cartwright, 'Knives to a Gunfight', British Army Review 191 (2025).*

"... in Ukraine the casualty figures attributed to near-surface effectors, and the associated resource cost, showed that something fundamental may have shifted in the way war could be waged. Significantly, drone warfare is being both centralised and systematised in the militaries of Ukraine and Russia, with the former generating a specialist cadre within the army force structure and the latter creating an entirely new arm."

increasing the capability of battery powered systems. The combination of these factors has driven exponential growth in the relevance and lethality of unmanned systems on the battlefield. The ability to generate a close to persistent presence of these unmanned capabilities has forced the distances between the forward lines of troops to 15 kilometres in some parts of the front as troops try to shield themselves from the particularly ubiquitous shorter ranged systems. There is a Ukrainian aspiration to use this power and doctrinal revolution to push these distances to between 80-150 kilometres by the end of the year[5] – though this timeline looks optimistic. However, if achieved, this could put all field artillery out of range and end the opportunities for opportunistic ground manoeuvre in any realistic form; neutralising Russia's manpower and fires advantage, automating the war and driving the key contest almost entirely into the near-surface.

Whilst it is tempting to focus on the contemporary conflicts for inspiration, the developments in Ukraine are being forced through evolution as the pressure of the battlefield hinders revolution in the usage of near-surface capabilities. Importantly, the effects of these near-surface capabilities are not new in real terms; it is just the evolving performance, simplicity and cost of uncrewed aerial systems (UASs), allied to organisational freedoms, allows them to mimic (and in places surpass) the capabilities traditionally associated with tactical air power. The most significant changes are the ability to command and control it at the lowest echelon and the scale/persistence, which surpasses the seemingly ubiquitous air-support witnessed during Operation Herrick. It is unsurprising that the models evolving to organise, operate and develop drones replicate many of the characteristics of the solutions generated to manage the early evolutions of air power.

As an example, the evolution of UAS types and their development from the provision of observation, through delivering ground lethality and finally into near-surface supremacy platforms mimics the development of aircraft technology and concepts of employment from the Great War through to the end of the Second World War. Naval warfare was revolutionised further, such that air power rapidly became the primary method of power projection at sea at the expense of surface capabilities – this more transformational revolution seems closer to the opportunity offered by near-surface platforms and their capability development trajectory. As such the historical case studies examined included the evolution of air power in the Great War, examination of the Desert Air Force/ Tactical Air Force of the Second World War,

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"The evolving performance, simplicity and cost of uncrewed aerial systems, allied to organisational freedoms, allows them to mimic (and in places surpass) the capabilities traditionally associated with tactical air power. The most significant changes are the ability to command and control [the use of near-surface capabilities] at the lowest echelon and the scale/persistence, which surpasses the seemingly ubiquitous air-support witnessed during Operation Herrick."

and the study of the Central Pacific campaign of the Second World War. Aligning these possible models with the feedback from Ukraine, the analysis of Project Velocity and the emerging technological opportunities presented by developments in power, automation and communication formed the key dialogue for our thinking. The following key deductions emerged:

- The primary find-and-fires systems in the next conflict would continue to be largely reliant on near-surface capabilities.

- Ground manoeuvre was at best incredibly costly and at worst close to impossible without a specialised counter-reconnaissance capability to blind enemy sensors.

- The evolution of near-surface capabilities mapped well to the evolution of air capabilities (land and maritime) in the First and Second World Wars – of these it was the carrier battlegroup model which resonated best in terms of basic wargaming and thoughts on future force design.

- Battery tech growth would support not just range and payload, but the use of more advanced automation and communication systems. This would make near-surface systems more lethal and also more resilient to adversary counter-measures.

- The growth in range, resilience and lethality would further extend the distance between the opposing forward lines of troops, reducing the relevance of ground manoeuvre and the majority of fires systems in all but the most deliberate of actions.

- Near-surface systems would become the 'supported' manoeuvre capability, with ground assets 'supporting'.

PUTATIVE DOCTRINE

Noting the capabilities offered by near-surface platforms are not fundamentally new, the concept of fighting from and in the near-surface is a continuation of 20th century Western military doctrine which placed primacy on the delivery of air power. This primacy exploited Western technological/industrial advantage to control altitudes which make the enemy's battlespace transparent and deadly whilst obscuring and protecting one's own. The resultant relative information advantage could then be used to defeat (or set the conditions for the defeat of) adversary surface forces ahead of the advance of one's own surface forces (maritime or land). Air power was the primary tactical weapon of the Allies during the Second World War and the generation of air supremacy defined the victor of each campaign as the war unfolded[6] – this has remained the Western pre-condition for victory in conventional conflicts since then. However, the evolution of uncrewed near-surface capabilities has presented an opportunity for our adversaries to deliver tactical air power of their own and subvert the advantage provided by Western air dominance. Dominating

[5] *Roland Oliphant, Ukraine's plan to win the war – with or without Trump's help, The Financial Times, telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/07/15/ukraine-plan-to-win-war-without-america, 15 July 2025.*

this altitude defensively is now a necessary minimum to maintain the asymmetric advantage provided by the otherwise still advanced Western air power. Dominating this altitude offensively multiplies the air power dominance of Western forces significantly. Near-surface warfare currently remains a responsibility of the surface commands (land and maritime) and so the generation of near-surface supremacy must become the primary (supported) aim for land manoeuvre resource and doctrine, and a key effort for maritime forces. A putative doctrine is outlined below, covering organisation, capability design and battlespace integration. It concludes with an offer of two models of formation manoeuvre.

Any doctrine must start with ownership. The integration of airpower with land power is traditionally managed at the corps level. Noting the increasing ubiquity of near-surface assets and their current range limitations, this centralisation at a corps level offers the worst of both worlds – generating huge complexity but failing to offer the ranges to enable deep battle. The brigading of near-surface capabilities to sit as a divisional asset is the recommendation of the Brigade and conforms with the current aviation doctrine. This echelon is able to provide the necessary command and control capabilities to manage the complexity of a multi-domain force including the generation of a recognised near-surface picture – it also places the capability at the echelon that can deliver violent effect across the adversary's near-surface system rather than just local effect. Brigading near-surface assets also provides a focus for capability development at this nascent stage of evolution, akin to the Machine Gun Corps of the Great War.

Brigading the assets also enables a scale that can resource a multi-domain battle, which will require a multitude of integrated capabilities. To capitalise upon this, scale must be matched by systematic capability design. The brigade system must include a balance of near-surface capabilities that cover all of the tactical functions and enables the concurrent delivery

"This possible revolution in land power could present a significant opportunity for our Army to leapfrog the expensive modernisation of its legacy force and instead generate a world-leading force by placing a bet on a future which looks to be moving from 'well-informed' to 'certainty'."

of effects in multiple domains (for example, electronic warfare, cyber, surface and air). Carrier air wings are built as packages that include aircraft focussed on command and control, air-defence, sub-surface, sustainment etc. The same approach must be taken when designing the various 'near-surface wings'.[7]

If counter-reconnaissance is the primary aim, then integration with the altitudes above are essential to prevent being 'flanked' by adversary sensors. Critically this defines a battlespace to control that is conal (reflecting the lines of observation at each altitude). The same is true in attack, where better integration across altitudes will enable the flanking of adversary defensive systems – with each altitude/domain enabling the success of the other. The gaining of altitude dominance and the consequent generation of a more transparent adversary battlespace is already allowing Ukraine to create 'drone walls' within which all adversary capabilities are destroyed and whilst these currently sit at 15 kilometres from the forward line of Ukrainian troops, their aspiration is to have these walls manifest at 80-150 kilometres within the next year. However, their ability to build a doctrine around integration with other altitudes is limited by their own lack of air or space dominance.

Thinking from a NATO perspective, where air and space are well resourced to compete, two centres of opinion are emerging on near-surface manoeuvre; one bold and one conservative. The more conservative opinion recognises near-surface capabilities as the supported arm but talks in terms of traditional land manoeuvre where they are used akin to a 21st century version of the tank to generate breakthroughs that can be exploited by echelon (ground manoeuvre) forces. The second approach is bolder but perhaps more logical and approximates near-surface capabilities not to armour but to air-power and speaks not to breakthrough but envelopment from the sky. An example of this in practice is the Battle of Shushan in the Nagorno Karabakh War. In simple terms it is a mimic of the way the US carrier fleet fought alongside the US Marines in the Pacific during the Second World War – isolating and degrading Japanese forces on islands to set the conditions for amphibious assaults by US Marines. In this model, integrated multi-domain near-surface task groups would develop supremacy over all but the most complex terrain, isolating degraded adversary capabilities in these 'islands' where they could be 'mopped up' by follow-on ground manoeuvre forces.

CONCLUSION

It is our belief that Nagorno Karabakh was indeed the 'dreadnought' moment for near-surface/drone warfare but the lessons were not properly heeded. However, they can't be ignored now.[8] Seen more broadly, this possible revolution in land power could present a significant opportunity for our Army to leapfrog the expensive modernisation of its legacy force and instead generate a world-leading force by placing a bet on a future which looks to be moving from 'well-informed' to 'certainty'. 11 Brigade's programme over the next year looks to exploit this, with force structures under review this year, direct relationships with independent artificial intelligence companies already established, a financial stream supported by Project Rapstone and elements of Project Asgard, and an exercise programme to test these developments at unit and formation scale. Whisper it quietly, but a bold new future might be upon us... it will be exciting to see how it develops.

