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Blinded by Bias

Chapter 8 | Crying Wolf from the Outset: The United Kingdom

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Crying Wolf from the Outset: The United Kingdom

Mistrust and suspicion of the Russian government ran deep in UK governmental circles. These were rooted partly in Cold War legacies, a clearer (compared to continental allies) recognition of the revisionist streak in Russia's grand strategy, as well as a series of Russian attacks on former Russian operatives and exiles on UK soil.¹ Based on the intelligence from the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), MI6, and the Five Eyes community, the UK government was outspoken about the severity of the Russian threat. It also acted early, providing Ukraine with strong political and military support short of deploying troops. This combination of strategic positioning and proactive measures marks the UK as particularly Buzzard-like in our analysis. Still, early on in the crisis, even Whitehall officials were initially quite sceptical about the prospect of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, at a time when many of them were still dealing with the fallout from the Afghanistan evacuation. This swiftly changed when intelligence started coming in. From early on military planners were tasked with thinking through worst-case scenarios and preparing response packages for each of them. The government adopted a firm and vocal stance, deploying clear language to warn Russia against invading.

A Poisonous Relationship

In the years leading up to the full-scale invasion, the UK and Russia had been at odds with one another. Although negotiations on energy issues took place between 2010-13, UK parliamentary records indicate a deterioration in bilateral communications as dealings with Russia became increasingly hostile.² The shift towards a more contentious relationship was cemented by the 2014 Crimea invasion. As one former senior UK official noted on the perceived threat Russia posed: "*The UK has a bit of history around this issue with Salisbury [the attempted assassination of former Russian spy Skripal and his daughter with poison in 2018]. We refer to the Russian invasion of Crimea etc. etc., So it's a sort of baseline to where we stand and where we are.*"³ The UK regarded this as a flagrant breach of Ukraine's territorial integrity.⁴

¹ *Sergei Skripal and the 14 Deaths under Scrutiny*, 7 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43299598>.

² 'RUS0011 - Evidence on The UK's Relations with Russia', accessed 14 February 2025, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/63692/html/>.

³ Interview 28

⁴ 'UK's Response to the Situation in Ukraine', GOV.UK, 4 March 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uks-response-to-the-situation-in-ukraine>.

In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea then Prime Minister David Cameron declared Russia's action "completely unacceptable and illegal".⁵ Foreign Secretary William Hague's condemnation of the attack as a "land grab" and a "profound breach of international law" received widespread support in parliament.⁶ In response, the UK imposed sanctions focused on the Russian financial sector, arms trade, and high-tech energy goods.⁷ In addition to these sanctions, which were imposed within the framework of the EU, the UK launched Operation Orbital in 2015, a training and capacity-building mission for Ukrainian officers in order to prepare them for a territorial threat.⁸ As Defence Secretary Ben Wallace stated in 2019:

"My recent visit to the Donbas region made clear not only the costs inflicted by Russian-backed separatists, but also the resolve the Ukrainian Armed Forces have demonstrated in defending their territorial integrity. That is why we are extending our training mission to Ukraine for another three years—so we may train thousands more Ukrainian personnel and continue to make a difference."⁹

A parliamentary briefing in 2015 described it as such: "The UK has some of the most difficult relations with Russia."¹⁰ Exacerbating these tensions, particularly in the public eye, was a series of high-profile poisonings on UK soil. These included most notably Alexander Litvinenko (2006).¹¹ The relationship deteriorated further in 2016 when an investigation into the murder of Alexander Litvinenko concluded that Russian nationals, acting under the direction of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), were responsible.¹² Tensions deepened in 2018 with the attempted (Salisbury) assassination of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy, his daughter Yulia, and Dawn Sturgess (2018), with the military-grade nerve agent Novichok, causing outrage and provoking widespread condemnation.¹³ Then Defence Minister Gavin Williamson called Russia a "pariah state".¹⁴ In retaliation, the UK expelled 23 Russian diplomats and Russia was condemned by many in the international community.¹⁵ In solidarity with the UK, 27 NATO and EU member states expelled over 100 Russian diplomats.¹⁶

⁵ 'PM Statement on Russia's Actions in Ukraine', GOV.UK, accessed 14 February 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-statement-on-russias-actions-in-ukraine>.

