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NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

Labour's Russia policy: Managing modern threats

TOP LINES

- There is cross-party recognition that Russia poses a security threat to the UK.
- This threat has changed with geopolitical and technological developments, particularly in relation to cybersecurity and Russia's regional influence in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Central Asia.
- The range of threats also includes the influence of democratic elections, the use of 'dirty money', infiltration of online media, Russian military activity in British sea and air space, and the targeting of Russian exiles in the UK.
- Labour must develop and present a clear policy towards Russia which takes these threats seriously. This is important for voter-perception if Labour wishes to be seen as a government-in-waiting.
- As the UK leaves the EU and a Biden administration takes over the White House, it is more important than ever that Labour calls for multilateral engagement with allies to develop a joint approach towards Russia.

BACKGROUND

In the wake of the Intelligence and Security Committee's (ISC) Russia report, published in July 2020, the UK is closer than it has been in years to a cross-party consensus on Russia. Labour and the Conservatives now share a justified perception of Russia as a clear threat to the UK as well as its allies and partners in Europe. Their mutual recognition of Russia's malign behaviour, however, obscures a mutual failure to elaborate a detailed vision of what Britain's relations with Russia should look like.

Russia and the UK

The national security risks both parties associate with Russia and documented by the ISC include:

- The use of cyber tools against the UK for espionage as well as sabotage, for example in 2020, when Russia directed cyber-attacks against UK COVID-19 vaccine developers.

- The targeting of Russian exiles on UK soil, including assassination, in 2006 and 2018, when Russian agents poisoned ex-spies Aleksandr Litvinenko and Sergei Skripal in London and Salisbury.
- The use of a range of instruments, including 'dirty money' and social and other media, to interfere in UK politics, for example in the 2019 general election.
- Intrusions by Russia's navy and air force into the UK's sea and air space, and the Russian military's modernisation over time.

Russia in Europe

On the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), European member-states find themselves significantly more exposed to military and other threats from Russia due to factors including proximity and unique opportunities for subversion.¹

The UK has moved to shore up NATO's most vulnerable member-states through military and other forms of support, provided bilaterally and multilaterally – the latter being a basis for, and example of, post-Brexit UK engagement with Europe. For example, UK troops are present in Estonia and Poland as part of the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence.

Despite this, the UK has relatively limited capacity to aid post-Soviet states outside of NATO, chief among them Ukraine and Georgia. These nations face not only a larger-scale version of the 'political war' UK military leaders see Russia as waging but also the armed occupation of territory by Russian troops or proxy forces and, in Ukraine's case, active hostilities.

The UK has actively supported these countries' resilience-building efforts and continued political and economic transitions and stood with them in the face of Russia's regional interventions. However, the UK has historically been outmatched in the former Soviet Union in terms of resources and political will, forcing difficult choices about how serious a commitment the UK can and should make to its partners, given the likelihood that this commitment will be tested.

Russia and the Middle East

The UK is similarly constrained in its ability to respond to Russia's actions in the Middle East and North Africa, a region where over the course of the 2010s Moscow restored its former military and diplomatic clout.

Unlike in its own neighbourhood, Russia lacks the power to unilaterally change the facts on the ground in the Middle East – even in Syria, where its post-2015 military intervention has built on the contributions of Iranian troops and proxy forces to keep Bashar al-Assad in power and preclude his enemies from achieving a military victory.

¹ This is shorthand for factors typically associated with 'hybrid warfare', such as large ethnically Russian, or Russophone, populations and relative ease of access to pro-Kremlin Russian-language media.

However, Moscow's maintenance of relations with all major parties in the region lends itself to an intermediary role that it has visibly sought to play in the area's military and diplomatic disputes, including the wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen and the Israel–Palestine conflict.

Russia also follows Iran's relations with the West closely, seizing on recurring tensions between the two to variously offer its services as a go-between or play one side off against the other.

Russia's domestic situation

UK interests vis-à-vis Russia extend beyond Moscow's international behaviour. The UK has long taken an interest in human rights in Russia and the country's shifting place on the autocracy - democracy spectrum. The UK is also increasingly, if belatedly, aware of the problem of corruption in Russia, especially in terms of its spillover into the UK – an issue that UK leaders found convenient to overlook until recently.