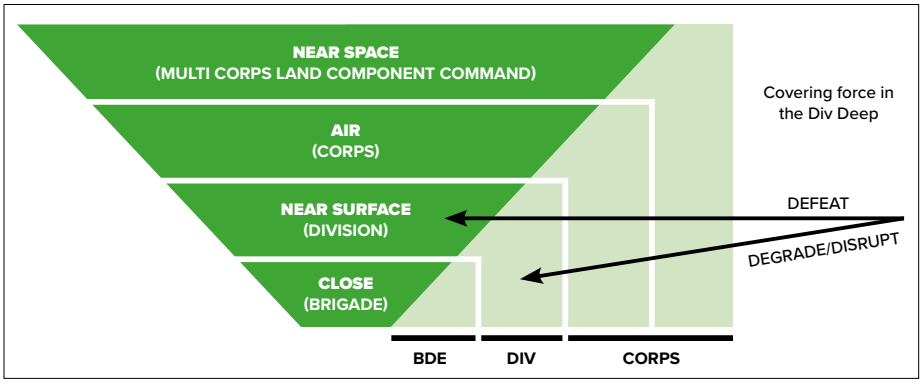

Figure 1: A demonstration of the organisation and integration of capabilities in a conal battlespace

[6] *Establishing airfields was one of the primary objectives in Operation Overlord. Montgomery Principles of War.*

[7] *For further interest see Salinas, Askew & LeVay, 'From Tactical Trench Killers to Strategic War Winners: Doctrine, Operational Art, and Tomorrow's Drone-Enabled Maneuver Warfare', Modern War Institute, 4 August 2025.*

[8] *It is important to note that Britain and the US continued to produce battleships through the Second World War despite the fact they were obsolete – it was primarily cultural and doctrinal conservatism that drove this and wasted vast amounts of treasure and time in so doing. If we can avoid this, we should.*

CLIMATE, CONFLICT AND RADICALISATION IN SOMALIA: AN OVERLOOKED NEXUS

AUTHOR

Drawing on his long-term fieldwork and policy experiences in Somalia, **Tim Clack**, Oxford University and CHACR, discusses how climate change and related resource competition are driving insecurity in the country and increasing the threat from violent extremist organisations.

SOMALIA has been called "the world's longest failed state", a nation of "acute social and political vulnerabilities" and "a graveyard of foreign aid".[1] Its problems are many – it is a country concurrently facing environmental fragility, political volatility, contested state authority, conflict and political violence, remnant warlordism and chronic underdevelopment. Often overlooked but increasingly important is the problem of resource competition. Triggered in large part by climate and environmental stresses, it is now a core driver of insecurity in Somalia, one that results in the misuse of finance, weakens traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, and amplifies inter-community grievances and radicalisation.

Somalia is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. According to the 2024 ND-GAIN [Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative] Index, which measures human and ecosystem resilience, it ranks 178 out of 182 countries. The increasing tempo and scale of devastating droughts, floods and land degradation in Somalia are not only undermining livelihoods, but also reshaping the country's security landscape, particularly by entrenching and expanding the influence of violent extremist organisations and threatening regional stability. Environmental shocks, when left unmanaged, create grievances that are exploited readily by armed non-state actors via their offer of services, protection and ideological alternatives to a failing or absent state. The result is a deepening cycle of fragility in which climate and conflict are mutually reinforcing.

CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT

Somalia's climate and environmental trajectory is a critical – yet under-addressed – driver of the country's fragility. Somalia's population is mainly dependent on rain-fed horticulture and nomadic cattle-herding, making it highly vulnerable to climatic variability, where even slight deviations in seasonal patterns can become a matter of survival.

Somalia has faced more than 30 climate-related shocks in the last three decades, with droughts and floods occurring with growing frequency and intensity.[2] The climate crisis in Somalia – as in other parts of the world – is not simply one of water scarcity, but also water unpredictability. Climate projections for the country indicate a rise in average temperatures by 1.5-2.0°C by 2050, with a concurrent increase in rainfall variability. Recent analysis has shown that a one per cent rise in average temperature in Somalia reduces agricultural exports by 8.37 per cent.[3] Since the

[1] *Hammond, L. 2013. Somalia rising: things are starting to change for the world's longest failed state. Journal of eastern African Studies 7(1). World Bank 2023. Somalia Climate Risk Review. Washington: World Bank, p. viii. Menkhaus, K. 2014. State failure, state-building, and prospects for a 'functional failed state' in Somalia. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 656.*

[2] *World Bank 2023. Somalia Climate Risk Review. Washington: World Bank. See also Thalheimer, L. 2023. Compounding risks and increased vulnerabilities: climate change, conflict, and mobility in East Africa. (In) T. Walker (ed.) Environmental Migration in the Face of Emerging Risks. London: Springer Nature.*

"The human costs are enormous. With each shock, productive assets such as livestock and arable land are diminished, undermining food security and placing immense stress on households."

1950s, Somalia's average annual temperature has increased by approximately 0.2-0.3°C per decade, with the rise accelerating to approximately 1.1°C from 2010. This has resulted in impacts on both water and food.

The human costs are enormous. The 2016/17 drought, for example, left 6.7 million people in need of humanitarian aid, and the 2022 floods displaced over half a million people.[4] With each shock, productive assets such as livestock and arable land are diminished, undermining food security and placing immense stress on households. Herders and farmers increasingly find themselves in competition as cropping zones shift and resources dwindle. Degraded rangelands and overgrazing accelerate desertification, while deforestation for charcoal – a primary domestic energy source and significant export commodity – has stripped much of southern and central Somalia of vegetative cover and, in turn, caused soil erosion and biodiversity loss and lessened water retention.[5] Seasonal herder routes, which have been used for generations, have been undermined as droughts have dried up water points, destroyed grassland corridors and triggered new inter-community tensions over who can move where. At the same time, access to water points that once served as the means to navigate climatic stress and facilitate cooperation across clan boundaries is becoming increasingly contested, with episodes of violence commonplace. As well as physical, the effects of climate change are economic, social and political.

The failure of environmental governance compounds the challenges. Somalia lacks reliable environmental data collection systems, leaving policymakers and communities unable to anticipate shocks or adapt effectively. National institutions such as the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change are under-resourced, while overlapping mandates with line ministries and weak regulatory enforcement leave vast governance gaps. International aid has positive impact but has historically prioritised short-term, life-saving relief over long-term adaptation. While this is understandable in responding to urgent need, it further entrenches vulnerabilities and, in contributing to the volatile supply and pricing of foods, disincentivises agricultural activities. This was evident in 2024, when the humanitarian response for the Horn of Africa, including Somalia, equated to more than 2.4 billion US dollars but only a fraction went into climate adaptation efforts.

RESOURCE COMPETITION

Resource competition in Somalia is intensifying dramatically as environmental degradation, population growth and climate change intersect with fragile governance and ongoing insecurity. Land, water and pasture are each under acute stress, driving tensions within and between communities, and contributing to localised conflict and displacement.

Over 80 per cent of Somalia's land is arid or semi-arid, and less than 15 per cent is suitable for cultivation.[6] Additionally, due to population growth, urbanisation and land privatisation, competition over access to arable and peri-urban land has risen sharply. The expansion of rain-fed and irrigated agriculture in riverine regions, such as the Shabelle and Juba valleys, has displaced traditional pastoral routes and triggered disputes and violence between farming and herding communities.[7] Moreover, land grabbing by elites and contested land tenure – often exacerbated by the absence of a unified land policy – has fuelled grievances and inter-clan disputes, particularly around urban centres like Mogadishu, Kismayo and Baidoa.[8] Pasture on traditional rangelands has also been degraded by recurring droughts and bush encroachment.[9] From a security

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[3] *Hassan Abdi, A. et al. 2024. Examining the confluence of climate change and conflicts on agricultural and livestock exports. Environmental Research Communications 6(7). doi.org/10.1088/2515-7620/ad5cce*

[4] *ACP-EU NDRRP 2025. Somalia: drought impact and needs assessment and resilient recovery framework. ACP-EU Natural Disaster Risk Reduction Program, gfdrr.org/en/somalia-drought-impact-and-needs-assessment-and-resilient-recovery-framework*

[5] *Osman, B. et al. 2025. Examining the drivers of environmental degradation in Somalia: the role of agriculture, economic and population growth. Discover Sustainability 6(150), doi.org/10.1007/s43621-024-00786-2*

[6] *FAO SWALIM 2021. Land Suitability and Degradation Reports. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Somalia Water and Land Information Management. Nairobi, Kenya, faoswalim.org/land/land-degradation/land-degradation-reports*

[7] *UNEP 2023. Climate Security in Somalia: Environmental Peacebuilding Approaches in Practice. United Nations Environment Programme. Internal report.*

[8] *UN-Habitat 2021. Land Governance in Fragile States: The Case of Somalia. Nairobi: UN-Habitat, unhabitat.org/land-and-property-taxation-in-fragile-states*

[9] *FSNAU 2023. Quarterly brief: climate and displacement dynamics. Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit – Somalia, fsnau.org*

perspective, this has resulted in greater contest over grazing rights and earlier and lengthier dry-season migrations, particularly in areas such as Gedo, Hiraan and Togdheer.[10]

Water scarcity is another major challenge. While Somalia is traversed by the Juba and Shabelle rivers, surface water is highly seasonal and – due to climate variability and upstream extraction in Ethiopia – increasingly unreliable. Groundwater, which supplies most rural and urban areas, is being overexploited, with saltwater intrusion and contamination spreading in coastal aquifers.[11] Borehole proliferation, often unregulated and resulting from humanitarian needs, has led to disputes over control and usage, especially in Puntland, Galmudug and Lower Shabelle. During recent drought years, particularly 2017 and 2022, entire communities have clashed over limited water sources, with incidents of violence reported in Sool, Sanaag and Mudug.[12]

Environmental stressors are compounded by weak dispute resolution mechanisms and limited state presence (and authority) in rural localities. Traditional governance, customary law (*Xeer*) and clan-based negotiation systems often manage tensions, but their legitimacy and effectiveness are being eroded by resource competition, proliferation of arms, as well as political manipulation, targeting of elders, and the increasing influence of younger actors with political and economic ambitions.[13]

CLAN CONFLICT

Somalia's complex clan system, deeply rooted in lineage and customary law, has long shaped social, political and economic interactions, with elders managing disputes and regulating access to resources.[14] Clan frictions have always existed but are, however, no longer matters of historical rivalry or cultural difference – they are now increasingly shaped by structural pressures including environmental decline exacerbated by demographic shifts and political marginalisation. Tensions over the use of water points, grazing and cropping lands, and movement beyond customary territories are putting extra strain on clan relations across the Shabelle and Juba basins as well as elsewhere.

"Tensions over the use of water points, grazing and cropping lands, and movement beyond customary territories are putting extra strain on clan relations."

