

A Response To
CONSERVATIVE VOICE - UKRAINE
November 2022

Introduction

In his article posted on the CA website in November 2022, ACM Sir Michael Graydon shared his views on the harrowing situation in Ukraine, now approaching its first anniversary.

He opened his paper quoting the words of Winston Churchill, describing Russia as “*a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma*”. Careful to concentrate on the facts, Sir Mike supplemented his own considerable Service experience with the thoughts of notable military advisors, colleagues and friends, to make the valid conclusion that “*it is the failure to react properly to the more recent years of Russian intransigence that has been largely responsible for today’s catastrophe; the time to wake up and show some steel is now*”.

Most interested in such matters would concur. The limited *informed* exposure the media and press give to the Kremlin’s latest unwarranted aggression - BBC 2’s *Putin vs the West* series is one of the better reviews - seems to endorse Sir Mike’s conclusion. As someone who enjoys researching RAF College history and frequently ponders the plight of seven Ukrainian Cranwellians at this time, I’d like to expand on three themes that emerge from his excellent article:

- Are we in fact at war?
- If so, with whom or what?
- How do we achieve victory?

Are We At War?

By implication from my proposed agenda, you may have already deduced that I believe we are at war. The unwarranted invasion of an European country merely brings this fact into sharper focus.

The widespread media commentaries to which Sir Mike refers have eluded to the missed opportunities, the indecision and the mistakes in countering increased and unwarranted intrusions by Russia in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, the Crimea and now Ukraine. On each occasion, we are shown the brutal devastation that Russian forces exact on their victims in an effort to impose the Kremlin’s will. On each occasion, Putin has called our bluff to a point that I seriously wonder if our expensive Nuclear capability has retained its *deterrent* effect, once its prime virtue.

Being so close to NATO’s and Europe’s eastern border, Ukraine seems at last to have re-focused the minds of some in the West to the extent that a modicum of realistic, practical if overdue support is now being offered to a hapless victim. This, of course, comes at a great financial cost and at a time when most of the world is still reeling from the impact of an unexpected (by most but the most dedicated medic) pandemic. Throughout Europe, economies are now facing rampant inflation and increases in the cost of living that remind those old enough of the austerity of WWII and immediate post-WWII years, and, in UK, the industrial unrest of the 70s. And, whilst offering much needed weaponry to Ukraine, albeit belatedly, it is dawning on some at least that we have yet again been caught off guard, now needing to deplete limited assets and to pay a significant price for decades of neglect. But do the enlightened and others, less so, fully realise that this is but a downpayment for our continued freedom and we now face the prospect of another period of hardship akin to the 50s, 60s and 70s, as European history repeats itself?

This war, however, is more complex than the last two European conflicts. In addition, to the devastation caused by an overt, conventional and prolonged ‘*special military operation*’, the combatants are engaged in a modern “secret war”, comprising energy wars, cyber-space intrusions and now UFO espionage, all aimed at undermining our economy and democracy. For example, there seems no doubt now that Russia interfered with the 2016 US elections with some evidence emerging of similar interference in European elections. And let us not overlook, the covert operation of Russian agents in Salisbury, which, shocking though it was, seems to have faded into the dim and distant past as has the murder of Alexander Litvinenko - remember him?

And our response to this continuous stream of disruptive intrusions? To express diplomatic outrage in the strongest possible terms, depose a few rogue diplomats, impose sanctions and to hope the problem will be negotiated away at least until the next line of politicians appear on the scene - almost a monthly event in the UK these days. Meantime, our great British public is shielded from the reality that, in the West, we are constantly under a threat that needs a sustained commitment from our politicians to invest substantially in our defence and security. The more we neglect that investment, as we have - a false economy - the more we will pay in the longer term.

Throughout the free world, our economies, energy and food supplies, livelihoods and well-being are being profoundly undermined by Kremlin aggression. So, is it not time for our press and media to switch more of their attention to this inescapable fact rather than sensationalising the evident shortfalls of “here today, gone tomorrow” career politicians, or the circular arguments of public sector trade unions? If the general public were made better aware of the impact and implications of Russia’s aggressive actions and reminded that we **are** in fact at war, perhaps our priorities, focus and attitude would change to address the root cause rather than the symptoms.

With Whom or What Are We at War?