⁶ 'Ukraine: UK Condemns Russian "land Grab" of Crimea', UK Politics, *BBC News*, 18 March 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-26632857>.

⁷ 'Doing Business in Russia and Ukraine: Sanctions Latest', GOV.UK, 22 December 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/doing-business-in-russia-and-ukraine-sanctions-latest>.

⁸ 'UK Programme Assistance to Ukraine 2016-2017', GOV.UK, accessed 14 February 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-programme-assistance-to-ukraine-2016-2017>; 'Security Cooperation between Ukraine and the UK', 14 February 2025, <https://rusi.orghttps://rusi.org>.

⁹ 'Defence Secretary Announces Extension of UK Training Mission to Ukraine', GOV.UK, accessed 26 March 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-announces-extension-of-uk-training-mission-to-ukraine>.

¹⁰ 'Russia and Relations with the UK', accessed 14 February 2025, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/key-issues-parliament-2015/foreign-affairs/russia/>.

¹¹ 'Alexander Litvinenko: Profile of Murdered Russian Spy', UK, *BBC News*, 19 September 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-19647226>.

¹² Luke Harding, 'Alexander Litvinenko: The Man Who Solved His Own Murder', *World News*, *The Guardian*, 19 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/19/alexander-litvinenko-the-man-who-solved-his-own-murder>.

¹³ 'Novichok Inquiry: Who Was Dawn Sturgess and How Was She Poisoned?', 29 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5y902q0qp9o>; *Russian Spy: What Happened to Sergei and Yulia Skripal?*, 10 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43643025>.

¹⁴ Guy Faulconbridge Deutsch Anthony and Lisa Lambert, 'West Accuses "pariah State" Russia of Global Hacking Campaign', United Kingdom, *Reuters*, 5 October 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/uk-west-accuses-pariah-state-russia-of-global-hacking-campaign-idUSKCN1ME1GL/>.

¹⁵ *Spy Poisoning: Russian Diplomats Leave UK*, 20 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-43470069>.

¹⁶ 'Spy Poisoning: Nato Expels Russian Diplomats', *BBC*, 27 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43550938>.

Before the lead-up to the 2022 invasion, the UK government had already perceived Russia to be a threat to regional stability as a result of the Russian-Georgia War in 2008, the Crimea annexation and Russia's interference in eastern Ukraine and Syria. The UK Parliament Defence Committee regarded Russia as the aggressor and concluded in 2009 that "Russia has breached internationally accepted principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹⁷ The 2021 UK's "Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy" identified Russia as "the most acute threat" to the Euro-Atlantic region, which was mirrored only in the threat assessments of Eastern European countries.¹⁸

Alert and Alarmed

The 2021 "Defence in a Competitive Age" corporate report went further citing the "modernisation of the Russian armed forces, the ability to integrate whole of state activity, and a greater appetite for risk".¹⁹ Russia's April 2021 military manoeuvres were met with alarm; British officials saw them as a confirmation of the integrated review's assessments. Unlike some of their Western European allies, UK government officials were clear-eyed about the potential for escalation. As a result, the UK took a proactive approach to supporting Ukraine. In addition to diplomatic efforts condemning Russia and reiterating the importance of Ukrainian sovereignty, the UK expanded Operation Orbital, doubling down on existing military-to-military ties with Ukraine through which preparations could better be coordinated. As one former UK official related: *"It wasn't strictly about deterrence, yeah...I mean, it's troop training and security but it gives you presence, gives you a relationship with the Ukraine military."*²⁰ Russia's April 2021 military buildup also had a naval component with live fire exercises on the Black Sea.²¹ In June, the UK asserted freedom of navigation in contested waters, sending warships to challenge Russia's territorial claims in the region. The situation escalated when a UK warship, *HMS Defender*, became involved in a confrontation near Crimea, with Russian forces firing warning shots and conducting aggressive flyovers to deter the British presence.²²

In response to the buildup, the UK's Defence Committee published an inquiry report on 29 June, examining the objectives behind Russia's military buildup.²³ The report outlined several possible explanations, including the possibility that "Russia orchestrated a military buildup in retaliation against the Ukrainian President, Zelensky, for his actions to limit Russian influence in Ukraine, even if one of the contributing subject matter experts suggested that Russia's actions were "mainly aimed at pressuring, sabre rattling, and military diplomacy".²⁴

¹⁷ 'House of Commons - Russia: A New Confrontation? - Defence Committee', accessed 14 February 2025, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdfence/276/27606.htm>.