There have been violent clashes between the Hawadle and Abgal clans in Hiran, and between the Marehan and Majerteen in parts of Gedo and Mudug. Often armed militia groups aligned with specific clans escalate these disputes beyond local containment. The scale of violence has also increased between the Ayr sub-clan of the Habr Gedir and the Marehan, where in the Galaduud region seasonal rivers have dried up and grazing land has become more contested. In Lower Shabelle, conflicts between the Bimaal and Hawiye sub-clans have intensified around agricultural land and irrigation access. Flooding from the Shabelle River, coupled with government and private land grabs, has triggered resentment among historically marginalised groups, especially when aid and state interventions are perceived as favouring one clan over another.[15]

Displacement has also instigated clan conflict. Over 3.5 million people are internally displaced in Somalia, many of whom have resettled in urban peripheries or in internally displaced people (IDP) camps where competition for aid and land often inflame tensions. In Baidoa, for example, tensions between IDPs, primarily from the Rahanweyn clan, and host communities have led to

[10] *CEWARN 2021. Pastoralist conflict mapping in the IGAD region. Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism. IGAD Secretariat, cewarn.org/multimedia/maps*

[11] *FAO 2022. Groundwater Mapping and Water Resource Assessments in Somalia. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. United Nations Environment Programme. Internal report.*

[12] *ACLED 2022. Somalia: conflict overview. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, acleddata.com/africa/horn-of-africa/somalia*

[13] *Abdile, M. 2012. Customary dispute resolution in Somalia. African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review 2(1). Gelot, L. and Khadka, P. 2024. Traditional authorities as both curse and cure: the politics of coping with violent extremism in Somalia. Conflict, Security and Development 24(1).*

[14] *Lewis, I. 1995. Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press.*

[15] *UN-Habitat 2021. Land Governance in Fragile States: The Case of Somalia. Nairobi: UN-Habitat, unhabitat.org/land-and-property-taxation-in-fragile-states*

disputes over informal land allocations and employment opportunities.[16]

Escalating frictions over resources and (the threat of) violence by armed actors have eroded traditional mechanisms which have historically ameliorated them. Clan-based arbitration, communal grazing committees and rotational water-use systems have been abandoned as elders struggle to enforce agreements, particularly when political elites or armed actors intervene to manipulate outcomes. Furthermore, climate-induced mobility disrupts the spatial stability required for such mechanisms to function effectively, weakening the ability of communities to self-regulate and avoid cycles of retaliation.

AL-SHABAAB AND IS-SOMALIA

Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia (IS-Somalia) represent enduring, adaptive threats in the Horn of Africa. Both are affiliates of transnational jihadist groups: al-Shabaab of Al-Qaeda and IS-Somali of Islamic State. While al-Shabaab remains the dominant threat actor under leader Ahmed Diriye, IS-Somalia has steadily expanded its influence, particularly in Puntland. The two groups have extended their reach – both ideologically and geographically – through sophisticated propaganda, strategic violence and exploitation of weak governance.

Al-Shabaab – 'the Youth' in Arabic – finds its origins in the militant youth wing of the Islamic Courts Union, a Sharia-based politico-legal organisation which emerged in the chaos of the Somali Civil War and, from the 1990s – until the Islamic Courts Union was dismantled after the US-backed Ethiopian invasion of 2006 – became the de facto government of the country. Al-Shabaab, which is largely a nationalist insurgency and estimated to have no more that 12,000 soldiers,[17] has been

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"Messaging often frames the Somali Federal Government, African Union forces – African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia, but African Union Transition Mission in Somalia and African Union Mission in Somalia previously – and international partners, like the US and UK, as illegitimate aggressors waging war on Islam."

responsible for countless attacks in Somalia as well as regional attacks in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya and Uganda. The group's name remains deeply resonant in a country where over 70 per cent of the population is under the age of 30 and face climate-induced livelihood collapse, chronic unemployment and social marginalisation. The youth are not just a demographic reality – they are the battleground and combatants for competing visions of the future.

IS-Somalia, which splintered, in 2015, from an existing al-Shabaab network in Puntland (a largely autonomous region to the north of the country) under leader Abdulqader Mumin, has carried out numerous attacks in Puntland against hotels and security forces. IS-Somalia was designated a full province by Islamic State in 2018 and given a level of transnational control, with responsibility over the Islamic State's footprints in central Africa and Mozambique. It is estimated that the group numbers no more than 1,600 in Somalia, with the Ali Suleiban clan prominent in the leadership and rank and file.[18] With a more globalist outlook, the group lacks the administrative capacity and nationalist legitimacy of al-Shabaab. IS-Somalia has an increasingly international composition, with some reports indicating foreign fighters may currently outnumber Somalis. Mumin himself has lived in both Sweden and the UK and Western-focused attack planning is an increasing concern.[19]

The climate has frustrated military operations against al-Shabaab. Flooding, for example, has repeatedly cut main access roads into the south of Somalia and stalled offensives. Moreover, the group has been quick to mount ambushes and improvised explosive device attacks against troops forced to use alternative routes. They have also been adept at disrupting military logistics chains – via attacks and local community coercion – to exaggerate the effects of extreme weather episodes.

HEATING THE THREAT: RECRUITMENT AND RADICALISATION

Extremist groups have long exploited local grievances – whether political, economic or environmental – to build support and recruit personnel. Al-Shabaab and IS-Somalia are not just insurgent/ terrorist actors but sophisticated political 'entrepreneurs' who exploit insecurity and institutional failure in order to intimidate and win 'hearts and minds'.

Both al-Shabaab and IS-Somalia mobilise issues of identity, protection and environment for influence effect, not least through their sophisticated propaganda machines. Climate change acts as a "conflict multiplier", deepening existing vulnerabilities and providing fertile ground for extremist narratives.[20] It instigates and exaggerates the "myriad parochial disputes" into which the groups can insinuate themselves.[21] This has helped them maintain their footholds even when military operations against them have intensified.

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[16] *FSNAU 2023. Quarterly brief: climate and displacement dynamics. Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit – Somalia, fsnau.org*

[17] *Jarle Hansen, S. 2024. Al-Shabaab is 18 years old: six factors behind the Somlia militant group's resilience. The Conversation, theconversation.com/al-shabaab-is-18-years-old-six-factors-behind-the-somali-militant-groups-resilience-236722#:~:text=Al%2DShabaab's%20strength%20is%20estimated,includes%20the%20Horn%20of%20Africa*

[18] *Jale Hansen, S. 2025. Islamic State in Somalia: the terrorist group's origins, rise and recent battlefield defeats. The Conversation, theconversation.com/islamic-state-in-somalia-the-terrorist-groups-origins-rise-and-recent-battlefield-defeats-252303#:~:text=The%20Islamic%20State's%20reputation%20in,in%20the%20south%20of%20Somalia*

[19] *Weiss, C. and L. Webber 2024. Islamic State Somalia: a growing global terror concern. CTC Sentinel 17(8): 12-21.*

Al-Shabaab's media wing, al-Kataib, produces sophisticated videos, frequently showing footage of attacks and speeches overlaid with religious chants (nasheeds), radio broadcasts (via al-Andalus) as well as press releases in Somali, Arabic and English. Messaging often frames the Somali Federal Government, African Union forces – AUSSOM [African Union Support and Stabilization Mission] but ATMIS [African Union Transition Mission in Somalia] and AMISOM [African Union Mission in Somalia] previously – and international partners, like the US and UK, as illegitimate aggressors waging war on Islam. They claim moral authority and portray themselves as defenders of the Somali identity, sovereignty and environment. The group's reputation as a protector resonates – whilst their interpretation of Sharia is strict, it has, historically, afforded a level of local security and predictability.[22]

Al-Shabaab propaganda frequently attacks the Somali Federal Government's inability to provide basic services or security, using this to justify its own parallel structures. The group has shown itself capable of working with, and across, clans as circumstances warrant. On the one hand it styles itself as a neutral and accessible arbiter in disputes, which are increasing over resources. On the other hand, it has bolstered the influence of certain clan elders in strategic areas as well as set up consultative councils (shura), shadow governance structures and courts, and undermined government-supported clan militias. Access to resources is often at the centre of al-Shabaab's accommodations with clan leaderships. Importantly, as state capacity falters increasingly in the face of climate-related crises, al-Shabaab steps in to offer environmental governance, order and belonging, under a banner that speaks directly to the "forgotten generation". The youth are targeted specifically in the group's propaganda by narratives which fuse grievance with moral clarity and offer purpose and protection to the climate-stressed and those marginalised by a predatory or absent state.

Showcasing its environmental credentials, in 2018, al-Shabaab banned plastic bags and tree felling in certain areas. These prohibitions are still in force in areas under its control.[23] The group has also taxed, misappropriated and distributed international aid, taxed charcoal production, and managed access to food and water sources during times of drought – further embedding itself into local economies and everyday survival.[24] This symbiotic relationship serves to generate passive acceptance or even active support, particularly among marginalised youth with few alternatives.

IS-Somalia makes use of the Amaq News Agency, a media platform linked to the Islamic State, to amplify the impact of attacks and assert their relevance. IS-Somalia's critique of the Somali Federal Government and its "allies", whom it considers corrupt apostates, is often even more extreme than al-Shabaab's. The group also criticises al-Shabaab itself, whom they describe as insufficiently committed to "true jihad", further fragmenting the insurgent landscape. The group rejects traditional Somali Islam in favour of a purist Salafi-jihadist ideology and although it levers clan-based politics, when useful, it rejects it publicly. In its operational areas of Puntland, IS-Somalia emulates many of al-Shabaab's strategies, albeit on a smaller scale. The group provides dispute resolution and has sought alliances with aggrieved clans as well as criminal networks. Resources again have been central to these activities as have long-standing and related disputes around borders and territories, particularly in and around the Golis Mountains.[25]

WARNING AND OPPORTUNITY

Radicalisation often starts with basic survival – water, food, protection – and shifts gradually into something deeper, sometimes ideological, sometimes just practical. The promise of income, justice, status and purpose resonates, especially with those, such as the youth, living amid systemic neglect. As such, kinetic strikes and military operations alone have proven an insufficient counter to the threat from either al-Shabaab or IS-Somalia. Mitigation, therefore, must also involve alleviating root causes, including the grievances around environmental degradation, lack of livelihoods and political exclusion. This is the means to outcompete and frustrate the groups' attempts to embed themselves within local communities.

To do this requires an urgent recalibration of how international actors approach climate security. Technical climate adaptation interventions will fall short without a conflict-sensitive lens. Likewise, counterterrorism and peace-building strategies must integrate environmental and livelihood dimensions to effectively address the drivers of instability.

