

Summary of RUSI-RIAC Discussion on UK and Russian Perspectives on European Security

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Key Points:

- Russia-UK relationship has reached a point where resetting is increasingly difficult but not impossible.
- Lack of communication, differing perspectives and disinterest in cooperation result in deepening tensions between the two actors.
- Currently, any form of cooperation can only be expected to be niche and foundational rather than a major initiative.

The RUSI-hosted discussion, in collaboration with the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), offered insights concerning both the state and possible solutions regarding European security, from both British and Russian perspectives. The event featured RUSI's Professor Malcolm Chalmers as the Deputy Director General and Dr Neil Melvin as the Director of International Studies. They were joined by RIAC's Director General, Professor Andrey Kortunov, and Dr Sergey Utkin, the Head of the Strategic Assessment Section, Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO). In the opening statement, a previous workshop between the two think tanks was referenced, where researchers convened to offer a review of the UK and Russian relationship under the lenses of European security.

Professor Malcolm offered his introductory remarks by summarising the relationship as “low level, semi-equilibrium” that is “not acceptable nor desirable, but [it is] bearable”. Referencing the Integrated Report, a British document that outlines the state's foreign security strategy, Malcolm underlines Russia as an “acute security threat”, a stance that did not change since Crimea's annexation in 2014. His interpretation includes an understanding that there is little potential for resetting relations between the two, which is only accentuated by the lack of interest in such a reset from its allies (with the USA's push to extend the new START treaty being one of the exceptions), while also stating that the UK's military decisions, such as increasing the nuclear stockpile and focusing on maritime forces and modernisation, are reactive to Russia's activity in areas such as Northern Europe or the Baltic Sea. He continued by stating that the lack of communication between the UK and Russia, as well as a fluctuating geopolitical order, “fuzzy red lines” and misunderstandings leave room for unwanted escalation and increase in tensions, resulting in the UK deepening its friendships with the Northern European countries.

Professor Kortunov echoed a similar narrative, stating that the relationship is “deplorable, but affordable” by both sides, emphasising that while there is no interest for Russia to escalate, nonetheless there is no interest in reconciliation either, resulting in a stalemate. **Continuing, he stated that Ukraine was a watershed moment in the relationship between the West and Russia, but that it was only a “graphic representation of the problem”. The origin itself is in serious disagreements of the world order, legitimacy and a general gap between the political elites of both sides.** Professor Kortunov continued stating that there are three ways the UK and Russia could find grounds for cooperation, albeit small ones. Firstly, through bilateral engagement, the UK and Russia can find “pockets of cooperation” and avoid confrontations and risks. Secondly, engagement over conventional arms control in Europe, through channels such as the NATO-Russia Council or Open Skies treaty. And thirdly, London must engage with Russia over its activity in the Arctic, especially since Russia will chair the Arctic Council from May 2021.

Dr Neil’s reflection over the UK’s shifting strategy highlighted in the Integrated Report followed suit. **The Report indicates how the UK wishes to shift away from its defensive stance on world affairs towards being a more competitive global actor, perceiving the world as being more hostile and threatening.** The UK also wishes to take on a greater leading role in the world, with the advent of a possible “pandemic treaty”, and stated that there is evidence for dialogue and cooperation on certain subjects between Russia, China and UK as it was observed by its UN resolution concerning the situation in Myanmar. Furthermore, Dr Neil would point out that the UK shifts towards promoting ad-hoc security groups more, especially in Northern Europe. Echoing Professor Malcolm’s position that the UK’s activity in Indo-China is a “tilt” and not a “pivot”, its operations into areas such as North Africa, where Russia also expands, can push for further possibilities for dialogue between the two. Yet, he made a remark that the UK, despite being an advocate for a rules-based international order, now wishes to negotiate the rules from a stronger position.

Dr Utkin’s final remarks of the discussion were focused on highlighting the issue of securitising old relationships. While Dr Utkin highlighted that no side wishes to destroy the present world order, he did warn of the lack of interest surrounding the warming of relations between the West and Russia. **Citing the example of the EU’s High Representative Borrell to Russia, Dr Utkin noted how Borrell tried to raise discussion on subjects where Russia and the EU would cooperate, but the European political circles showed little interest in that regard.** He concluded by highlighting the importance of the NATO-Russia council as a channel of diplomatic mediation, especially over military affairs and by stating that regardless of the West’s position on China, Russia would make a strategic mistake to distance itself from its friendship with Beijing.

The discussion ended after a Q&A session, where the most important highlights were questions regarding US involvement in European security being welcomed by the UK and its European allies on reinforcing the transatlantic relationship. Equally, the UK's nuclear arsenal would not concern the P5 members as much as it could frustrate non-nuclear members. Dr Neils would point out the lack of reciprocity Russia gives to reconciliation efforts made by the West, while Professor Kortanov's highlights that NATO's enlargement is not the issue for Russia, but the monopoly NATO has over European security and its reluctance to offering Russia veto powers in a joint council, underlining the restraints Russia has in thinking about a viable European security system.

You are able to learn more about the event here:

<https://rusi.org/event/uk-and-russia-perspectives-european-security>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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