



The UK, Russia and NATO Revisited

Richard Reeve

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From Theresa May's hand-holding with Donald Trump to the pointed demands of US President, Vice-President and Defense Secretary that European states pay their share of NATO's costs, via Turkish-Russian rapprochement and a seemingly endless series of scandals linking incoming US officials to Russian influencers, turbulence in trans-Atlantic relations looks set to be the defining security issue of 2017.

For the UK Government, struggling to invoke Article 50 to begin its formal withdrawal from the EU this month and facing a backlash against President Trump's impending state visit, policy towards Russia presents a further headache. Increasingly isolated from both Washington and a divided and hostile Europe in its hard-line stance toward Moscow, London must seek to preserve trans-Atlantic and intra-European unity on Russia and its destabilisation of Ukraine.

Commons Inquiries on Russia Policy

The UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee published its report on its 2016 enquiry [The United Kingdom's relations with Russia](#) on 2 March. The report cites at length [written evidence](#) from Oxford Research Group (ORG) on how international sanctions allow the Kremlin to deflect criticism from its own failings and supports our argument that, in the context of Brexit and intra-EU/NATO divisions, the UK risks "becoming an isolated actor supporting a policy towards Russia that is failing. This could lead to further damage to Britain's long-term ability to influence Russia."

ORG's evidence to the inquiry focused on trying to understand Russia's perceptions of its national and regional security in relation to NATO and the rest

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of Europe, and how the process of bolstering NATO's physical presence in and rhetorical commitment to frontline states risks a dangerous cycle of escalation and misperception with Russia.

ORG's separate [evidence submission](#) to the Commons Defence Committee inquiry into [Russia: Implications for UK defence and security](#) addressed the role of nuclear weapons in Russia's current military policy and strategy, and the significance of Russia's current rhetoric about nuclear weapons. It concluded that:

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“ “The key to understanding the meaning of [Russia’s elevated use of aggressive nuclear messaging] is the context. For, as [Jacek] Durkalec argues, Russia’s action ‘seems to suggest that if seriously challenged by NATO it may have no other choice than to escalate to a nuclear level or that it may “inadvertently go over the brink” by accident or miscalculation’. Russia thus uses nuclear threats for war prevention purposes, in order to achieve its goals without fighting—acutely aware of NATO’s vast military superiority. Moscow’s main strength is indeed thus its ‘unpredictability’ and apparent willingness to use nuclear messaging and hybrid tactics to cause serious disruption and instability, even though this may be counter-productive as NATO solidarity increases against it so that Russia becomes even more isolated from the West.” “Given that any escalation to nuclear conflict between NATO and Russia would potentially involve the UK’s nuclear force, and would have the most dire

consequences for this country, it is imperative that, in the short-term, Britain—as a leading alliance power—acts in ways that reduce rather than increase the risk of nuclear war. In the longer-term, London must carefully consider how its commitment to overseas power projection, as part of NATO, interacts with Russian threat perceptions and reliance on nuclear deterrence against the possibility of an attack with conventional forces.” ”

ORG's Sustainable Security Programme has also submitted evidence to the current Defence Committee inquiry into [The indispensable ally? US, NATO and UK Defence relations](#).

ORG's work on Russia and NATO

Since the onset of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, ORG has worked to understand what drives the greatest tensions in European security for a generation, not least Russia's own perception of its place and interests in Europe and the wider world.

Our Sustainable Security team has worked with UK analysts, media and decision-makers to encourage a more nuanced and sustainable response to the European security crisis. Paul Rogers, in his [Global Security Briefings](#), has also presented sustained analysis of Russia's increasing role in Middle Eastern

geopolitics, in particular its military [intervention](#) in the Syrian war and its oscillating relationship with [Turkey](#). We have also consistently looked for opportunities to find common ground or mutual interest between Russia, the West and regional states, including over [Syria's chemical disarmament](#) and resolving the international conflicts over [Syria and Iran](#).

Indeed, the Track II diplomacy of the Oxford Process has long worked closely with Russian experts and diplomats on the [Iranian nuclear programme](#), in promoting regional reconciliation in the Middle East, as well as exploring new possibilities to engage in dialogue with states such as North Korea, where Western influence is very limited. Often there is potential for Western and Russian officials to work constructively through back-channel processes when official positions seem irreconcilable.

Since 2015 we have also looked increasingly at the issues of [nuclear deterrence](#) and [disarmament](#) and how they condition the UK's relationships with NATO and Russia. We have presented [practical options](#) on how Britain can move forward on its commitments to [reduce the salience](#) of nuclear weapons in its defence policy and work towards de-escalation of its relationship with Russia.

Finally, we have not been afraid to [ask questions](#) of NATO and the implications of its expansion, deployments and [spending commitments](#) for Russia's own security perceptions. These are crucial questions that we argued that the [2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review](#) should engage with. It did not, and barely a year later the long-avoided, off-the-table questions of NATO principles and the trans-Atlantic 'special relationship' are centre stage.

We continue this work in 2017, including research on opening-up the UK's defence decision-making and proposals on how NATO reform might serve to reassure both member states and neighbours such as Russia. A new briefing revisiting the revived debate on NATO members' commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence is forthcoming this spring. We will also analyse the rising role of Russia in Mediterranean geopolitics, Libya and North Africa.

Image credit: [Kremlin ru/Wikimedia](#)

About the Author

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