¹⁸ *Global Britain in a Competitive Age - The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (HM Government, 2021), 18, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age_-_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf.

¹⁹ 'The Consequences of Foreign Policy: The Review and Russia | Feature from King's College London', accessed 24 March 2025, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/the-consequences-of-foreign-policy-the-review-and-russia>; 'Defence in a Competitive Age (Accessible Version)', GOV.UK, 8, accessed 14 February 2025, 30-7-2021.

²⁰ Interview 28

²¹ 'Russia Holds Black Sea Drills amid Tensions – DW – 04/27/2021', Dw.Com, accessed 14 February 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-holds-black-sea-drills-amid-ukraine-tensions/a-57355929>.

²² *HMS Defender: Russia's Putin Accuses UK and US of Military Provocation*, 30 June 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57662956>.

²³ 'Russia and Ukraine Border Tensions - Defence Committee - House of Commons', accessed 4 April 2025, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmdfence/167/16705.htm#_idTextAnchor015.

²⁴ 'Russia and Ukraine Border Tensions - Defence Committee - House of Commons', 11.

Putin's summer essay was certainly noticed in London although it only had a moderate effect. Those who read it perceived its rhetoric to be consistent with what Putin had said before. Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson recounted the essay in his book *'Unleashed'* as a very favourable account of Soviet times in which the unity of brothers was overestimated: "Which was the very point that Putin was trying to make in his rambling essay, published in the summer of 2021, in which he set out in advance the ideology of his war".²⁵ At the time, however, the attention was on the growing crisis in Afghanistan. As one former senior UK official put it:

*"Also, let's be frank, the UK is going through the Afghan debacle as well in the midst of all this, which is increasingly challenging—but in some ways, that sharpens the mind. So that's sort of the top line."*²⁶

Clear-eyed, Determined

During the months that followed, the UK-Russia relationship remained strained, with limited diplomatic engagement and increasing political tensions. On 10 September, the Council of the European Union extended sanctions against individuals and entities deemed responsible for undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence.²⁷ Although no longer part of the EU, the UK joined the EU's sanction package set that day. The UK maintained its naval presence in the Black Sea with British warships continuing to carry out freedom of navigation operations, challenging Russia's maritime claims and demonstrating unwavering support for Ukraine.

When Russia started its second buildup in the autumn of 2021, the UK and its Five Eyes allies started to pick up signals that Russia was preparing for a full-scale invasion. During the G20 summit on 30 October, Joe Biden and Boris Johnson had a private meeting with the leaders of Germany, and France to warn them about the intelligence the US had received.²⁸ Boris Johnson added that he had received similar intelligence from MI6 that Russia was preparing for a larger conflict. These warnings marked the beginning of an intensive intelligence sharing campaign with which the US and the UK sought to convince their allies of the likelihood of a Russian invasion. As a former senior UK official noted: "*We had the advantage of the Five Eyes intelligence,*" giving them a more complete picture of what was to come.²⁹ Prime Minister Boris Johnson, with reference to the wavering Europeans, framed it as a choice between "sticking up for Ukraine" or advancing the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline from Russia to Europe.³⁰ Even if the German and French governments, among others, remained unconvinced, the UK government considered a Russian invasion ever more likely based on its Five Eyes intelligence. Still, in hindsight, there was criticism, also from within the government. A high-ranking UK military official stated:

"I think it took the UK, NATO, and the West far longer than it should have to accept the inevitability of the invasion. [...] There was lots of intelligence that was coming down the

²⁵ Boris Johnson, *Unleashed* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2024), 528.

²⁶ Interview 28

²⁷ 'Timeline - EU Sanctions against Russia', Consilium, accessed 17 February 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/timeline-sanctions-against-russia/>.

²⁸ Bob Woodward, *War* (Simon & Schuster, 2024), 72–73.