The assailant? Russia, of course. Really? I believe we should be more precise. Indoctrinated though they are, let us not fall into the trap of blaming “the Russians” *per se*. Given the improbable chance, I believe the average Russian would enjoy the comparative freedom that the citizens in former USSR states, including Ukraine, now enjoy having opted to break the bonds of Mother Russia. Allow me to develop this premise further.

In his article, Sir Mike recalled his experience dealing with his Russian counterparts, touching on human nature and injured pride. His anecdotes reminded me of my own father’s experience, when as Leader of Liverpool City Council in the late 60s and early 70s, he led a delegation to our sister-city, Odessa, at that time part of the USSR. For obvious security reasons, Dad didn’t share much about that visit, but he left me with three vivid and abiding memories that I should like to share:

- Such was the authoritarian regime in USSR, every member of the Liverpool delegation was telephoned hourly through each night by the GRU, to make sure that nobody had escaped their *control*. It had a debilitating effect of disrupting their sleep, a typical *control* measure.
- The ‘ordinary’ Russians they met, however, were reasonable, proud and hospitable citizens with a mischievous sense of humour underscored by a national addiction to their staple diet - vodka. I conjured up visions of “vodka boat races” as they plied hospitality onto their guests.
- Above all, Dad loved the school children he met, whose spirit for life, despite the austerity and near poverty they were enduring, shone through and much impressed the ol’ man.

I mention all this not only because, to a point, it resonates with some of Sir Mike’s experiences, but because we should be clear that our adversary is not the humble Russian, but their leadership and an authoritarian regime inherited from those who were more ideologically driven.

As Sir Mike reminds us of the Cold War and the measures that NATO had in place, it’s also worth remembering that, then, we faced a Soviet threat with a clear doctrine and strategy. I don’t see that today, despite the perceived wisdom of analysts that the Cold War has all but returned. I don’t see the pursuit of a doctrine or ideology that despises capitalism. I just see Putin - a bully, who resents the loss of the Soviet empire, its global status and the intoxicating power he craves.

I do not believe we are fighting the powerful nation of the Cold War years, but Putin and his fellow bullies, like Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, all smarting, as Sir Mike put it, at the undisguised “triumphalism in some parts of the West”. In my view, there is no transparent Russian strategy; Putin is not a strategist, but a very able and dangerous tactician. With an overinflated ego, he knows just how to exploit our democracies and our political weaknesses, to test the boundaries of acceptability, knowing full well we will not take a decision without obtaining a consensus nationally or internationally. He capitalises ruthlessly on our mistakes and we have made some howlers: Libya; Iraq; Afghanistan. Leader after leader has been seduced by Putin, believing they can do business with him, and, realising the “Deny & Lie” facade, end up proposing counter-threats they cannot deliver. On every occasion, the bully Putin has got away with murder.

I referred earlier to the enthralling BBC 2 series *'Putin vs the West'*, which contains first hand accounts from those Western leaders who have had to negotiate with the Kremlin Bully Boys (KBB), as I shall now call them. Cameron, Obama and Hollande all recount how initially they were seduced by Putin into believing he was someone, like Gorbachev decades earlier, with whom they could do business, but now admit that all they can and should expect is "Deny and Lie". Former Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond recounts one incident when a face-to-face meeting with Lavrov soon became nose-to-nose and nasty. Interesting too is how many of such confrontations were often delayed and organised by the KBB to take place at night, when their guests were tired - like Dad's Odessa experience? 'Boris' alleges that, in a long and bizarre phone call, Putin threatened to hurt him with a nuclear strike; "it would take a minute". Typical bullying antics. Sadly, none of these politicians - East or West - possess the calibre or vision of Reagan, Thatcher or Gorbachev. After the break up of the Eastern Bloc, Putin had effectively been cast out into a wilderness until the West, fearing the growing ISIL threat, consulted Russia on its plans for Libya, inviting Putin (and Medvedev) back to the party and handing him world political status on a plate; Medvedev felt let down by the West as a consequence of our actions in Libya, effectively handing Russian Presidential power over to his heir apparent - Putin. He saw his chance for revenge and we have suffered his intimidation ever since.

Episode 2 of *'Putin vs the West'* shows Cameron, in 2012, hosting Putin in the 'Thatcher Room' of No 10, the Russian leader observing the portrait of our former PM and opining that she was "truly an iron lady". I wonder what she would have made of him - handbags spring to mind! But that admission by Putin betrays his psyche; he recognised (and seemingly appreciated) her ability to deal with a bully, perhaps? Obama too came close to understanding how best to deal with Putin when, to the horror of his advisors, he announced just before his first encounter with Putin that Russia was a "regional" power, implying that he, Obama, had greater, global issues requiring his attention. By all accounts, the bully could not handle that, and was incandescent with rage.

