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The 4th in our occasional series of expert comment and analysis, by General Sir Richard Barrons, Commander Joint Forces Command (2013-2016), now Co-Chairman of Universal Defence & Security Solutions, and GSF Advisory Board member. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.

What The War In Ukraine Means For UK Defence & Security – Some Initial Thoughts

When the latest phase of the war between Russia and Ukraine opened on 24th February 2022 it was certainly a shock: a huge, bloody battle for the existence of a state of 40 million people right on NATO's boundary. This sort of thing had been waved into the history books by many opinion leaders who should have known better. It has shredded the idea that when the Cold War ended in 1990 Europe went eternally 'post-conflict'.

It is, though, wholly unreasonable to call it a surprise: the intelligence staff, diplomats, officials and military who know Russia, the governments of most of the states that were once crushed into the Soviet Union, and even President Putin's own literary canon have all cogently set out what could happen for the

past decade and more. Now it has happened, the shock has yet to dissipate, and the war is far from over - but there is enough clarity to draw some preliminary conclusions about what it means for UK Defence and Security.

Perhaps the place to start is by acknowledging that the latest invasion occurred in part from a failure of the West on two significant levels. First, the failure to build the capacity of Ukraine to deter and if necessary (as it is now) to defeat a Russian invasion. That had been a realistic prospect since the invasion of Crimea in 2014 (and the West's timid response to it). Second, the failure to revitalise NATO as an Alliance sufficiently to pose such a political and military deterrent to Putin's imperial ambitions that he could not risk moving on Ukraine. Both point to the risks in trying to contain an angry bear with poetry and sugar lumps.

It must be strategically incompetent of the West for President Putin to feel that he can



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act in this way when the NATO membership has vastly more latent political, economic, and military power. The way Russia has so aggressively mobilised and employed its modest capability - including standing military power - and treats the West with threatening disdain says as much about the West - especially Europe - as it does about Russia. We can explain why and how we continued to demobilise the Alliance and hollow out our defences for more than a decade after the wind from Russia changed from balmy to icy (hubris, but also austerity, Brexit, Covid, China etc.), but we should admit it has not turned out well. We are now remobilising in haste and regret; until we reset the balance of power we will bear some risks and costs that we need not have. We should conclude we ought not repeat the experiment with China over the rest of this century and henceforth ensure we have a loud enough voice to protect our security, prosperity and values.

There was nothing wrong with the intelligence. The rhetoric from Moscow and the fidelity with which NATO could see the Russian forces deploying to the borders with Ukraine over months was easily sufficient to identify that the *capability* to invade was being set. This war marks the arrival of warfare in the 'transparent battlespace': not just the geo-stationary military satellites, but also the new arrays of Low Earth Orbit commercial satellites, comprehensive efforts to intercept all forms of digital communication, the mass of open-source data found on the internet as movement of people and materiel leave a digital trail, and the solid media coverage.

All these combined to show what was being lined up. What has happened was not impossible or unthinkable, just unpalatable.

What the intelligence effort could not do, however, was access the inside of either President Putin's head or those of his key lieutenants to determine *precise* intent and timing. This shows the limits of 'human intelligence' more than a failure of it. The degree of surprise President Putin inflicted on the West was perhaps exceeded by the surprise he inflicted on his own armed forces. Had we been able to see inside the minds of the inner Russian leadership we might have been disturbed by what we saw and just as baffled as the first echelon of Russian troops into Ukraine. Nonetheless, the lesson - hardly new - is the value of basing force levels and plans on what an opponent is actually capable of doing, rather than hedging all the expense and bother of doing this with strategic-sized dollops of fiscally-attractive wishful thinking.

Our understanding of Russia's military capability was guilty of being weak in some crucial respects. The performance of the Russian armed forces has been so poor in professional military terms and this really is both a shock and a surprise, to me included. We had, after all, monitored decades of Russian military modernization involving equipment specifically designed to counter NATO's perceived advantages, especially in dominating in the air and at sea. The S-400 Air Defence System (ranging to perhaps 450km), highly capable submarines, the T14 Armata Tank, the Iskander class missile with a range



of 500km and 5m accuracy, and lately claims about fielding hypersonic weapons – all of these were hallmarks of a Premier League military, daunting even to the US.