²⁹ Interview 28

³⁰ Rowena Mason, 'West Must Choose between Russian Gas and Supporting Ukraine, PM Warns', Politics, *The Guardian*, 15 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/nov/15/west-must-choose-between-russian-gas-and-supporting-ukraine-pm-warns>.

*pipe from a very early stage that people were dismissing or reducing the importance of because that's what Russia does."*³¹

Persuading European allies ran into difficulties, as one former senior UK official noted: "We had the challenge that there's a perception of Five Eyes intelligence that had been less effective, going right back to Iraq and major events like that, but also more recently on what happened in Afghanistan."³²

Attempts to dissuade Russia continued, as the extent of the threat had already sunk in at all levels of government. Overall, UK's senior leadership recognised the severity of the threat sooner than many of their colleagues did. As one high-ranking UK military official remarked:

*"The UK government was quite quick to react to the intelligence and [...] thought it would be a real possibility or perhaps even a likelihood that Russia would invade. [...] It's one thing to have intelligence on communications and troop movements, but ultimately it's reading the mind of the decision-maker. [...] Despite there being debate both in the UK and in the US and across Europe, [Ben Wallace and Boris Johnson] were steadfast in their conviction that this was more likely than not, this was the way they read it."*³³

This early recognition enabled them to better prepare policy options geared towards a worst-case scenario in which the invasion did take place. Military planners were able to utilise this to draw up responses based on these scenarios. As one high-ranking UK military official put it:

*"So we were definitely working on a timeline to ensure that these really practical, actionable military options that we were going to provide were going to arrive on the desk of those key decision-makers, UK decision-makers, at the same time that they suddenly went, oh fuck, wanted it to be the first thing that they reached for."*³⁴

Discussion about the appropriate level of response continued in the corridors of Whitehall, as related by another former senior UK official:

*"There's an argument [...] as to whether you prepare a massive punishment package or whether you [...] signal what you're prepared to do in terms of sanctions and lethal aid before anything might happen."*³⁵

As intelligence reports painted an increasingly dire picture, Boris Johnson made sure to clearly state the threat posed by Russia to both domestic and international audiences, including Russia. On 24 January, he warned:

*"The intelligence is very clear that there are 60 Russian battle groups on the borders of Ukraine. The plan for a lightning war that could take out Kyiv is one that everybody can see."*³⁶

³¹ Interview 16

³² Interview 28

³³ Interview 22

³⁴ Interview 16

³⁵ Interview 28

³⁶ Aubrey Allegretti, 'Johnson Warns of Painful and Violent Ukraine "Lightning War"', World News, *The Guardian*, 24 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/24/johnson-warns-of-painful-and-violent-ukraine-lightning-war>.

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Just days later, on 22 January, the UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss accused Russia of seeking to topple Ukraine's government and install a puppet regime.³⁷ These public statements made the UK stand out as other NATO states were not quite convinced that this was going to take place. At the same time, UK diplomats had been taking increasing note of Russia's diplomatic disengagement. As one former senior UK official previously quoted related:

*"The people I met which were on the Russian side were not particularly engaged, invested [...]. The more you are present in such situations, the less it looked like it could have started in a reasonable negotiating starting position, but the more like a rationale or justification for a course that already had seemed to be chosen."*³⁸

Committed to Ukraine's Sovereignty

As the invasion loomed, the UK intensified its public warnings and actions. For example, on 23 January, the UK released detailed intelligence demonstrating Russia's plan for the aforementioned decapitation invasion.³⁹ This was intended to have a dual effect of signalling to Russia that there would be consequences as a form of deterrence as well as rallying international support for Ukraine. In a phone call at the end of January with Prime Minister Boris Johnson, President Putin denied any invasion plans in Ukraine and warned of the deployment of NATO missiles in Ukraine which could trigger an undesirable nuclear confrontation.⁴⁰ In his book, Johnson recalls Putin saying: "I would not want to hurt you, Boris."⁴¹ Boris Johnson later shared in a BBC documentary that Putin threatened him on the phone with a missile strike: "With a missile, it would only take a minute."⁴² On 1 February, Johnson visited Zelensky in Kyiv where he reaffirmed his support by announcing £88 million in aid and warned Putin about the consequences of an invasion.⁴³ Simultaneously, the UK government started talks with the Polish and Ukrainian governments to discuss the possibility of a closer trilateral security partnership in response to Russian aggression.⁴⁴ This demonstrated the UK's commitment to upholding Ukrainian sovereignty, sending a clear message to both its NATO allies and to Russia. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu stated on 11 February that bilateral relations between the two countries were "close to zero".⁴⁵ British military trainers stayed in Ukraine until 17 February while ensuring the safe delivery of anti-tank weapons which had been arriving since January.⁴⁶ Still, there remained hope that Putin could be dissuaded from his