Returning to the main issue, this leads to why I added to the section title "With WHAT are we at war", as well as with whom? In my view, we in the West are our own worst enemies, at times, forgetting how to deal with bullies, giving them sufficient opportunity to exploit our weaknesses and gifting them some fundamental 'own goals' on foreign policy, not least embarking on regime change initiatives without thinking through the de-stabling consequences and the need for a robust exit strategy. Iraq remains the heaven sent political *faux pas* that has given ammunition for Putin to harangue and also inhibited Western foreign policy since.

The main problem, I fear however, is that our Governments are elected democratically for comparatively short periods, limiting the opportunity to plan with a mandate beyond a few years. This frequent voting rite is a benefit of democracy, which most would not wish to surrender. But it is also a weakness when dealing with regimes whose leaders enjoy much longer term, self-imposed and unopposed tenures. Every decision from the West in the last decade - on Georgia, Crimea, Syria (Aleppo), ISIS - has been a tactical reaction to a new crisis sometimes of the West's making, rather than a balanced approach within a predetermined and agreed strategy to preserve peace. Such Short-Termism undermines any commitment to our defence and security and plays into the hands of any authoritarian regime playing the long game. As well as "showing steel now" against current aggression, our politicians must, in my view, demonstrate a greater priority and commitment to Defence & Security against the would-be aggressor, and that means dismantling the culture of Short-Termism and attendant false economies.

Currently, the West seems unwilling to make strategic plans, preferring to react tactically amidst endless dialogue and consensus. When a threat or crisis *is* averted, our politicians too quickly embrace their success by falling repeatedly into the trap and false economy of reducing their commitment to Defence & Security, weakening our hand in subsequent times of heightened tension. We seem to have forgotten how to play our 'Nuclear Deterrent' card, for example, to rebuff the threats from the KBB. In his inspirational speech to Parliament on 8 January, President Zelenskyy reminded us that it is human nature to be aggressive and that we shall never be able to eliminate it, so we should always be prepared, even "when this war is won", for the next aggressor; note, not a single Western reporter recorded this profound and prudent warning that there will always be a threat to our democracy. I believe that Putin has given us enough evidence in the past decade to prove the Ukrainian President so right. As Sir Mike says, "WAKE UP".

Powerful organisations already exist to exercise our sincerity and commitment to a longer term strategy for peace. However, the 'G Force', as I refer to the G5, 7, 8 plus meetings, appear less effective than they might be, having consistently backed down on most of their agreements, whether they be about the "Russian enigma" or more serious items such as the Climate Threat. The voice of the United Nations, despite countless resolutions, appears muted. Since the Berlin Wall was torn down, NATO countries have substantially reduced their commitment to defence or exercising progressive counter-measures - Flexible Response - that could and should be employed when threatened by a foreign power. Always, it seems our Western politicians appear on the back foot, reacting to the latest action by intimidators like Putin as they continue to test our resolve. It is time to plan, strategically - work harden that "steel" - and to stop resorting to hopeful, reactive and costly tactics.

Until Western leaders "wake up" to reality, they will continue to vacillate for fear of incurring the wrath of a nuclear power and the prospect of armageddon. I am by no means ignoring or belittling the significant risk of such nuclear confrontation, but if the West took a more coherent, collective and proactive approach to a strategy for world peace, perhaps they would not be caught on the hop quite so often and pander to the tactics of a bully. The nuclear threat cannot be ignored. In the hands of Putin, it is a major concern; in the West, however, let us not lose sight of the fact that we possess sufficient of a deterrent, if exercised carefully, to make even Putin *and his Generals* think twice. He is not slow to test us with probing enquiries before he takes precipitous actions; we should recognise the signs more readily and be ready to assert our power. We should be more proactive and be ready to test him as well, through the powerful organisations that already exist.

Like Sir Mike, I am not sure what the answer is, but if we are to deal with Putin's distractions swiftly and return to the main geo-political agenda items such as China's expansionism and/or the Climate Threat, we need to find a way to make these bodies more accountable and effective.

How Do We Achieve Victory?