What is needed is a shift from fragmented, sector-specific programming toward integrated approaches that:

- Invest in community-based natural resource management systems;
- Reinforce traditional conflict resolution mechanisms through inclusive governance;
- Expand anticipatory action and early warning systems;
- Engage at-risk youth with sustainable livelihood pathways; and
- Strengthen the state's ability to mediate, not just secure, environmental disputes.

Somalia has become a frontline for climate security action – terrain where climate resilience, stabilisation and resource and political governance must be pursued not as separate goals, but as a single integrated enterprise. The UN has identified opportunities – for example, in supporting conflict resolution in Hiran through the Jowhar Off Stream Reservoir Program – but the approach must be scaled to realise security dividends. Military operations against the groups are important but without accompanying investment in climate resilience, Somalia risks descending further into a state of eco-political crisis via a feedback loop of environmental and security collapse.

The case of Somalia warns as to the complex ways climate change and its environmental consequences shape the threat from violent extremist organisations. Kinetic military operations alone – particularly at current scale – are unlikely to significantly degrade either intent or capability. If the AU and the West are serious in their "unwavering commitment... to continue supporting Somalia until al-Shabaab is completely eliminated and durable peace, security and stability are fully restored in Somalia",[26] the transformative opportunity for a joined-up, holistic response must be grasped.

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[20] *ICG 2024. Fighting climate change in Somalia's conflict zones. International Crisis Group, crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/316-fighting-climate-change-somalias-conflict-zones*

[21] *Reno, W. 2019. The dilemmas of security assistance to a failed state: lessons from Somalia. (In) T. Clack and R. Johnson (eds) Before Military Intervention: Upstream Stabilisation in Theory and Practice. Basingstoke: Palgrave, p.65.*

[22] *Jarle Hansen, S. 2013. Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group. Oxford: Hurst.*

[23] *Clack, T. et al. 2023. Introduction: climate change and (in)security. (In) Hot War: Climate Change, Conflict and (In)Security. London: Routledge, p.6-7.*

[24] *Papale, S. and Castelli, E. 2025. Food, terrorism and the Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab insurgencies. Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 1-25, doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2457427*

[25] *Hoehne, M. 2015. Between Somaliland and Puntland: Marginalization, Militarization and Conflicting Political Visions. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute. p.144-9.*

[26] *AU 2025. Communiqué from the 1287th Meeting of the Peace and Security Council, held on 3 July 2025, on Update on the Situation in Somalia and Operations of the AU Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), peaceau.org/en/article/communique-from-the-1287th-meeting-of-the-peace-and-security-council-held-on-3-july-2025-on-update-on-the-situation-in-somalia-and-operations-of-the-au-support-and-stabilization-mission-in-somalia-aussom*

WINNING THE PEACE: INSIGHTS AND LESSONS FROM POST-ASSAD SYRIA

AUTHOR

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"The Middle East is being consumed by many fires. But today there is a flame of hope in Syria. That flame must not be extinguished."
– UN Secretary-General António Guterres, December 2024

THE lightning offensive of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, which burst out of Idlib province in late November 2024, swept aside five decades of authoritarian rule in Syria in the space of barely ten days. The succeeding authorities, led by the former Al Qaeda leader Ahmed Al Shara'a, quickly set about rebuilding international and regional ties while promising the people of Syria a new era, free from the depredations and shortcomings of the Assad years. Yet the challenges of stabilising, governing and building a sustainable peace in a nation as diverse as Syria – and one so brutalised by 14 years of civil conflict – have, in the months since, so far proved insurmountable.

There is, consequently, much to be learned from this very recent, raw experience of a country of often understated strategic importance. To draw out these lessons, this article applies an integrative framework that has emerged over 70 years of international peacebuilding, peace support and stabilisation operations: Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR). Although by no means always referred to as DDR on the ground (or necessarily carried out in anywhere near the neat sequence suggested by its title), the concept nonetheless creates the ability to holistically view, analyse and ultimately deliver some of the most significant actions that a post-conflict nation can take to begin entrenching an early peace, re-unifying its fragmented parts and setting the path to recovery. Importantly, the insights from Syria – as well as DDR as a tool for understanding and action – carry value for those UK military commanders and policymakers who may face stabilisation operations in the future and are worthy of heed.

THE DDR FRAMEWORK

DDR is a process that aims to support the transition from conflict to peace by reducing the means, motivations and structures of armed violence – particularly through the disbandment of non-state armed groups and the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian or state-controlled security structures. It furthermore considers the crucial influences such as 'spoilers' (malign actors), legitimacy and socio-political and economic landscapes upon each phase.

DDR is often employed in concert with wider security sector reform efforts. The United Nation's own Integrated DDR Standards define each key stage of the process,[1] however, analysis of Syria has suggested a further discrete phase – *Integration* – to account for the possible incorporation of non-state armed groups' combatants and units militarily into the new state (particularly when it is not expedient or possible to demobilise many thousands of fighters in the direct aftermath of conflict). As was discovered by the Coalition Provisional Authority to its detriment in Iraq in 2003, the rapid dissolution of hundreds of thousands of militarily-trained personnel provided the tinder for a post-invasion insurgency. DDR will henceforth be referred to as DDIR.

KEY INSIGHTS FOR STABILISATION

Despite the formal end of conflict, Syria's stabilisation landscape remains unsettled. Incomplete disarmament, fragmented armed groups and fragile reintegration continue to obstruct the consolidation of a sustained peace. Non-state armed groups have not been demobilised – and are still acting as potent, autonomous organisations. In Syria's post-conflict space, their presence – representing as they do sub-national centres of power, outside of the 'official' national authority – continues to challenge the central authorities as they seek to establish governance over all regions of the country. Non-state armed groups can endure in the aftermath of conflict because they provide protection for a particular community; offer paid employment for individuals in an economically devastated setting; afford members the prestige associated with armed power; or sustain the standing of local strongmen or warlords. It may indeed be irrational in many cases for groups to disarm, especially in the absence of compelling safety and economic guarantees, and continued status for their members.

At present, many such non-disarmed groups exist, with each one possessing its own command structures and loyalties – and, to a greater or lesser extent, enough fighting power to be able to challenge the pre-eminence of the Government of Syria. The authorities in contrast do not possess sufficient coercive force to compel such groups to dissolve or to be fully assimilated into the national military. As a result, tensions between the Government and such groups have repeatedly boiled over into renewed conflict, such as with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces around the Tishreen Dam in the north of the country, and with the militia forces of the Druze factional leader Hikmat al-Hijri in the south.

Hand-in-glove with demobilisation is disarmament, which in Syria remains elusive. Disarmament, as the term suggests, entails removing the immediate means for non-state actors to continue fighting, and in doing so ensuring that the central authority is able to establish a 'monopoly of force' – in essence, to be the only actor legitimately able to hold weapons and deploy their lethal effects in the service of national stability and security.

Disarmament is certainly a matter of critical importance for the Government of Syria, especially when such a significant number of weapons in the country– as many as 1.3 million – lie outside of its control. Even with intensive and reasonably successful efforts by the authorities to encourage voluntary disarmament through 'Settlement Centres' – which facilitate local agreements with

[1] *United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, 'Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards', 2010.*

"Reintegration encompasses some profound elements... it must provide the psychosocial support that is needed for a traumatised population: for former fighters habituated to carrying weapons; for brutalised civilians, particularly children and young people bearing the brunt of conflict; and for the communities re-absorbing combatants."

non-state armed groups that remove heavy calibre weapons from circulation while permitting the retention of some small arms – and through intelligence-led interdiction and seizure operations of weapon caches, the administration has not yet been able to sufficiently minimise the number of armaments in non-state hands.

Within Syria, the Government brokered a number of deals early on with non-state groups, in which they agreed to formally assimilate their personnel into the national security forces. In practice, however, this integration has only been partially successful: other actors, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces in the north-east, have latterly become far more reluctant to give up control of their fighting power and dissolve their command structures. This reluctance has stemmed in particular from significant disagreements about political representation, as well as from the violent clashes in the coastal regions and Suweida – after which a widely-held belief has begun to take hold that the Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham-led Government of Syria is favouring the Sunni majority of the country at the expense of its minorities. The practice of 're-flagging' militias[2] has also brought some nominally under the control of the state, however, in reality this control has been tenuous – which in the worst instances meant the Government was not able to restrain these affiliated groups as they unleashed large-scale violence.

Reintegration is possibly the most important of all long-term stabilising activities – yet is not being prioritised. Beyond its direct imperative to transition combatants out of fighting forces and back into civilian life, reintegration implies the setting of the structurally deep socio-economic conditions that are needed to prevent a backslide to conflict, factionalism and instability – and to begin enabling the fabric of society to be repaired. As per the UN's own Integrated DDR Standards, "the return of ex-combatants should be carefully planned with the involvement of community leaders, civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations to prevent the undermining of social cohesion".[3] Reintegration consequently encompasses some profound elements. It must start to provide the economic means for former fighters to sustain themselves and their families, without reverting to membership of armed groups. It must enable a modicum of transitional justice, to provide both redress for victims, but also a legal, credible mechanism for allowing former combatants to move on and shed their previous existence, if possible. And it must provide the psychosocial support that is needed for a traumatised population: for former fighters habituated to carrying weapons; for brutalised civilians, particularly children and young people bearing the brunt of conflict; and for the communities re-absorbing combatants.

"There is currently precious little in the way of the clear economic pathways, national-level employment programmes and financial incentives that would give sufficient inducement for combatants to give up their affiliation of non-state groups."

Within Syria, however, reintegration efforts have been partial at best, compounded by a significant shortfall in the national coffers. There is currently precious little in the way of the clear economic pathways, national-level employment programmes and financial incentives that would give sufficient inducement for combatants to give up their affiliation of non-state groups.

In terms of justice, the central authorities have begun to make some progress: an independent commission was established in May 2025 to start addressing the matter nationally. This, however, will focus only on the 'grave violations' of the Assad regime, with scrutiny likely not being as evenly applied across all former parties to the conflict, including the Government of Syria.

