Putin's brutal war shows why we still need NATO

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the folly of proposals for a European army

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FEATURES

April 2022

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President Putin's invasion of Ukraine presents many challenges to NATO, the EU and the world economy. The most serious is that we cannot be sure that it will not be followed by another war between Russia and the three Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, involving the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad in which Putin has provocatively placed nuclear weapons.

Europe will never have a clearer warning of the dangers of being involved in World War III than we have had from Putin's conduct in Ukraine. It is necessary that NATO's European members all increase their spending on defence, and specifically that the UK reinforces its contribution to NATO's defence of the three Baltic states.

NATO must recognise that the Russian resentment over the Baltic states dates back to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. This was made abundantly clear to me by both President Brezhnev and Foreign Minister Gromyko in Moscow in 1977 when they claimed — which I strongly countered — that the clause on "the inviolability of frontiers" meant the incorporation of the three Baltic states into the USSR as part of the frontiers agreed at Yalta and Potsdam.

Now that all three Baltic states are bedded into membership of NATO, Putin needs to be very clear that an invasion of them will meet the full strength of NATO's combined armed forces.

> "I was the only living foreign secretary to have voted to leave the EU

President Putin's brutal invasion has already achieved two unexpected outcomes. Firstly, the Russian army has been exposed by the incredible resistance of Ukraine to be far less effective than most strategic experts envisaged. But within that Russian army weakness lies a serious danger. It makes it more likely that Russia, as long as Putin is in control, will resort to not just threatening, but using, nuclear weapons in a tactical way which could lead to an all-out strategic nuclear exchange. Tactical and strategic warfare, when it comes to nuclear weapons, merge into one far quicker than conventional weapons.

Secondly, two days after the invasion of Ukraine, Germany reversed its historic policy of never sending weapons to conflict zones. The early conflict exposed a weakness in NATO when Germany refused to allow a Baltic state country the right to send weapons they had bought from Germany to Ukraine. But in the first few days of the invasion, Germany recognised, as the new German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz said, that "the Russian invasion of Ukraine marks a turning point. It threatens our entire post-war order".

Scholz now says that Germany will set aside an extra €100 billion, sharply increasing its spending to more than NATO's target of 2 per cent of GDP. Germany is also now involved with France, Turkey and Israel in trying to persuade Putin into negotiating a settlement.

There did exist a new order in Europe from 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. During that period in 1997 the NATO-Russia Founding Act committed both parties to "build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security".

It added that "NATO and Russia do not consider each other as adversaries". It went on to state that their relationship would be based on the principles of "respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states and their inherent right to choose the means to ensure their security". The first invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea which took place in 2014 was too easily accepted by the EU when the UK was still a member. It should have been followed by far tougher economic sanctions. It did mean that I stopped my 20-year-old business interests in Russia.

Putin became president of the Russian Federation in 2000. At the first ever NATO-Russian summit in 2002, in an airbase outside Rome hosted by Silvio Berlusconi, Putin signed a joint declaration on "opening a new page in our relations, aimed at enhancing our ability to work together in areas of common interest and to stand together against common threats". The following year Putin came to London on an official state visit and stayed in Buckingham Palace.

> Macron's claim has been shown to be nonsense

Yet those optimistic times have long since vanished. Now we need NATO more than ever before and President Biden has shared vital intelligence with NATO to the fullest extent. We need that since in my judgement there has been no leader of Russia before Putin, including Stalin, who has shown the same readiness to use nuclear weapons and no leader who has made it clearer that he wishes to regain territory lost from the USSR since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Putin's constantly repeated pledge that he had no intention of invading Ukraine was a blatant and obvious lie. Virtually no information about his real intentions was shared with his fellow Russians, who are now increasingly asking why he launched an invasion against their fellow Slavs and co-religionists.

I recently wrote in the RUSI Journal a passage that bears repeating. In 1945 Truman started to pull us troops back from Europe, telling Americans he was bringing the "boys" home. He then reversed his stance in 1946, saying that from then onwards the task was to construct a defence organisation in which the us would stay with troops on the ground in Europe to deal with the Soviet threat.

That decision is as relevant today as it was in 1946. Putin is no Stalin, but he has to be contained. Whereas China has to be constrained.

In the lead up to the 1948 NATO Treaty, when Foreign Office officials came forward with opaque language on military matters, Ernest Bevin, the then foreign secretary, sent them back with a strong injunction for greater clarity. He did not want fudged wording because he saw, as a Cabinet minister during the Second World War, that unity and speed were essential for military success.