I have several times attempted to draft a response to this question, but on each occasion have entered a series of blind alleys, with a rambling dialogue that ranges between an extensive and somewhat naive 'wish list' and an opinionated commentary on the past performance of our politicians, ill-informed "sound bite" media coverage and a general public too interested in domestic issues and effects rather than cause. Such is the complexity of our problem with Putin. With hindsight and to (over)simplify the challenge, therefore, I confine my response to dissecting Sir Mike's conclusion, namely: "*wake up*"; "*show some steel*"; "*now*".

"Wake Up" - Communicate the Facts

As Sir Mike rightly intimated, the deployment of Russian troops in Ukraine has been shambolic, betraying the antics and ambitions of a bully totally lacking any realistic military strategy. A nuclear power with a wealth of military resource has been unable to achieve its territorial objectives against a make-shift army of volunteers. And Sir Mike rightly reminds us that this is not a new phenomenon, past Russian military doctrine being somewhat predictable, pedestrian and solely reliant upon its Generals, lacking the in-field initiative and efficiency of well trained and disciplined SNCOs and junior officers the type of whom we are fortunate to possess in the West. Whilst having failed to take Ukraine, however, Putin continues his mindless onslaught, supposedly with the backing of his people, in the full knowledge that the West will continue to display what Biden now calls, albeit in a slightly different context, "an abundance of caution". So why are we so reticent against such a poorly led deployment? Their nuclear button, it seems, retains more effectiveness as a deterrent against the West than ours against the KBB. Why *is* that?

For the moment, however, Putin is in a mess and we should lose no time to exploit it. With an increasing stream of bodybags returning across his boarder - over 800 a day in February that may not bother him, but will in time bother others in Russia - we can and should proactively sow the seeds of doubt in Russian minds about their KBB and the futility of the "special military operation". Now stirred from our torpor, we should at least try to put this bully back in his place. Should we not proactively engage the "ordinary" Russian, thereby undermining KBB control?

At home, I think we could do a lot more to alert the great British public and European neighbours to the impact and implications of the threat posed by Putin. Our press and media have a moral and professional responsibility to do their homework and to report all the facts and not just those that make 'good copy'. One, three part series outside 'prime-time' is not enough. They should be taking war briefings from HMG and delivering them in prime time to the public - with an Eastenders-type "duff duff" if it helps to sell the message - leaving the 'average' Britain in no doubt how serious the threat from Putin is to our freedom and democracy. Just because it's "bad news" is not sufficient an argument to ignore its publication. I see no harm in instigating interactive briefings, the type we witnessed through Covid, in this instance to cover developments in Ukraine and their impact on our daily lives. We need to shift public debate and understanding from effect (e.g. cost of living, inflation, etc) to cause (i.e. KBB). On matters of national security, it is time that the British public were legally bound, as in Australia, to maintain a proactive interest.

"Show Some Steel" - Lead By Example

The perceived wisdom for dealing with a bully is, in the first instance to walk away; on Georgia, Crimea, Syria (Aleppo) and now Ukraine, we have exercised that ploy to a ridiculous and shameful extreme, proving that we now need to move to the next, more proactive and assertive step. Again, perceived wisdom suggests that to counter bullying, you need to remove the opportunity from the bully to exert control over its victims, denying the bully the opportunity to bully. And there are concerted measures sustained relentlessly by a determined West, through the fora mentioned earlier, that would have just such an effect, starting at home.

Setting an example to our Western allies and recognising that we *are* at war, I believe the parliamentary Defence Committee should be elevated to the status of a cross-party War Cabinet. The tasks of such a war cabinet would support day-to-day government, as the supreme Parliamentary Committee to work with our defence and security agencies, to establish a robust strategy that would maintain focus on our peace and stability. The cost and practicality of providing weaponry to Ukraine whilst replenishing and making substantial overdue reinvestment in our own dwindling resources should be addressed in closed session as a first priority, the key recommendations of this cabinet forming part of the communication briefings mentioned earlier. Announcing the formation and intentions of such a cross-bench cabinet might just awaken our public, our industry, our financiers and the RoW to how seriously UK takes any threat and the 'zero tolerance' it wishes to apply in future to anyone with aggressive inclinations towards world peace. We need to reeducate the British public on Defence and its pivotal role in our economic stability. Our freedom, our Defence & Security must be promoted to the status as our first national and strategic priority. Others, primarily NATO nations, *may* follow our lead.