What has rolled into Ukraine, however, has (so far) turned out to be much less impressive – more pub league than Premier – as well as institutionally brutal. It has failed in competent leadership from top to bottom; its campaign planning has lacked situational understanding and realism (even if it was force-fed mad strategic level instructions); much of its equipment care is insufficient for more than parading; its individual and collective training levels have made even basic tactical action on the ground and in the air disastrous; logistic planning and operations have starved troops of fuel, ammunition and maintenance; medical support has resulted in many thousands of young Russians bleeding out where they were wounded. And so many of these professional military failures, especially in equipment support and logistics, have the pervasive whiff of the effects of an astonishing level of endemic corruption. No wonder morale is generally low and the will to fight diminished.

We should conclude that we did not really 'know' the Russian military in the way we needed to. Perhaps we over-emphasised counting the quantitative aspects or perhaps we didn't listen to the few who really are under the skin of the Russian military. This military and human intelligence gap needs fixing; it also will be vital in how we understand the more dangerous and strategic risks of growing Chinese military

power. Perhaps the most important place to start with is to educate many more of our people in Russian and Mandarin and make it their career to really know their subject.

Poor performance or not, it would still be foolish to disregard the far greater scale of resources that the Russian military can bring to bear than it has so far. There are at least another 150000 more men in the standing army (including conscripts, who are mostly placed in useful non-combat roles), and massive stockpiles of equipment and ammunition (though their condition is highly questionable). Were Russia to mobilise for war in Ukraine, another 1 million men at least are potentially available. These would take time – months – to equip, train and deploy in phases – and many would not be thrilled to be recalled nor any better trained. These are numbers Ukraine cannot manage and they serve to remind us that war between great powers can still stretch to mobilising society and industry, something we have not really thought about since 1990.

We should not yet discount the Russian military capacity for learning through disaster nor a capacity for absorbing losses that is off the scale of present-day European tolerance. The impossibility of President Putin contemplating failure is informing how the military has taken back charge of campaign design from the salon generals of the FSB and provoked the wisdom to change the plan and slug it out. We see this in the Donbas at the time of writing. In limiting the achievable campaign objectives, tackling them sequentially to concentrate resources on each major battle



in turn and putting destruction by artillery at the heart of manoeuvre, some progress really is being made. It isn't pretty, it isn't skilful, but Russia today has occupied four times more of Ukraine, excluding Crimea, than it did on 23rd February.

This is the point we need to absorb: it is possible to make war by sheer bloody attrition for as long as it takes as well as by perfecting 'Multi-Domain Integration' with small but perfectly formed armed forces required to be home for Christmas. The Russian ability to expend their shells and youth at scale and endurance is a powerful reminder that mass and a lot of stuff matters. Winning, especially for autocracies, sometimes just means being the last man standing. Germany is spending €100bn this year to reboot its armed forces, €20bn of that is on materiel like munitions as their cupboard is bare. So are the shelves of all European militaries. We may not want to be ready to make war the Russian way, but are we entirely sure we get to choose any more than Ukraine now does?

There are lessons for us from the Ukrainian military too. They have taken a battering, losing trained manpower and relatively scarce platforms such as air defence platforms and attack aircraft, but their use of surveillance drones, data from social media, short range precision missiles and above all artillery has been highly impressive. The will, agility and skill with which they have contained the Russian incursion to date shows again how the 'moral and conceptual components' of combat power are as telling as the 'physical' - the inventory of weaponry in particular.

The Ukrainians are fighting for their homes and it's personal. The lesson for the UK is that we need armed forces that are hard enough for this sort of existential war, a far steeper challenge than the limited 'wars of choice' of the past 30 years with their carefully calibrated demands for blood and treasure. We see again war that needs unlimited personal and institutional commitment, it's no longer only war in six-month doses from safe bases with showers and two weeks holiday in the middle. We should demand this standard is met and resource the armed forces to achieve it.

We can also see that the Ukrainian military effort is now based on Ukraine providing the leadership, will and manpower to fight and the West providing the money, weapons and training to match. What started out as the provision of some limited 'defensive weapons' is now a fulsome commitment to provide the heavy artillery and ammunition that dominate the fight, and an array of other vital equipment (drones and counter-drone technology) and training. The war is inextricably now linked to Western inventories and industry. After 30 years off existential war, industry will take too long to crank up for the crucial battles that are happening right now. We are once again having to find the resilience, mobilisation capacity and whole of society endurance that great power conflict requires.

