

British Pugwash Group discussion meeting

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Western responses to Russian activities in Ukraine

Speaker: Dr Ian Kearns, Director, European Leadership Network

Dr Kearns argued that the situation in Ukraine is serious and while the violence is not on the scale currently seen in Syria, or in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, it remains the gravest challenge in Europe today. In his view, a large part of the blame lies with President Putin, but the West has certainly made policy mistakes. To get out the current situation will require a combination of resolve, restraint and dialogue on the part of the West.

The current situation

Dr Kearns argued that Western policy towards Russia during the past 25 years has been misguided. NATO should not have enlarged to the east, and the EU strategy towards Eastern Partnership countries has been a 'walking disaster'. But equally President Putin has in the last year violated the law in Europe, including the Helsinki Final Act (signed by Russia in 1975) which forbids the threat or use of force. Russia has progressively increased its aggressiveness in confronting western forces. There have been several examples of near misses between Western planes (including one civil airliner) and Russian military planes that were flying with their transponders switched off. Russian planes have also simulated cruise missile attacks and attacks on western warships in the Black Sea. Russian and Western submarines have been shadowing each other.

During the past two years, the conflict in the Ukraine has claimed > 6000 deaths and 13,000 casualties. Some 5.2 million people are living in the conflict zone and 1.6 million people have been displaced. Estimates of the number of deaths are widely regarded as too low. At present, conflict in Ukraine continues at a lower level, restrained only by a tenuous ceasefire. The Ukrainian economy is collapsing, with per capita income at \$4.00 per day. There is the possibility that further economic collapse would create a failed state.

In terms of the West's relations with Russia, the conflict has led to an increase in the frequency and intensity of military exercises on both sides, while there are allegations from the US that the Russians are not only providing support to the eastern Ukrainian separatists but that whole formations of Russian troops have operated inside Ukraine. Diplomatic links have been shut down or suspended and treaties governing European and NATO relations with Russia – for example, the treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe – are not operating, and there have been allegations of nuclear weapons alerts, with Russia seeking to emphasise that it is still a nuclear power. Economic relations between Russia and the West are beginning to disintegrate, and population movements between the two areas are declining. No one wants or predicts a war, but in countries close to Russia actions are being taken, such as introducing conscription or setting up militias, which imply making preparations for a possible war.

What should the West do?

Show resolve: At present there is a grey area between Russia and NATO territory. NATO needs to signal to President Putin that there are clear boundaries beyond which Russia cannot go, as

was the case during the Cold War. Many observers in the Baltic States doubt whether NATO would be in a position to defend them if they are attacked, but it could establish a deterrence tripwire by placing NATO troops in those states, raising the risks too high for Russia to contemplate an attack. There are however no logistical resources available to deploy a rapid response force in the Ukraine in the short term – the best estimate for a deployment of the NATO Rapid Reaction Force is 2017.

A response is also needed to the Russian practice of 'hybrid warfare' – misinformation, use of troops without insignia, infiltration of local populations to create militias etc – but at present NATO is poorly prepared for this. A further step would be to provide economic aid to vulnerable countries in the region. In relation to the Crimea, it should follow the call of the Kiev administration that no country should acknowledge the validity of Russia's annexation of that territory. In Ukraine itself, support for reform, reducing corruption, and promoting prosperity and justice would be a better defence than sending troops. It would also be the only way to attract Crimea and the eastern region to fully re-join Ukraine.

Military support from the West could include non-lethal support, for example, for intelligence, command and control, professionalisation of the armed forces and democratic accountability. NATO and the EU also need to work more closely together than at present in developing and pursuing these strategies.

So NATO and the EU need to show resolve, and demonstrate that they are not willing to accept what Russia is doing in this region. This does constitute a strategy in which Russia must be resisted, while it may have constructive aspects. If they do not persuade Putin that there are limits to what he can do, we will not have peace in Europe.

Balance resolve with restraint: There are limits to how far economic sanctions can go. The West cannot afford to allow the Russian economy to collapse, as it came close to doing after the demise of the Soviet Union, something that is feared in western capitals. The dilemma is that if sanctions are pushed too far, Putin could conclude that the West wants to remove him. This would make him a far more dangerous adversary. The same would likely apply to whoever followed him, creating the prospect of a nuclear-armed failed state, which no one wants.

Sanctions therefore cannot be the whole strategy, and must be limited. However, sanctions on technology transfer are a possibility, as is a policy of non-engagement on specific issues, such as Crimea, whose economy we need to protect.

Military assistance to the Ukraine should be limited to non-lethal aid. In any case, the Ukraine has its own arms industry and it should not be stopped from using its own weapons to defend its territory, or importing military materials. Restraint is definitely needed in NATO deployment in Eastern Europe, especially in regard to nuclear weapons, including battlefield nuclear weapons. We should not move nuclear weapons closer to the Russian border. However it might be possible to use aircraft exercising over Eastern Europe to signal that NATO has this option.

A further aspect of restraint concerns estimates of Russia as a military threat. In public diplomacy there has been a tendency to inflate this threat for political reasons, without any basis in solid intelligence. The indications are that, in order to build an effective force in Ukraine, Russia has had to cannibalise its military forces in other parts of the country, limiting its capacity to respond elsewhere.

Encourage dialogue: There has been disagreement in the EU on whether to re-engage with Russia. Dr Kearns suggests that the Russian proposal for visa-free travel should be accepted – if only to call their bluff. Arms control conventions (on conventional arms control) should be reinstated and an open skies policy expanded and intensified, including discussions with the Russians on how to address near misses.

He mentioned two specific cases where three-party talks need to be supported: economic dialogue between the EU, Ukraine and Russia on keeping payments for gas supply to Ukraine flowing; and devising some means to implement a Ukrainian Association agreement with the EU, while taking account of its impact on Russia. These talks could be a bridgehead to a wider conversation about economic cooperation, embracing broader trade agreements and bodies including the WTO.