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In Defence of Collective Security

The Skripal affair and the vital importance of “collective security” as the foundation of British national defence

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**Foreword by Admiral The Right Honourable
Lord Alan West of Spithead**

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About the Author

John Bew, Head of the Britain in the World Project at Policy Exchange and Professor in the War Studies Department at King's College London, notes that the 80th anniversary of the Treaty of Brussels passed with barely mention this weekend and asks whether further acts of aggression by Russia should prompt the invocation of NATO's Article 4. He suggests that a re-invigorated approach to collective security provides the safest and most robust long-term approach as opposed to playing Putin's preferred game of escalatory brinkmanship.

About Admiral The Right Honourable Lord Alan West of Spithead

Lord West served as Minister for Security and Counter-Terrorism from 2007 – 2010. Prior to that he enjoyed a long career in the Royal Navy, including as Chief of Defence Intelligence and finished as First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff. Lord West served in the Far East, Indian Ocean, Africa and the Atlantic. In 1982 he deployed to the Falklands and led the victory parade at the end of the war. He has published work on defence matters, including a contribution to *What Next for Labour? Ideas for a New Generation*.

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Today, it is often said that the “rules-based international order” is under threat. The role that the post-war Labour Party played in the creation of that order should never be forgotten. The genius of Winston Churchill as wartime leader was followed by the steady-but firm-handed approach of Clement Attlee and his Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin. However, they also realised that the free nations of the West needed to take additional measures – as well as the United Nations – to protect itself from totalitarianism and the type of breakdown of order that had seen such destruction in the first half of the twentieth century. By leading the way in the creation of NATO, the then Labour Government sought to create a system of collective defence that was built to last over the long-term. How striking that the seventieth anniversary of the Treaty of Brussels passed by this last weekend. This was Labour-run Britain leading the way on European security, and it formed the basis for the North Atlantic Treaty the following year.

This difference with today is as staggering as it is tragic. As Professor Bew lays out in his essay – those now leading the Labour party have consistently criticised NATO. Recent Russian behaviour demonstrates that the threat to the rules-based international order remains a serious and increasing concern. In the last few years, we have seen a growing number of challenges from Moscow to international law and the type of behaviour that is designed to threaten and undermine those within the NATO alliance. The list is long and forms part of a pattern that cannot be ignored: incursions into Donbas and Crimea, cyber-attacks, election interference, political assassinations inside and outside Russia, incursions into sovereign airspace and territorial waters of other countries (including the UK), and attempts to undermine critical national infrastructure such as undersea cables. The use of chemical weapons on the streets of Britain is an alarming escalation.

As Professor Bew’s important essay shows, the UK’s best response is one which reinvigorates the principle of collective security, that has been the bedrock of national defence for so many years. The joint condemnation of Russia’s action issued by the UK, France, Germany and the US is the resounding example of this in practice. It underscores the fact that – no matter how many tensions there might be – that there is more that binds the West together than divides us, in the face of those who would undermine the international order that has been built since 1945. The ultimate goal must be to decrease tensions between Russia and the West and find surer foundations for a working relationship. Should President Putin continue to pursue the same strategy, the UK should seek further consultation with its NATO allies, as per the guidance of Article 4 of the NATO Treaty.

As for the politics of the Labour Party, the present scale of discomfort over the strategic position of the leadership, evident from many Labour backbenchers, is a source of hope

to me. I look around and still see many who follow in the proud tradition of Attlee, Bevin, Healey and Robertson.

by Admiral The Right Honourable Lord Alan West of Spithead, former Security Minister and First Sea Lord

Collective Security and the Case for Article 4

The poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, along with police sergeant Nick Bailey, by a Russian nerve agent on the streets of Salisbury has led to a series of debates about the best response to be taken by the Government. It is now widely agreed that the reaction to the poisoning of another former Russian national-cum-intelligence asset, Alexander Litvinenko, in London in 2006, was insufficiently robust in deterring such acts being perpetrated again on British soil. The first and most important aim that should guide the Government's response is to prevent this becoming a pattern. As the US ambassador to the United Nations has already remarked, the use of a chemical weapon on the soil of one UN member state must be considered as a "[defining moment](#)".