No substantial, nationally-funded psychosocial provisions exist either, which are of critical importance in addressing trauma and also enabling reintegration of combatants into communities. At present, the gap is only being filled minimally by civil society organisations delivering initiatives, for example, to train doctors to deal with post traumatic stress disorder. This programming in itself has been deeply affected by the cutting of USAID funding that took place in early 2025.[4]

Domestic and external spoilers are causing significant damage to the stabilisation process. As it attempts to stabilise the country, the Government is having to confront threats from spoilers on multiple fronts. Domestically, low-level insurgencies persist in the form of both the Islamic State, as well as remnants of the former regime's military, known as the Fuloul – both of which seek to sow chaos and undermine the new government. The Druze faction of Hikmat al-Hijri in Suweida province has also sought to leverage the weaknesses of the authorities to its own benefit, in order to extract greater autonomy and concessions – which in turn impact the unity of the country and the legitimacy of the government.

Internationally, Israel's interventions in Syria have contributed to its instability. Its military has bombed central Damascus, carried out regular incursions and land annexations in southern Syria, and struck Government of Syria units attempting to intervene in fighting between Druze and Bedouin factions in

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[2] *R. Geist Pinfold, H. Hammoud, mecouncil.org/blog_posts/how-syrias-new-government-risks-undermining-itself, 3 Aug 2025.*

[3] *United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, 'Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards', 2010.*

[4] *Interview with civil society organisation director, 27 March 2025.*

July 2025. Yet in doing so, it has arguably destabilised the country further by diminishing the Government's ability to impose authority within its borders, in turn emboldening non-state actors while creating space for malign actors to reconstitute. Iran has also followed a similar strategy of destabilisation, supporting extremist Sunni groups and generating a vast amount of disinformation.

Neighbouring nations are performing a far more assertive role in Syria's future. Of note, particularly for Western countries, is the significant part being played directly by regional actors. This has been shown through, for instance, Gulf countries writing off the debts of Syria at the World Bank, providing gas and electricity infrastructure, funding civil servants salaries, and through Turkey's close political support of the Government of Syria, and its assertive military presence in various parts of the country.

LESSONS FOR THE UK'S STABILISATION APPROACH

Syria's experience underscores that stabilisation cannot succeed without coherence, legitimacy and the careful sequencing of DDIR. For the UK, aligning civil-military efforts around these principles – and engaging regional actors while curbing spoilers – offers the surest path to durable effect.

DDIR provides a valuable start point for grappling with the complexity of the post-conflict space, while being complementary to existing stabilisation approaches. It is of little surprise that the environments in which stability operations must take place are wickedly complicated. Crippled infrastructure, devastated national and local economies, a fragmented and traumatised population, severe shortfalls in government administrative capacity, an array of militarised, well-armed factional groups, and interference from domestic and external spoilers all converge to hamper any efforts at stabilisation, or even fully understanding the nature of the problem in the first place.

From close observation of Syria's recent experience, however, it becomes evident that many of the Government of Syria's difficulties in stabilising the country stem from both not coherently addressing the base elements of DDIR, nor seeing them as a set of inextricably linked activities. Instead, it has undertaken a number of localised initiatives – yet without the benefit of a comprehensive overview and joined-up approach, it has so far struggled to gain the monopoly of force, set the political and economic conditions for the widespread demobilisation of non-state actors, and provide the pathways and support for combatants to sustainably return to civilian life.[5]

"Neighbouring nations are performing a far more assertive role in Syria's future. Of note, particularly for Western countries, is the significant part being played directly by regional actors."

Noting this highlights that, for the UK, there are significant advantages to incorporating the DDIR model in the early phases of any stabilisation estimate:

- DDIR is simple yet robust. If achieved, its required outcomes of disarmament, demobilisation, integration (where appropriate) and reintegration are both necessary and sufficient for the conditions of a lasting peace to be set. As such, it makes a useful start point for the development of subsequent well-informed, well-focussed stabilisation planning.

- In the complexity of a country emerging from conflict, the DDIR model enables commanders and policymakers to effectively make sense of the bewildering array of factors and linkages present, from the international down to the local domestic – and what operational courses of action may emerge to best enable stability. Given that peacebuilding is ultimately a civil-political effort, it also correctly situates any military activities in subordination to this endeavour, while clarifying valuable enabling actions that military forces can play beyond security taskings (a notion which aligns with the four key tasks of military stability operations defined in *Army Field Manual: Stability and Peace Support Operations*).[6]

- DDIR benefits from already being a well-recognised approach by the UN in its peacebuilding and stabilisation activities, ensuring immediate harmonisation of process in the event of UK forces operating under a UN mandate – as well as enabling the UK's presence to be effectively and positively communicated, domestically and internationally.

The legitimacy of any partner nation's government to rule is fundamental to stabilisation, so encouraging it to remain above all partisanship and factionalism is critical. The UK's stabilisation model is built around supporting a recognised central national authority to strengthen its position, prevent insecurity and violent conflict, and begin delivering positive effects to the nation.[7] Key to this is the legitimacy of the partner authority to rule, especially in the eyes of its populace. Yet Syria's experience has shown how quickly fragile a government's legitimacy can become, and how damaging lost legitimacy can be to its peacebuilding efforts. Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham won early support from the international community – as well as cautious optimism domestically – for leading the ouster of the Assad regime and by presenting a seemingly tolerant and unifying agenda. Subsequently,

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[5] *Muscat House Research Unit, Syria's Peace: An Initial Insight into Disarmament, Demobilisation, Integration and Reintegration Processes in the post-Assad nation, August 2025.*

[6-7] *Army Field Manual : Stability and Peace Support Operations, June 2022.*

though, a number of factors have conspired to cast doubt on it being an effective ruler for all Syrians. These include it being unable to prevent the violence in coastal regions against the Alawite and Druze minorities in March and July 2025; its inability as yet to reach an accord with the Kurds around their representation and role nationally; and concerns about the structuring of the interim administration to entrench power for a small circle of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham insiders, rather than set it on a path to greater representation of all.

The need for genuine transparency and accountability notwithstanding, these elements have detracted severely from the Government's perceived right to govern. By doing so, they have overshadowed the positive efforts it has made in attracting investment into the country, fighting the rampant narcotics production and trafficking syndicates, and more broadly, stabilising the country's economy while returning Syria to the international system after a decade and a half as a pariah.

More broadly for the UK, therefore, this implies the importance of being prepared to exert political guidance and, where necessary, pressure on the partner nation's government – thereby minimising the missteps which diminish its legitimacy, and threaten the broader peacebuilding effort. It also means being realistic about how quickly the 'benefit-of-the-doubt dividend' for new authorities can run out, and anticipating and mitigating accordingly in any stabilisation approach.

The UK's stabilisation approach must actively incorporate the role of positive regional actors, and minimise the influence of negative ones. Too often previously, Western nations have carried out post-conflict stabilisation work without due regard to the innate understanding, connections and concerns of countries regional to the partner nation – much to the detriment of the results.

In Syria's recent case, however, a number of regional neighbours such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have actively contributed to the country from the outset of the new administration's tenure – providing it with support in everything from infrastructure reconstruction, political support and investment, to funding for government services, training and even explosive ordnance capabilities.

While the intentions for doing so may not, of course, be purely selfless, the powerful motivations for such regional partners to ensure stability in their neighbourhood, and ultimately support a 'fraternal' nation back to its feet, should not be overlooked. Syria's case has also illustrated that such nations no longer automatically look to Western governments and militaries to step in first, but rather now have the means and motivations to do so themselves – and as such, the UK must demonstrate high quality diplomacy and coordination if it is to contribute effectively in this new context.

By the same token, working to minimise the impact of 'spoilers' goes hand in hand with the encouragement of positive regional actors. As referenced earlier, Iran, Israel, as well as domestic terror groups, have all sought to disrupt Syria's new ruling authority's attempts to stabilise the country and prevent a backslide into social fragmentation, economic collapse and conflict. Addressing these spoilers directly, and doing all possible to neutralise them diplomatically and militarily, compounds the positive effects of stabilisation.

CONCLUSION

Stabilising post-conflict nations, and winning an enduring peace, is a deeply challenging endeavour regardless of its setting – requiring the masterful orchestration of security operations, political shaping and socio-economic rebuilding. Syria's recent experience has laid bare these challenges in technicolour. Nearly a decade and a half of civil conflict, plus the much longer depredations of its predatory former regime, have created a context of immense complexity. The Government of Syria has made some undoubtedly substantial progress in its efforts to bring stability and peace, however, by not yet comprehensively addressing the interconnected fundamentals of DDIR in the country, long-term peace remains elusive. Nonetheless, the resulting insights which have emerged remain of significant value, and should be heeded and incorporated into the UK's ever-evolving and improving conception of how to carry out stabilisation in the post-conflict space.

AN EMAIL ENIGMA AND DIGITAL DENIAL

AUTHOR

The Boxer is a serving British Army officer who floats around the Service like a butterfly and whose words *can* sting like a bee.

WITH a sickening sense of dread, Tom Weeves, Adjutant of the 3rd Battalion, realised he hadn't seen any new emails since escaping his desk at 2213 hours the previous evening. The last correspondence he'd received was from the welfare officer, excitedly advertising that, for an exorbitant fee, a small quartet had been booked for the upcoming summer ball.

"Why does it matter how bloody tall they are?" the pedant in Weeves had wondered.

As he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and realised he needed a cup of tea, he knew he wasn't going to get to review any subsequent messages any time soon. He'd left his relic of an iPhone 8 on his bedside table, which meant he couldn't enter the two-factor authentication codes now pinging onto his laptop into its heavily scratched screen and – consequently – he had no means of accessing the inbox that dictated his life and usually kept him pinned to a computer for ten hours a day. A little queasy at having to go cold turkey and keen to avoid anyone finding out about his forgetfulness, he went to actually talk to people around the HQ.

Dropping in to the Battalion HQ communal kitchen, Weeves held his breath and looked for the least brown-stained mug that also contained no curdled dregs. It was not an appealing, or easy, task. Underneath a curled, tea-stained notice that read "CO: Tea (weak), dash of milk; RSM: Coffee (strong), black, 3 sugars before PT, no sugar otherwise; Chief Clerk: Tea, NATO; Adjt: whatever" he spotted a nearly clean-ish mug nestled amongst the others, fished it out and distractedly made himself a cup of tea (white, one sugar) while reminding himself to fill in the Battalion HQ 'how do you take your brew?' form.