Bevin minuted the prime minister, Clement Attlee, on the 13 articles of the Treaty that he did not want a situation in which the UK would be an outpost still left in doubt about American action. For that reason, the language of the Treaty had to be definite: "We shall never fix the German-French problem unless it is [definite]. The finding of words that may leave ambiguity will be disastrous."

NATO's most precious asset is its accepted command and control procedures and the well-defined relationship between the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) and the NATO secretary-general, as well as the military line of command under SACEUR. Such a structure takes time to build.

To throw that proven structure away would be an act of folly. Yet increasingly we have heard voices in the EU putting forward proposals in favour of the EU having a second military HQ in Europe with a European army. In 2020 Macron publicly said NATO was becoming "brain-dead".

In light of NATO's response to the Ukraine invasion, Macron's claim has been shown to be nonsense. Boris Johnson and his defence secretary, Ben Wallace, are widely acknowledged to have played a leading role within NATO, working closely with President Biden and his excellent team.

The rational case against two military headquarters in Europe — one NATO and the other EU — and the double counting that is inherent in a European army should now carry weight with more EU countries. Johnson and Wallace dealt with the over-cautious advice not to send very early on the NLAWs anti-tank weapons. The UK's up-front support for the Ukrainian president and army has been carefully calculated and the old arguments that outside the EU we would not be able to carry the same influence have been shown to be ill-judged. Handling a war is one of the biggest responsibilities for the nation state.

I had supported entry to the European Economic Community in the first referendum in 1975 but in 2016 I was the only living foreign secretary to have voted to leave the EU. I did so not primarily for economic reasons but because I wanted the UK to be free to conduct its own foreign policy within NATO and the UN and not be sucked into an EU-defence and security arrangement as a prelude to forming a single European federal state of the kind President Macron advocates.

> "Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel"

His "manifesto" to remain president of France, after all his meetings in person and virtually with Putin was made clear on March 17. He likened the war in Ukraine to "an electric shock" that proved the importance of the NATO military alliance. In language terms a distinct improvement from "brain-dead". He added, however, that he intended to push forward creating a new "European security order". As well as finding an extra €42 billion by 2025 for defence, he wanted a larger EU defence fund.

The Danish government has also announced another referendum on whether Denmark should reverse the previous decision to not spend money on EU defence at the expense of increasing their contribution to NATO. It is not for the UK to repeat President Obama's mistake in intervening in the UK referendum by entering Denmark's. Nor should we venture into the French election. But — and it is a big "but" — European citizens must ask themselves the key question: "Seeing how Russia is behaving and how it is trying to link with China, should we in Europe pretend we can afford to give Americans the impression we can do without them in the best alliance ever forged to stop World War III?"

Shakespeare, as so often, has the words to match the hour: after Ukraine, all Europeans are reminded of the vital nature of our friendship through NATO with Americans, so much so that we should "Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel".

During the referendum campaign, Nigel Lawson and I were invited to Princeton University to speak at a day's seminar on the case for Britain leaving the EU. We both thought it important to try to shape American attitudes to the referendum debate outside the UK.

I also went to Canada and then flew down to meet with Henry Kissinger in New York. He started our meeting by saying that he had to decide by close of play that day whether to sign a joint letter with the great and the good of US foreign policy experts on why it was imperative that Britain stayed in the EU. It became clear during our discussions that he was not going to sign.

His reason was concise and clear cut. "I do not want a world where there is not an independent British voice," he said.
One of the first advantages of the UK outside the EU is that Boris Johnson's government immediately increased the defence budget and the chancellor of the exchequer, Rishi Sunak, wisely gave the Ministry of Defence an unprecedented four-year guarantee that that level of spending would be maintained.

Nevertheless, for the next two years events now dictate that that defence budget be substantially increased despite the extra costs of Covid. Fortunately, we are no longer having to spend large sums of money from the defence budget on Afghanistan, nor on Iraq, but we cannot count on being able to reduce spending on ISIS nor on making our contribution to counter the massive military expenditure that President Xi has authorised for the Chinese military.

With Canada fully supportive as it has been throughout the invasion of Ukraine, no American president — dare I write it, not even Trump — would stand by and see the Baltic states overrun after the sheer trauma experienced by Ukraine.

The only thing that will change an American president's mind will be if the European partners in NATO fail to respond in terms of increasing defence spending. There is no doubt that Macron will try very hard to push any increase in defence spending to go not to NATO but to the EU defence headquarters and to reinforce his arguments for a European army. Hopefully most EU countries, perhaps the new German government as well, will see NATO's needs as the first priority.

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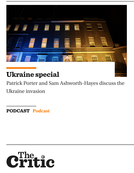

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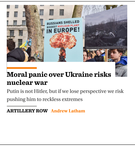

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