We are learning to bear our share of the global costs of war. There are 11 million Ukrainians who have left their homes, either now displaced in Ukraine or - at least five million



of them - refugees in Europe. Caring for this vast number is as important to sustaining the will to fight as supplying artillery. The shock to energy prices means we are all paying for our slice of the war, and this is way better than doing the fighting ourselves. Just ahead, the effect of Ukrainian and Russian grain not getting to Africa is very likely to be one of the major implications of the fighting. Ukraine supplied 100% of the grain to Somalia and 75% of the grain to both Lebanon and Egypt. There are major implications for stability and humanitarian crisis as this flow dries up. Managing global food and energy insecurity will be as important to getting the right outcome in Ukraine as supplying weapons to the front line. Great power conflict always has these sorts of profound effects, it is in our own best interests to manage them well and they are not only somebody else's problem.

So far in Ukraine neither side has won nor lost, what happens next is not following a script and certainly not necessarily quick or decisive. A grinding stalemate for years is as much on the cards as a breakthrough by one side or another. The politics may get even more difficult, especially perhaps if Russia culminates and then unilaterally declares a ceasefire, shoves through a faux referendum before annexing occupied terrain into the Russian Federation and asserts that it is henceforth sheltered under the Russian nuclear umbrella.

We need to steel ourselves for a long haul regardless of our domestic pickles, always aware of the ease with which the war might lurch into a wider Russia/NATO conflict. The

ghastliness of that prospect may perhaps even be tempered by the realisation of just how weak Russia really is in the face of a mobilised West, so we should be good enough to think widely and deeply about war again. This is going to need more than an instinctive defensive crouch to solve well.

History may record that today's war in Ukraine was the 'inflection event' that marked (in what is really process) the point at which the West realised that the comforts and certainties of the Post-Cold War era were definitively over and was actually moved enough to do something about it. The present unity will likely fray, the competing claims for resources from struggling economies, rising inflation and pandemic debt will reassert themselves, but for as long as there is a Russia like Russia under Putin, then Western Defence and Security means having the capability to deter and defeat against a stiff benchmark. We enjoyed paying only for deterrence by (nuclear) punishment, now we are back to having to spend more on deterrence by denial – especially more forward based conventional forces. The timing is lousy, but unless we elect to leave our defence and security to the goodwill of our enemies as well as our allies, we are where we are.

There are three main, integrated imperatives to resetting UK defence and security now, none are new, just newly more self-evidently pressing, and each requires its own detailed exposition:

- The imperative to restore national resilience to manage not just natural and



man-made disaster but also great power confrontation and conflict. The homeland has no immunity from this in the way that the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan inferred. Resilience means ensuring that government, institutions, enterprises, armed forces, and citizens can ride out blows to the physical, digital and cognitive sustainment of our daily life. Sweden's 'Total Defence' approach is instructive here, Ukraine is currently a startling exemplar of what war in our time can look and feel like at home.

- The imperative to build and operate capability for 'hybrid' confrontation and conflict, building on what is being done well now to orchestrate as many non-military levers of power as possible to bear down on Russia. These measures come at a cost, the biggest 'weapons' are in the private sector (banking, insurance, law, property, travel, sport etc), and these campaigns endure for perhaps years. NATO is traditionally only a vehicle for collective military defence, it may now have to evolve to do more in the 'hybrid' arena. We are all very clear that these 'hybrid' measures can be an alternative to, a precursor to, and a companion to conflict - and just as important as the military campaign to get right. The Government's March 2018 Fusion Doctrine said this, it will no doubt have to be repackaged to make fresh news, but

it still needs enacting, with allies, at scale, power and endurance.

- The imperative to rebuild NATO military hard power to manage the military risk that Russia has so clearly revealed. The concern here should not be the tattered instrument that has stumbled into Ukraine, but the reformed military that Russia is likely to insist on by about 2030 - just as other militaries that have had a beating embark on profound reform (US 1979, UK 1902). This means urgently picking up Europe's armed forces (including the UK) that have been sliding down a trajectory of decline in effectiveness, mass, readiness and sustainability in stages (called Defence Reviews) since 1990. It does not mean recreating the armed forces of the 1990s: the Digital Age clearly offers better and more affordable ways to provide better, bigger combat power. This transformation was well presaged in the Integrated Review and then broadly pushed off for a decade - that won't work now.

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