Captain 'Doc' Docherty was the first individual he found to converse with face-to-face. Based in B Company, the young officer was supposed to have deployed to Kenya on an exercise but – keen not to return to the bottom of a long list – was staying behind to attend the dental appointment he'd made eight months ago. Taking advantage of his extended presence, Weeves had asked Doc to tackle the operations officer job that he sensed was overfacing the very rotund and somewhat curmudgeonly Sergeant Porter.

"What's up, Doc?," quipped Weeves as he walked into his office, still holding his cup of tea.

"Err, not a lot," replied Doc, looking somewhat taken aback that Weeves was away from his desk, and glancing with bemusement at the brew in his hand.

"How's the handover gone?"

"Well, your instincts proved right, Sergeant Porter was drowning in here. I asked him to show me his filing system and he drew my attention to hundreds of documents in one folder on the desktop. Not a single sub-folder to be found."

"Maybe he just knew where everything was?" suggested Weeves optimistically.

"The folder was called 'important stuff'," pointed out Doc. "And someone called the encrypted phone and tried to sell me some double glazing."

Weeves' mind started to whirl with the potential implications as the commanding officer walked past en route to his office and glared in his direction.

"Have you seen that email I sent you this morning? I need you to action it asap," Lieutenant Colonel Jooster said sternly.

"Yes, sir, I'll get on it straight away," replied Weeves.

He reached into his pocket with the intent of pulling out his phone so that he could contact his wife and ask her to relay the required codes from the authenticator. It quickly dawned on him that if his mobile had been in his pocket no such call would be necessary; that he'd long forgotten his wife's number in any case; and that, given she too was at work, wouldn't appreciate a request to drive home in the middle of the day.

While contemplating the unenviable decision either to admit he couldn't read his email or abandon the office for a 30-minute round trip, he was interrupted by the ever dependable Regimental Sergeant Major.

"Weeves, have you seen the email the CO sent you and me this morning? Shall we grab a brew and work out how we're going to square it away?"

"Amazing," exclaimed Weeves, before continuing a little too energetically, "good idea, RSM, let's sit in your office and attack it immediately." Before adding "and I already have a brew thanks!" while wafting his mug in the RSM's direction.

"So I see, sir," said the RSM with a raised eyebrow, and, barking "brew!" at a passing clerk, led the way into his office. Within moments a steaming coffee arrived for the RSM (strong, black, no sugar), in a gleamingly-clean regimental-coloured mug with 'RSM' stencilled upon it. The RSM quietly shut his door. "You've forgotten your phone, haven't you?"

Often credited with being as fit as anyone in the battalion, what actually made the RSM great, throughout his career, was his ability to read people.

"Yes, I have," Weeves conceded in his characteristically droll tone.

"No bother – I've got the email here. The CO has had his ear bent from on high about this data leak in London. Apparently we now have to do hours of online learning by next Wednesday or he's going to get it in the neck. Apparently the info that's gone astray has cost the UK billions of pounds. It's the most expensive data leak since the Zimmerman telegram."

"Okay, I'll send an email to the company commanders, get them to light a fire under this online learning and then I can report back to the CO... and what's the Zimmerman telegram?" asked Weeves.

"Never mind the history lesson, how are you going to email the OCs?"

"Good point," reflected Weeves before blurting out "coffee". "I'll tell them at CO's coffee in the mess. And you can tell the sergeant majors and seniors."

Content that he was somehow managing without the use of an electronic device, Weeves asked the RSM what the Army had been like before computers.

"Easy," came the reply.

"Weeves, my office, now," instructed the CO suddenly from across the corridor. "And shut the door."

Before Weeves had a chance to sit down, Lieutenant Colonel Jooster launched into a full-blown rant.

"I've just got an email from Brigade. Some eejit put almost all our officers' annual reports, including mine, on the Brigade SharePoint. Everyone in the entire Army can read them."

Feeling faint, Weeves realised he'd uploaded the reports to the SharePoint, as he'd been asked to do, but not then gone into 'settings', 'edit in desktop app' and 'properties' to protect them from prying eyes.

"I don't care who it was. Lock them down now. I don't want the whole of the British Army reading my OJAR."

"Of course, sir, I'll do it straight away."

Weeves sat at his desk, opened up his computer and clicked on SharePoint, despite knowing the futility of doing so. The secure code on his laptop screen would just add to the growing list of notifications displayed on his missing mobile. Resigned to his fate, he placed his head in his hands, only to be shaken from his slough of despond by the familiar ping of the authenticator app.

Beside his keyboard sat his phone with a Post-it note, bearing his wife's handwriting, stuck to its screen: "Thought you might need this xx".

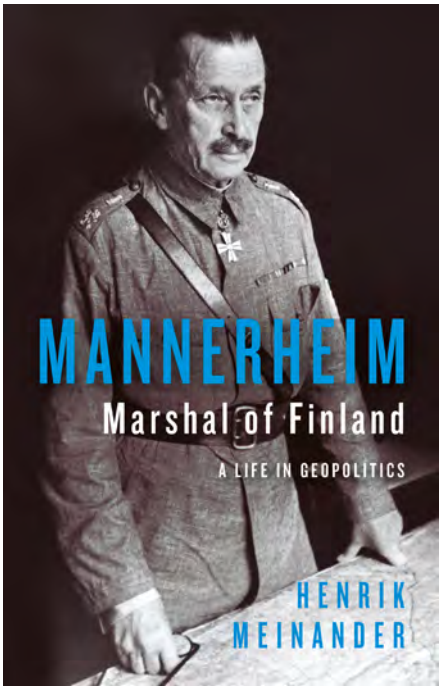
"What a legend," thought Weeves, toasting his turn of fortune with his now cold cup of tea. It was only then that he realised, in his haste this morning, he'd picked up the mug from the communal kitchen adorned with a picture of a small, chubby, Roman God, with a cherubic smile on its little round face, and underwritten with the words 'Cupid Stunt.'

"Your wife dropped off your mobile when you were in the CO's office," said the RSM as he entered the room. "Everything okay?"

"I guess so, now, but it's not been my finest hour."

"You've got to remember; you work for an organisation that drives with its lights on during the day and turns them off at night – it's inevitable that occasionally such stupidity will rub off on you."

***The Boxer* will be back in the next issue of *The British Army Review*...**



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TITLE
Mannerheim, Marshal of Finland: A Life in Geopolitics

AUTHOR
Henrik Meinander

REVIEWER
Professor Andrew Stewart, Head of Conflict Research, CHACR

A TIMELY REFOCUS ON 'UN-*FINNISH*-ED' BUSINESS

Finland has become a focal point for conflict watchers. With a nearly 900-mile frontier and a history of conflict and occupation, the relationship with its neighbour Russia has been complicated. The Soviet invasion in November 1939 has secured much renewed interest with its similarities to the war fought since February 2022 in Ukraine. Both instigated by Russian political leaders who presumed they would be short and decisive actions with little or no external interference, Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Putin each failed utterly to anticipate the resistance they would face from small but resolute neighbouring militaries. Added to this is the level of loss that the attackers have suffered. "So many Russians – where will we bury them all?" was the reported observation of one Finnish soldier who saw the enemy advancing towards his country.[1] More than 40 months since the disastrous attempt to seize Kyiv, this seems increasingly the case when considering the latest Russian-driven war. While casualty figures for both conflicts vary wildly, even the more restrained estimates run into the hundreds of thousands for the attacking side. Further aggression towards Finland is not inconceivable, reports earlier this year suggest that Russia is rebuilding and expanding military infrastructure along its borders.[2] The focus on the security of the Baltic region is not misplaced but the threat further north should not be underestimated or overlooked.

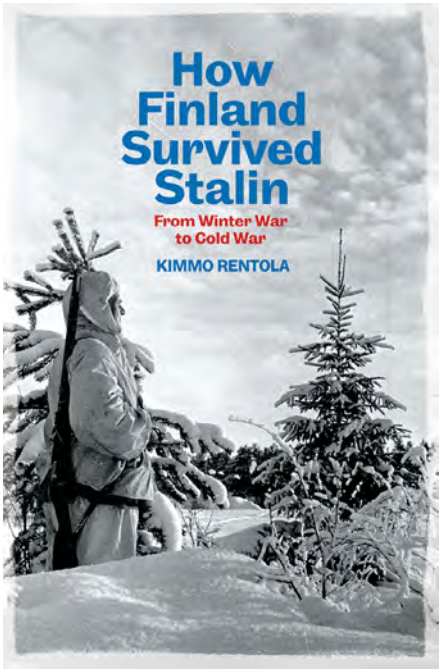
> "The focus on the security of the Baltic region is not misplaced but the threat further north should not be underestimated or overlooked"

Two recently released books – *Mannerheim, Marshal of Finland: A Life in Geopolitics* and *How Finland Survived Stalin: From Winter War to Cold War*, which were originally published several years ago but have now been translated into English – provide important insights, both of the Winter War and the geopolitics and security of what today represents NATO's north-eastern flank. The conflict fought between the Soviet Union and Finland from November 1939 until the following March ultimately resulted in a defeat for the Finnish military and the government was forced to cede territory to Moscow. It was though in many respects a hard fought victory, a much smaller country with a much smaller defence organisation had embarrassed, even humiliated, its much larger military neighbour and power. It is a conflict that has been well studied with a number of published accounts throughout the Cold War (some of which were translated into English). These latest additions offer a more developed appreciation, the first providing a biography of one of the leading national figures and the other a more expansive study of how Finland was able to hold Russia at bay and avoid the fate, at the end of the Second World War, of the Baltic states and those other territories annexed by the Soviets.