The Short-Termism of Western democracies and politics is not the best platform to launch strategic ambitions, but we need to relearn how to think holistically, plan strategically and act tactically, rather than reacting in a panic. The EU, NATO, United Nations and the 'G-Force' each contain sufficient talent and critical mass to develop and implement a concerted strategy aimed at sustaining world-wide peace and economic stability. The building blocks *are* in place, but the attitudes of mind, the emphasis, the priorities and, dare I say, the leadership of member nations need to change substantially to replace Short-Termism with strategic, long-term "hands-on" commitment and to maintain momentum. This is where the steel needs to be forged.

As a corollary, we need to re-examine how we impose sanctions and withdraw privileges, nationally and internationally. The usual reaction to aggression is to impose financial sanctions, travel restrictions and removal of assets, and, as a quick response, these measures still have their role to play. However, I remain unconvinced that they are as effective as they might be in the short or long term. Our leaders need to turn their attention to other strategic measures that deny the bully his control. Despite the atrocities of the past decade, for example, Russia still retains its power of veto as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Why? Is it not time that this privilege be suspended indefinitely until Putin ceases his unwarranted aggression? Deny this bully his control and his apparent status as a world leader. The KBB needs to be reminded that there is enough power in the free world to cause a bigger threat to Russia than Russia can cause the free world. The UN, NATO and the EU need to step up to their respective marks and relearn how to rehearse and enforce political, economic and military control over the bully. Our combined, refurbished nuclear deterrent capability must be demonstrated as a force not to be reckoned with.

Nothing comes cheap and there is no endless supply of taxpayers money, something our trade unions might wish to acknowledge. If we cherish our freedom and democracy, however, we must be ready to reassess our priorities, pay the monthly instalments and not continue the “never-never” culture that ignores addressing inevitable crises until too late. With a collective change in attitude and emphasis, we could find and redeploy the funds for collaborative ventures that would sustain a world-wide infrastructure for peace; the proposed war cabinet would review and agree the main candidates for consideration by HMG and parliament. I am convinced that there is a need to fund a multi-national peace-keeping force, ideally but not necessarily with the UN, held and exercised in reserve, in readiness for future crises. Among the many troubled areas of our planet, whether they be the results of conflicts or natural disasters, I can think of two or three hot-spots that would benefit from immediate deployment of such a force: the Crimea, Northern Syria; Afghanistan (which we should never have left to the terror of the Taliban).

“Now” - like yesterday!

In truth, “now’ is a bit late. We enjoyed comparative peace for five decades after WWII, an uneasy peace preserved by a Nuclear Deterrent. Even then, we skirted danger reducing our commitment to Defence, ‘salami slicing’ year-on-year budgets, as did the rest of NATO. The break up of the Eastern Bloc seemed to be the indication to savage our defences further, the threat having disappeared. How naive. How myopic. In the decades since, ironically, British forces have been involved in a series of conflicts stretching our resources to the very limit. The false economy.

We appear to have a Defence Secretary who has not deserted his post despite opportunities to do so to lead our country. Have we the opportunity, therefore, to elevate Defence & Security up the political agenda and, killing two birds with a single stone, to see off the “Russian” threat and to reinvigorate our Defence & Security capability to a level that deters the next aggressor?

Conclusion

I have offered just a few suggestions that in an ideal world, we should perhaps consider. At first sight, they may appear far fetched and naive, but with a collective change in mindset and stronger global leadership, they may have some relevance. In any event, if we do not sort the Ukrainian situation out, it will soon be 2030 and we will be facing the inevitable disasters heralding the Climate Threat. And to whom do our Governments turn when faced with a crisis they could have avoided? - The military. So, we must change our priorities now. But what do you think?

Meantime, I revert to my research on Cranwellians and, just now, remember seven in particular.

The Seven Ukrainian Cranwellians



Chymbanba
IOTC 40



2015 - 2016
Ukraine





Petelin
IOTC 40

Course	Name	Initials	Graduated
IOTC 40	Chymbanba	EK	September 2015
	*Leshchenko	MY	
	Petelin	A	
IOTC 43	Komlin	R	May 2016
	Konchenko	A	
IOTC 46	Kalimulin	T	December 2016
	Polianska	AD	



Komlin
IOTC 43



Konchenko
IOTC 43



Kalimulin
IOTC 46



Polianski
IOTC 46





Leshchenko
IOTC 40
Overseas Student Prize
[WATCH HIM HERE](#)



