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REACTION



The Bush House Declaration

A declaration by students (facilitated by the School of Security Studies, King's College London, and Reaction).

This conference is titled the Defence of Europe. Our generation has not had to face a conflict of this nature in Europe before - it is the first time most of our generation has ever thought about nuclear war. Fortunately, we are War Studies students. All we do is think about the possibility of war.

On February 24, global security entered a new era. We are not dealing with a local security threat, but with a global threat. The way the war in Ukraine is ultimately resolved, will also shape the future of the Russian regime, totalitarian leaders, and even democracy itself, the world over.

This declaration focuses on three key issues. First, the short-term of the conflict in Ukraine, the most immediate threat to European security. Second, the long-term ramifications of the conflict. Third, the British policy response, focusing on capacity.

Short-term:

Short-term, we agree, like many of the panellists, that NATO continues to be an enduring, and increasingly relevant, structure of European Defence. We second Defence Secretary Ben Wallace's point that the UK and the West should work to strengthen Ukraine's negotiating position, rather than prescribe policy for Ukraine.

Sanctions were much discussed, and while we concur that they are unlikely to change the course of the war, their potential military impacts have been underplayed. Re-building

damaged military equipment in the future will be more costly, if possible. But the West faces costs too: the increasingly fraught cost-of-living crisis may come to dominate policy-making over the Ukraine crisis. Ugly trade-offs may need to be made.

Long-term:

While a crisis requires an immediate response, we must avoid the trap of focusing just on the short-term. We need a coherent long-term, European strategy towards Russia, parts of which have been articulated by many of the panellists today. Panellists disagreed on whether Putin may remain in power; yet a Russia without Putin could be even more concerning. Similarly, we agree with the panellists that strengthening European defence and security structures is crucial. It was understandably a foremost concern for guest of honour Ambassador Prystaiko.

Capacity:

A lot has been said about the 2% goal in defence spending, with several governments seeking to defend their budgetary flexibility. Democratic governments nevertheless tend to defray peacetime investments in the armed forces in favour of election-winning commitments to other public services. As we have heard, this approach clearly came at a price. The outbreak of war in Eastern Europe, unforeseen as it was to too many, throws this folly into sharp relief. European governments are scrambling to invest in long-neglected forces, with immediate capabilities too often exchanged for future capabilities. We risk sunseting capabilities before we can bridge the gap to sunrise capabilities. We face systemic deficiencies in materiel, munitions, and vehicles, in the midst of a global supply-side shock.

Stop-start spending is destructive to defence capacity, strategic relationships, and subsequently, deterrence. But spending more is only half the solution; it is as important to spend effectively. For too long, investment in humans has given way to platform-centric budgets. For example, allied intelligence has proved such a vital asset in pre-empting the Russian narrative, and yet, the UK military consistently under-recruits intelligence analysts - one of our strongest national skill sets. Today's conference also highlights the need for sophisticated decision-support, including through wargaming and red teaming, and in turn, leveraging the natural and social sciences to precisely target our adversaries' weaknesses.

It's not just professionals. We have seen the symbolic departure of high street shops from the streets of Moscow; and ethical hackers broadcasting anti-war propaganda on state television. The Government could and should coordinate these hitherto unilateral actions

in support of the overarching national strategy, while adhering to the constraints of democratic governance.

But while an offensive strategy like this is all very well, we also need to establish a whole-of-society approach to Defence. Societal resilience, and weaning ourselves off clear external vulnerabilities, such as Russian energy, is a national security priority - it should have been since at least 2014. We need societal resilience: stronger supply chain; larger stockpiles; the end of 'just in time'. The good times are over.

Further, greater domestic capacity in two key areas is desperately needed: economic crime enforcement and energy security. One fine was issued for facilitating sanctions breaches to UK financial and legal firms in 2020-21. One. The 'London laundromat' needs to end. Similarly, UK energy policy has long left itself vulnerable, as Helen Thompson spoke about earlier. We have known about Russia's strategic use of energy supplies for years, yet done nothing to address it. Nuclear power plants falling off the grid with no replacements. Our cultural and political institutions must also be protected. Our politics has been vulnerable to Russian action, from misinformation to buying influence, whether hosting parties in Italian villas or donating to political parties.

The West needs to strengthen its soft power, including cultural empathy and a strategy to deal with the full-spectrum radicalization threat that the Russian regime is demonstrating. The disinformed are victims too. This includes ensuring the proper resilience of citizens: establishing a cultural strategy for the individual, inculcating democratic values and preventing the spread of misinformation.

Lastly - a word for the future: Russia's war in Ukraine has supplanted, not replaced, the security threats of the 21st century: climate change, failed states, and great power competition."