Henrik Meinander's excellent biography of Gustaf Mannheim provides an important modern interpretation of an influential European political and military figure perhaps not so widely known outside his own country. Published in Finnish and Swedish in June 2017, marking the 150th anniversary of his birth, and subsequently in Estonian and Russian, *Mannerheim, Marshal of Finland: A Life in Geopolitics* is now available in English. With ten chapters and nearly 270 pages, and drawing almost entirely on secondary sources, the writer tracks a most remarkable career of what emerges as a sometimes reluctant warrior politician who tirelessly served his country, one which did not exist when he was born in 1867 into a Swedish-speaking aristocratic family in 1867 in what is today south-western Finland and was then a Grand Duchy of Russia. He served in the Imperial Russian military, first in the Russo-Japanese War and then the First World War's Eastern Front, rising by 1917 to the rank of lieutenant general. After the Revolution and being installed as commander-in-chief of the counter-revolutionary Finnish White Army, Mannerheim had defeated the Reds by May of the following year, securing not only Finland's independence but, as Jozef Pilsudski had also done in Poland with his defeat outside Warsaw of Soviet forces, ensuring that communism

[1] *Laurence Kenneth, 'What were the Red Army losses during the Winter War?', Finland at War, 6 September 2020, finlandatwar.com/what-were-the-red-army-losses-during-the-winter-war; for those interested in the Finnish military, this is an excellent resource. Ann Marie Dailey, 'Molotov Cocktails in winter: What 1939 Finland tells us about Ukraine today', New Atlanticist, 2 March 2022.*

[2] *Ioana Cleave, 'Putin is building new force to take on NATO', Daily Telegraph (London), 24 May 2025.*



Published by Yale University Press London, Hardback, £25
ISBN: 9780300273618

TITLE
How Finland Survived Stalin: From Winter War to Cold War

AUTHOR
Kimmo Rentola

REVIEWER
Professor Andrew Stewart, Head of Conflict Research, CHACR

would not spread beyond the Russian border. Appointed as the country's second regent for a short period, he was a candidate in the first Finnish presidential elections in 1919 but lost and withdrew from politics. After an absence of 12 years, in accepting the role of Chairman of the Finnish Defence Council in 1931 he did so with the agreement that he would also temporarily take over as commander-in-chief of the country's armed forces should there be a war. It was this that led him to command in November 1939 in what seemed from its first days to external observers as a hopeless battle against the Soviet Union.

With growing interest across the British Army, the 27-page chapter devoted to the Winter War will make a particularly useful addition to resources for study albeit detailing considerations at the strategic level of the war. The discussion is relatively short, perhaps in part because of the author's conviction that there have been plenty of military histories already published on the conflict. What is insightful is his conclusion that, as the Soviet war machine finally started to demonstrate "the vastly unequal strengths of the warring armies", "it is a small miracle that things did not go worse for the Finns". He also provides an interesting discussion on Mannerheim as a military commander, a 72 year-old aristocratic field marshal with no staff college education who exerted top-down control on the war's conduct but ensured the political leadership retained overall control. As he argues, no other contemporary commander-in-chief combined his qualities and public support. The author also explains how the war ended just as there were more tangible signs of international backing from the United States and the Western powers. He notes that Stalin struck a swift deal with the Finns driven in large part by intelligence reports from London and Paris that preparations were being made to send large numbers of troops and aircraft, an intervention which could have had implications far beyond the Baltic. Meinander concludes: "The terms of the peace treaty were, of course, extremely harsh from a Finnish perspective, but they did not correspond at all to what Stalin had expected to gain from the Winter War." It is to be wondered if a future stage may come where a similar calculation is made in Moscow about continuing the previously termed 'special military operation' or accepting that the costs of prosecuting the war in Ukraine to a conclusion are greater than the rewards.

"It is to be wondered if a future stage may come where a similar calculation is made in Moscow about continuing the previously termed 'special military operation' or accepting that the costs of prosecuting the war in Ukraine to a conclusion are greater than the rewards."

Both Meinander and Kimmo Rentola also examine the second war fought against the Soviets. From 1941 to 1944, there was a military alliance with Nazi Germany as the Finns contested what was known as the 'Continuation War' to recover the territory they had been forced to cede. The Finns were never committed fellow travellers with the Nazis, this was very much a marriage of convenience as the country sought to recover what it had been compelled to give up. The pursuit of national interests forced on Mannerheim and the Finnish leadership difficult decisions and, as Meinander notes, "not surprisingly, the Marshal has been both adulated and vilified for the decision taken during those troublesome years". Once amongst the most vocal of supporters, Winston Churchill declared war on Finland and was particularly harsh in his criticism of their actions as the conflict came to a close; this was perhaps one of his more hypocritical wartime actions when considering his own unanticipated marriage of convenience with his former implacable foe the Soviet Union.

This is a biography of "the nation's pre-eminent hero" who had "such a long and action-packed life, full of contradictions and remarkable twists" and played a critical role in Finland's national history (for those who are interested, the two final chapters *Responsibility and Legacy* and *Posterity* are especially illuminating in providing the context of why Mannerheim was and remains so important). Reading this fascinating study, it is easy to understand Meinander's conclusion that it is "completely impossible to understand Finland's twentieth-century history without him".

In *How Finland Survived Stalin: From Winter War to Cold War*, Rentola provides a fascinating examination of Finnish-Russian relations and in this context those interested in the Winter War will not be disappointed. The author acknowledges that post-Ukraine "many analysts turn to the past to fight historical precedent" and that, in terms of today, "the Winter War offers many similarities and plenty of food for thought [as] Moscow surely underestimated its neighbour's defensive capacities and will to survive". He notes that while ideology had no part to play in the Soviet decision to go to war – a simple case

of strategic calculation, national interest and intelligence-based predictions of the intentions of the European powers – it did influence "how the attack was politically framed and sugar-coated". As was the case prior to the invasion of Ukraine (and worryingly is being repeated in the rhetoric aimed at the Baltic states), this was portrayed as a defensive war, redressing perceived wrongs and restoring what had previously been Russian. As is reported to be the case now with Vladimir Putin, Stalin also attached some significance to the importance of history.[3] According to Rentola, it framed his strategic thinking but – as with his successor – his failure to accurately understand events condemned him to disaster. He never believed the Finns would resist and if they did it would be a short war. The result was a series of cascading outcomes that stretched far beyond the bloody fighting in the snow and forests of the Finnish-Russian frontier. The author's concluding thoughts – what he terms 'Consequences' – is particularly important for a non-Finnish reader, not least to understand how a war that lasted a little over 100 days had a significant impact on subsequent events running through the Cold War and continues to be of such importance to this day.

Although the book was written 10 years ago, it has been updated with the translation to English (this can be a little literal at times, but the text is easy to follow) and includes additional material and the range of source material is impressive. As would be expected for a book written by a distinguished Finnish academic, and which received considerable acclaim when published in Finland and Sweden in 2016, Finnish and Swedish text provide a strong framework and there are some limited references to British archival material which adds value. It is, however, the extensive reference to Russian sources which is critical in raising the reader's understanding and the author is right to lament – as the Cold War has resumed – that Moscow's archives and libraries are once again no longer available for study.

"For those who are keen to promote the merits of artificial intelligence decision-making, here is a valuable example of just how difficult it will remain to anticipate how political and military leaders make decisions to go to war and the degree to which miscalculation will endure as a constant risk."

While there are other texts and sources that will provide the reader with far more specific detail and analysis about the battles of the Winter War, these volumes still offer a great deal. A particularly strong theme for Rentola is the role played by intelligence in the conflict, a focus of his previous research, and it is interesting that this highlights the degree to which there was understanding and also ignorance on both sides of events that were taking place around them. Rational actors are supposed to make sound, reasoned decisions based on the information available to them. In 1939 and 2022, the leadership in Moscow had no shortage of this but still chose to make poor choices which had far-reaching effects. For those who are keen to promote the merits of artificial intelligence decision-making, here is a valuable example of just how difficult it will remain to anticipate how political and military leaders make decisions to go to war and the degree to which miscalculation will endure as a constant risk.

More importantly, these books increase our understanding of what influences the modern Finnish character and strategic outlook. As one of the writers notes, it is increasingly impossible to overlook the strategic challenge as "Finland's border with Russia constitutes the longest and, in some senses, the sharpest frontier between civilisations in Europe...". Increasingly central to European security and NATO's collective defence, any opportunity to learn more about increasingly close British partners is to be welcomed.

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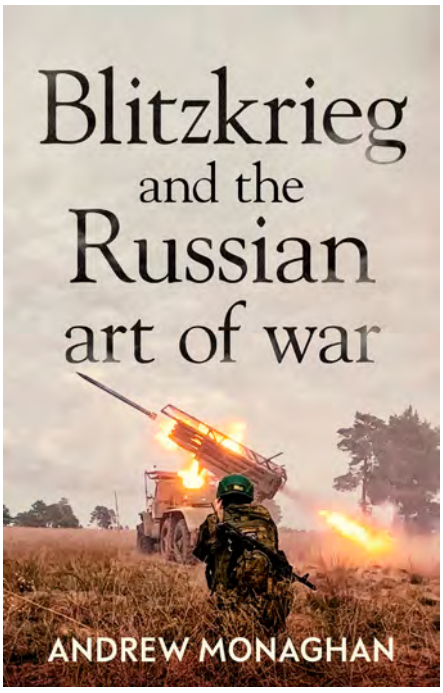
[3] This is discussed in a recent CHACR study, 'Defending NATO's front-line?', 18 June 2025, chacr.org.uk/2025/06/18/defending-natos-front-line



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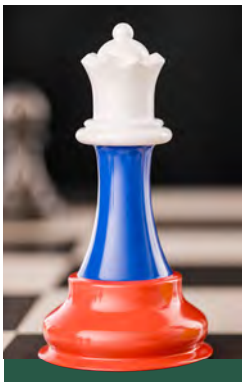
TITLE
Blitzkrieg and the Russian art of war

AUTHOR
Andrew Monaghan

REVIEWER
Major Luke Turrell,
Directing Staff, Land Command and Staff College

'AN IMPORTANT BOOK, AT A PIVOTAL CHAPTER'

Following a compelling presentation to newly promoted members of the British Army General Staff a few years ago I discussed the Russian art of war with Dr Andrew Monaghan. He thought the characterisation of it being 'chess-like' did not include enough violence. A cage fight was a more appropriate analogy. And he should know. His regular drumbeat of books, published on average every two years, starting in 2017 with *Power in Modern Russia: Strategy and Mobilisation*, have been rigorously researched and provided a hugely valuable insight, not merely into the tactical detail of Russia's war machine, but how Russia thinks about war, its strategy. His latest book, *Blitzkrieg and the Russian art of war*, argues that NATO has to fundamentally change its discussion about Russia: it is a mobilising state, regenerating public/private partnerships and socio-economic resilience to position Russia for "a long contest…[of] geopolitical struggle [requiring] resilience at home with deployable power across the global horizon". Monaghan's point is we have little choice in that, but understanding patterns in Russian strategic thinking and how their leaders have rationalised previous experiences of warfare to shape their philosophy will help us to understand where Russia seeks to be in 2030.