No longer constrained by a policy of 'business first,' UK politicians are now vocal in their condemnation of turns for the worse, including Russia's recent imprisonment of Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader. What's more, the UK seems prepared to respond with material penalties like targeted sanctions, such as those imposed in 2020 on Russian officials complicit in the poisoning of Navalny and the death of Sergei Magnitsky before it.

LABOUR'S APPROACH: PHILOSOPHY

Realism

Successive UK governments have learned the hard way that changing Russia's behaviour – at home or abroad, through suasion or compulsion – is a difficult undertaking.

In areas where the UK and Russia disagree, the low likelihood of a meaningful change in Moscow's conduct as a result of UK actions should relieve Labour of the temptation to try to either create goodwill in the Kremlin by muting criticism of its misdeeds, or cow Russia by throwing the book at it. A UK Russia policy informed by such a view could pragmatically recognise the low likelihood of behavioural change while being principled in holding Russia accountable for wrongdoing.

Principles

In line with its recently renewed 'moral commitment' to 'ethical foreign policy', Labour should embrace a policy that achieves moral clarity in avoiding the gratuitous moral compromises made by previous UK Governments seeking a change in conduct or the deeply problematic practice described by Shadow Secretary of State Lisa Nandy of letting "economic and trade policy ... subsum[e] everything else" in the making of foreign policy.

Labour should push back against Russia's transgressions wherever they occur and push for proportionate penalties in coordination with like-minded allies and partners – not because Russia can be expected to change its ways as a result but because an ethical foreign policy demands that wrongdoing be treated as such.

Balance

Labour should follow NATO's example in espousing 'a dual-track approach' to Russia that marries 'meaningful dialogue' with 'a strong deterrence and defence posture'. A UK Russia policy which categorically rules out engagement – which is not in itself a concession, and which need not involve any material concessions – would tie Britain's hands in its relations and limit its tools of statecraft to the coercive.

Situations can and will continue to produce opportunities for issue-specific cooperation. If the UK Government is solely looking out for threats, or has sworn off diplomacy with Russia, these opportunities could be missed. Potential opportunities for cooperation include the Arctic, climate change, and less politicised challenges facing law enforcement, although much will depend on the substance of any offers of cooperation. Limited cooperation cannot make things between Britain and Russia right, but can serve to build confidence between the two countries and, over time, improve the tenor of their interactions.

Off-ramps on more contentious issues should also be on offer. However, these should be consistent with Labour's principles and acceptable to any third countries they affect. In the long-term, off-ramps may remind decision-makers in Russia beyond President Vladimir Putin that de-escalation – and even normalisation – of relationships remains a possibility, though not at the cost of an ethical foreign policy.

Forward thinking

UK Russia policy should also look beyond Putin, by acknowledging that the president is not the country's sole decision-maker today, and nor is he permanently the president, but also by keeping ordinary Russians in the picture. Doing so is an essential part of meeting the "test of solidarity" with "the people it [Russia] oppresses, who suffer poverty and discrimination" of which the Shadow Foreign Secretary has spoken, and could lay a foundation for future partnership between Britain and Russia.

To that end, Labour must take care to underscore that ordinary Russians almost invariably lose from their Government's actions abroad. This is a line of criticism favoured by Putin's opponents inside Russia, and Labour should similarly aim to communicate to ordinary Russian people that Britain will not wait until a change in government to establish links with them.

Insofar as it is possible to undertake public and cultural diplomacy without agreeing to unacceptable trade-offs – for example, muting criticism of human rights abuses in exchange for the renewal of British Council operations in Russia – it should be a critical element of UK Russia

policy. Aside from the British Council's successful efforts during its time in Russia, other examples of constructive engagement with the Russian people include cultural, educational, and other exchanges, which should be kept independent of unrelated bilateral disputes for the sake of people-to-people relations.