Putin threatened him on the phone with a missile strike: "With a missile, it would only take a minute."

³⁷ 'Kremlin Plan to Install Pro-Russian Leadership in Ukraine Exposed', GOV.UK, accessed 17 February 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/kremlin-plan-to-install-pro-russian-leadership-in-ukraine-exposed>.

³⁸ Interview 28

³⁹ *Russia-Ukraine Tensions: UK Warns of Plot to Install pro-Moscow Ally*, 22 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-60095459>.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *Unleashed*, 531–32.

⁴¹ Johnson, Boris. *Unleashed*, 2024, 532.

⁴² James Landale and William McLennan, 'Ukraine: Boris Johnson Says Putin Threatened Him with Missile Strike', *BBC*, 30 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-64397745>.

⁴³ *Boris Johnson Visits Ukraine for Talks as Russian Invasion Fears Rise*, 31 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-60204847>.

⁴⁴ 'United Kingdom, Poland and Ukraine Foreign Ministers' Joint Statement, February 2022', GOV.UK, accessed 3 March 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-by-the-united-kingdom-poland-and-ukraine-17-february-2022>.

⁴⁵ Andrew Roth et al., 'Cooperation between UK and Russia "Close to Zero", Wallace Told by Kremlin', *World News, The Guardian*, 11 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/11/cooperation-between-uk-and-russia-close-to-zero-wallace-told-by-kremlin>.

⁴⁶ Dan Sabbagh et al., 'UK Supplying Ukraine with Anti-Tank Weapons, MPs Told', *Politics, The Guardian*, 17 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/17/uk-supplying-ukraine-with-anti-tank-weapons-mps-told>.

plan. As a former senior UK official recalled: *"I think it's February 2022 or January. Still trying to find the days. We are still in a position where we hope we can dissuade and deter and give diplomacy a chance."*⁴⁷ The official also added that: *"The UK still believed it could deter Russia through diplomatic means."*⁴⁸

Behind closed doors, Prime Minister Boris Johnson remained sceptical about Ukraine's ability to withstand a Russian assault. "No matter how plucky the Ukrainians were, we didn't think Zelensky would have the men or matériel to hold out. That was the military view. How could I contradict them?" he later described.⁴⁹ Interestingly, the Prime Minister's closest advisors were not all convinced. On 17 February, just days before the invasion, Johnson sought their opinion on the likelihood of war. "Three of the four—all except Joshi—said that Putin was bluffing, that he might be trying to destabilise Ukraine but that he would not actually invade," he recalled.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, they turned out to be wrong.

Conclusion

The UK government's response to Russia's military buildup and political posturing was rooted in a distrust of Russian intentions based on Cold War legacies, Russia's record of hostile leadership personalities, and an excellent intelligence position. The UK therefore adopted a more critical stance compared to other NATO states. Policymakers were more ready to take at face value Russian actions, which partly explains early military support for Ukraine. Although the highest echelons of the UK government were quick to accept the possibility of an invasion, policymakers struck a fine balance between sending military support to Ukraine and coordinating sanction packages with allies. Meanwhile, it had to overcome scepticism *vis-à-vis* the credibility of its intelligence. The UK came out as one of the more Buzzard-like European states. While it initially harboured doubts about Russian intentions and Ukrainian resilience, its deep-seated strategic mistrust of Russia allowed it to act more decisively in support of Ukraine than many of its allies.

"The UK still believed it could deter Russia through diplomatic means."

⁴⁷ Interview 28

⁴⁸ Interview 28

⁴⁹ Johnson, *Unleashed*, 527.

⁵⁰ Johnson, *Unleashed*, 534.

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