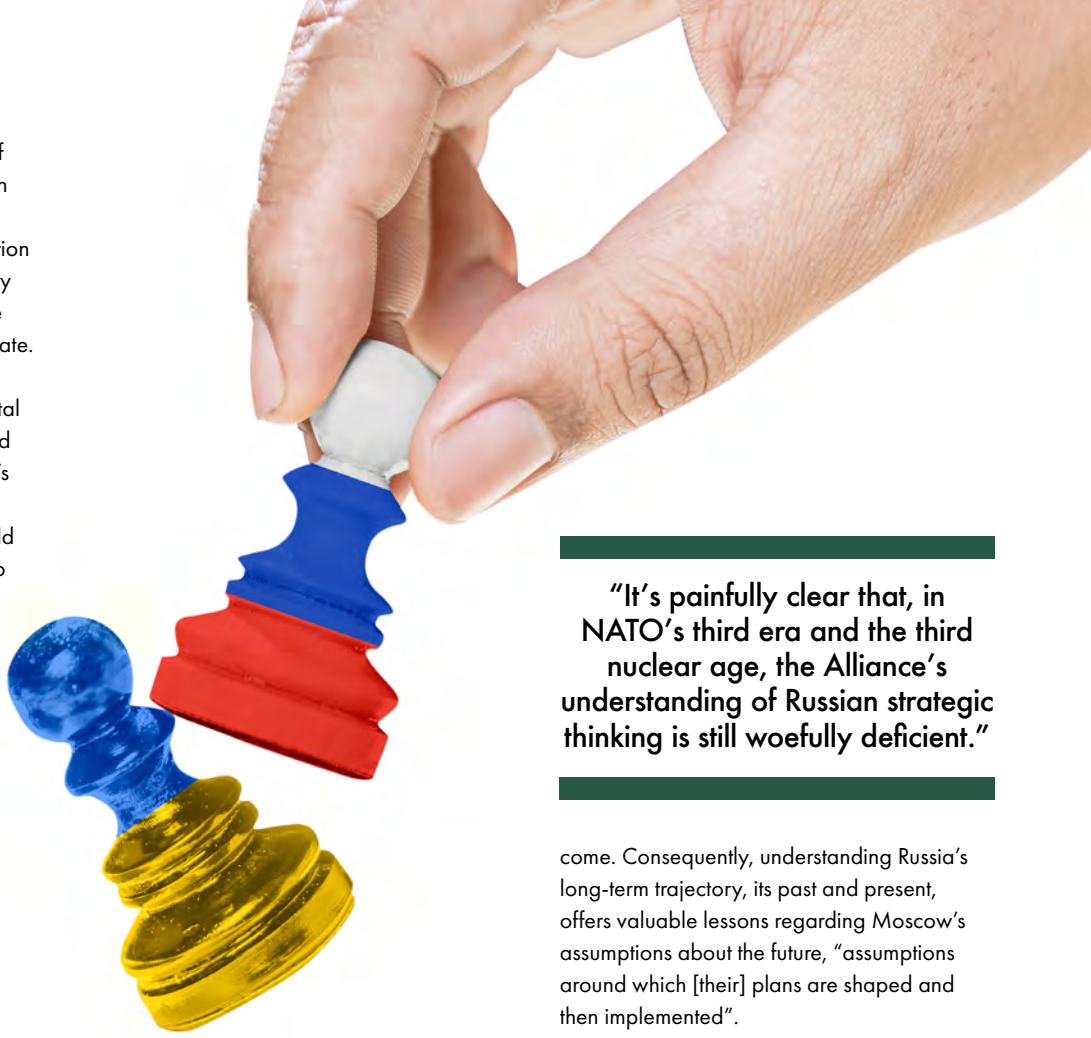
"Understanding patterns in Russian strategic thinking and how their leaders have rationalised previous experiences of warfare to shape their philosophy will help us to understand where Russia seeks to be in 2030."

Monaghan argues strongly for studying Russian strategic culture, that sense of 'Russian-ness' – advocated by George Kennan, Frank Roberts and Ronald Hingley during the Cold War – as a way to grasp how the intellectual climate in the Kremlin conceptualises the past and approaches the future. What is critical is "how Russian strategists perceive their world, rather than an objective truth… [and that] to do so [they] draw on both history and strategic theory".

He stresses this isn't about 'Putinism'. A study of Russian strategic culture, which will endure beyond Russia's current conflict in Ukraine and Vladimir Vladimirovich, will provide contextual nuance to assessments of capability and intent about the future. Monaghan's clear – until you're really looking at the system that produces the armed forces, you cannot understand Russia's way in war and he councils against capability based scenarios or ill-informed "one-dimensional depictions of authoritarianism and corruption" that fail to recognise the role of history and culture as an evolving sociopolitical and intellectual context.

Equally, the author cautions against mystifying and exoticising the Russian way in war. It is not alien, he argues, it's Clausewitzian (Clausewitz served in the Russian army, briefly, and fought at the Battle of Borodino) and resembles Liddell Hart's strategic principles and the dialectical relationship between strategy and history. In the 1990 film *The Hunt for Red October* an American admiral confidently states "Russky don't take a dump without a plan". The reality, Monaghan argues, is that the Russian approach to strategy is less about perfectly planned projections and more about dynamically dealing with бардак (bardak) or 'uncontrolled events' – a concept previously explained to me using the analogy of water flowing downhill, encountering resistance but then quickly finding alternative paths. This is also unsurprising, really, given that Monaghan includes traits such as indecision, negligence and squander in Russian strategic culture.

Central to the book, and perhaps most concerning, is that of persistent threat perceptions in Moscow, not from Ukraine, but from the West. For Monaghan, the invasion of Ukraine is exactly what President Putin called it, a spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya, or special war operation. Clearly, by Western definitions, it is a war, he argues. But by making this distinction, Western observers and officials can more clearly interpret the level of state effort Moscow is investing and so delineate escalation potential. The war, requiring large scale mobilisation-style confrontation, is with the West. As a result, the



'Svechin school' advocates for a strategy of exhaustion and is evidenced by the sanction proofing of the Russian economy and the establishment of the Government Coordination Council to harness the civil-industrial-military partnerships necessary to support resilience and resource the ability of the state to escalate.

This is clearly an important book, at a pivotal time. It's painfully clear that, in NATO's third era and the third nuclear age, the Alliance's understanding of Russian strategic thinking is still woefully deficient. The end of the Cold War prompted attempts to bring Russia into Western spheres of trade and diplomacy and was coupled with compensating reductions in Kremlinologists, both within the UK Civil Service and military. Ironically the level of data about Russia's military and intelligence apparatus increased significantly – the irony was there was now less expertise to be able to interpret it. This left the countries in NATO with a staggeringly low level of literacy about the way Russia views the world and responds to it. Perhaps best encapsulated by Hilary Clinton's attempt to improve the US relationship with Russia in 2009 with a misspelt 'reset' button.

"It's painfully clear that, in NATO's third era and the third nuclear age, the Alliance's understanding of Russian strategic thinking is still woefully deficient."

Monaghan argues Moscow anticipates the 2020s to be defined by intense geo-economic competition for resources, the redistribution of global power and structural shifts in the international architecture. In response to attempts by 'Western Policy' to 'limit Russia's sovereignty' and 'violate its territorial integrity' they are increasing their ability to mobilise, regenerate and assert Russian interests around the world, to prepare for the 'post-West' era to come. Consequently, understanding Russia's long-term trajectory, its past and present, offers valuable lessons regarding Moscow's assumptions about the future, "assumptions around which [their] plans are shaped and then implemented".

Russia's actions in Ukraine are not a reversion to Soviet approaches, even if there are some echoes of the past. Instead, they are part of Moscow's preparation for the 2030s. And "Moscow appears to be accelerating its strategy, not implementing a course change".

OUT NOW...

The world is less safe than it has been for more than half a century – there is a storm coming. The first duty of any nation's government is to secure the safety of its people, and therefore the first duty of any nation's army is to be ready to fight and win the nation's wars. It would be both naive and irresponsible to assume that anyone can accurately predict the nature, scale or timing of the security problems that are approaching, and war has been (mercifully) distant from the capitals of western officialdom. Economic circumstance combined with social demands have meant that increasingly little resource has found its way into nations' security preparations. But there are too many indicators and warnings that simply can no longer be ignored. So, what is being done to be ready for the coming storm?

Storm Proofing, edited by the team at the British Army's Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, offers the collected thoughts of 15 experts – respected practitioners and academics from the UK, US and Europe. They consider what is being done, whether that is sufficient, and how we might think differently about our preparations for 21st century war on land. This is not a book about numbers of troops and equipment, it is rather more human than that. So, it is about how we approach war, how armies might structure themselves and align themselves to modern contexts, how soldiers should think and might feel, and how all of those very human things relate to the march of technology and artificial intelligence.

***Storm Proofing* is published by Helion & Company and can be ordered by scanning the QR code on this page.**

DOCTRINE

The Land Warfare Centre Warfare Branch recently published the following Field Manual.

Army Field Manual: Land Targeting

NATO publication ATP-3.9.2 [*Allied Tactical Doctrine for Land Targeting*] has been adopted by UK land forces as *Army Field Manual: Land Targeting*. The original NATO text has not been modified, but the NATO terms and definitions have been updated. It addresses the roles, responsibilities, processes and products from the land component command and subordinate formations that are inherent in this process and describes how land targeting is planned, conducted and assessed.

FURTHER READING...

Ares & Athena #28: Might is Light

"As the UK re-evaluates its doctrinal and force development stance, including in light of the opportunities offered by the recent Security Defence Review, the research project captured in this *Ares & Athena*, commissioned originally by 1st UK Division, explores a range of aspects of the utility of light forces. We have divided this publication into three parts. The first explores the history of light forces and offers examples of how they may have been used and useful in the past – by design, as opposed to by necessity. The second explores how specific-to-purpose light forces have and can be used and those battlespace circumstances that demand their use. The third looks at the emphasis that is placed upon light forces by some of the Nordic members of the NATO alliance alongside whom the UK is expecting to operate. In so doing we ask in what way might 'might be light'? – **Major General (Retd) Dr Andrew Sharpe, Director CHACR.**

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