There is also a case to be made for making it easier for young Russians – along with Belarusians and others living under autocracy in the former Soviet Union – to visit, and study in, the UK with an eye to shaping this critical demographic's views toward the UK and the broader West.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Leveraging UK military power

Labour should enthusiastically support continued UK participation in NATO arrangements aimed at deterring Russia from military action, as well as resilience-building efforts necessitated by threats from Russia. Labour should pursue defence cooperation with partners in the former Soviet Union and consider conditioning non-essential forms of defence on much needed defence reforms, prioritising practical outcomes like improved key military capabilities and reduced corruption in defence procurement. As for Russia itself, Labour should seek to lessen the likelihood of an accidental clash through 'de-confliction', or military-to-military communication between the two countries.

The UK under Labour should use its prominent role in NATO and close relationship with the US to push for the restoration and reinforcement of the arms control architecture set up during the Cold War, which has frayed over the years, and from which the UK has long benefited. Given the new US administration's recent extension of New START, the nuclear arms control treaty, with Russia, UK support for such a course of action is unlikely to risk straining UK–US relations.

Safeguarding UK democracy

Given the difficulty of deterring Russia from interfering in British politics using disinformation and other means, Labour should prioritise resilience-building as well as the development of the UK's capacity for detection, disruption, and exposure of Russian influence operations. Such an effort must be whole-of-government and involve more than just the security services, and where appropriate should also involve elements of wider society, for example if electoral law, financial regulation or promotion of media literacy is deemed a necessary step.

Relatedly, Labour must regard it as essential to do more to counter the targeting of Russian dissidents on UK soil. Kremlin-directed efforts to assassinate critics for whom the UK has become a refuge are possibly the gravest national security threat posed to this country by Russia – one that has claimed British lives, unlike any Russian cyber or disinformation campaign or intrusion into UK sea and air space. This speaks to a failure of policing and intelligence that cannot be repeated.

Striking a balance on regional security

Given the importance of the UK's established diplomatic relationships in both the former Soviet Union and the Middle East, Labour should support allies and partners in these regions against Russia's transgressions morally and, where appropriate, materially. However, it should also be on the lookout for and welcome openness among regional actors to revising regional orders or devising solutions to regional problems that are acceptable to all concerned states.

Additionally, while recognising that Russian attempts at peace-making are invariably self-serving, Labour should not reflexively dismiss conflict-resolution and other proposals put forth by Moscow, but instead scrutinise these for signs of promise, especially where there is buy-in from key parties to the conflict in question.

Making pushback against abuse strategic

UK pushback against Russia's transgressions should be not only principled but also strategic. One strategic end that should inform efforts to hold Russia accountable for wrongdoing is communicating with ordinary Russians, whose relations with the Kremlin are increasingly strained and whose dissatisfaction with the country's leadership is highly visible. Strategic communications via digital media and schemes for visiting and studying in the UK are just two options for outreach to ordinary Russians and should be targeted at critical demographics, particularly young Russians.

In addition to centring criticism of Russia on the price paid by ordinary Russians for the Kremlin's misdeeds abroad and misrule at home, material steps taken against Russian officials deemed complicit in human rights violations and other serious wrongdoing can convey to the Russian public that Britain is at odds with its leaders, not the country as a whole.

To this end, Labour should frame in its strategic communications the UK's crackdown on dirty money at home as an indirect form of justice for those in Russia impoverished by the country's corrupt elites. In addition, it should emphasise targeted rather than economic sanctions so as to ensure that measures intended to penalise Russia for its policies spare ordinary Russians as much as possible.

The views expressed in this paper represent solely the views of the author, and are not necessarily shared by the reviewer or the New Diplomacy Project.

The author:

The author is a research fellow at an international affairs think tank. To get in touch with them, please contact the New Diplomacy Project.

Reviewers:

Sarah Lain, Associate Fellow, RUSI; Research Advisor for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue's Eurasia Programme

The paper was also reviewed by a Russia expert at a major London-based think tank, who wishes to remain anonymous.

About the New Diplomacy Project:

The New Diplomacy Project is helping Labour develop a foreign policy for the 21st Century. Our experienced network of foreign policy researchers provide expert advice to Labour MPs and Lords, from real-time reaction to global events to in-depth policy briefings on complex areas of foreign policy. We seek to expand Labour's capacity to think about the foreign policy, while complementing and bolstering the work of its frontbench team.

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