According to some [estimates](#), as many as nine high-profile Russians have died in mysterious circumstances since the US presidential election on 8 November 2016. The UK cannot allow itself to become a location where such acts can be committed with impunity. Unfortunately, there is a long history of such operations in this country, stretching back to the famous case of Georgi Markov, the Bulgarian dissident poisoned by an umbrella spike as he waited for a bus at Waterloo in 1978. But the use of a Novichok-class nerve agent from Russia's military arsenal, doing potentially lethal harm to British citizens on British soil, raises the stakes considerably.

Last Wednesday, the Prime Minister [announced](#) a series of counter-measures, including the expulsion of 23 "undeclared intelligence agents" and the suspension of "all high-level contact" with Moscow. The response will also include increased checks on private flights, customs and freight, the freezing of Russian state assets if deemed to be linked to threats to the life or property of UK citizens or residents; and a ministerial and royal boycott of this summer's World Cup.

None of this will cause much surprise in Moscow which has grown used to coping with sanctions since the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Having engaged in tit-for-tat expulsions with the United States last year, one can expect President Putin to respond in kind, at the very least. It is also conceivable that the timing of the attack, and the courting of international condemnation, was part of a Kremlin strategy to ensure Putin's re-election in the recent Russian presidential ballot in the most propitious circumstances – playing up claims that Russia is once again "under siege". The first round of voting passed with the only serious opposition figure, Alexei Navalny, banned from standing as a candidate. As he enters his fourth term, Putin will expect to outlast almost all of his counterparts in the West. As in the case of Xi Jinping in China, there are significant advantages in playing the grand strategic game over the long haul.

There continue to be demands for further measures against the Russian state in response to the Novichok attack. Most of these are likely to come before the National Security Council and will be being examined in greater detail. One of the more headline-grabbing suggestions is the idea of a punitive cyber-attack against Russia. Quite rightly, however, it has been [pointed out](#) that such a response is potentially escalatory; more

importantly, it is not in any case good practice for the UK Government to go public with any covert action.

In terms of the public response, a more fruitful line to pursue is the establishment of a tougher legal apparatus regarding the free movement and assets of foreign nationals suspected of involvement in human rights abuses and corruption. The Government has so far been resistant to pursuing a UK equivalent of the so-called Magnitsky Act, introduced in the United States in 2012. This was originally designed to secure asset freezes and visa bans against Russian officials alleged to be involved in the death of Russian anti-corruption lawyer Sergei Magnitsky. The Chancellor, Philip Hammond has now [suggested](#) that the Government is “seeking to reach an accommodation” with MPs on a “Magnitsky Amendment” to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill currently before the House of Commons. Set within a broader context, it is worth remembering that a reputation for the rule of law and clean financial governance is something that is of great importance to Britain’s global standing.

As Sir Lawrence Freedman has [observed](#), the flexing of Russian muscle in places such as the Ukraine and Syria belies a picture of a country with an unbalanced and stagnating economy and a declining population. In the short-term, however, Putin will calculate, correctly, that he will win almost any game of brinkmanship with the UK. There have already been stark warnings from the Kremlin that it is dangerous to threaten a nuclear power. It is incumbent upon the UK to show a robust response before the international community, particularly at a moment in which its allies are seeking to understand what “Global Britain” will mean in practice. Ultimately, however, the best response is one which seeks to articulate a long-term strategy, along with allies, in response to Russia’s desire to flout the rules of international conduct.

Of course, crafting a more unified and coherent response to Russian policy under Putin has proved the most vexatious of tasks. NATO has made a number of missteps since the end of the Cold War, though it is beyond this short article to assess the long course of Western policy. What can be said, however, is that the firmness and ultimate success of any UK response depends upon the level of support it receives from allies. The Government moved quickly to brief the UN Security Council on the findings of its initial investigation but the more important meetings are those involving the NATO’s North Atlantic Council. Thus far, the Prime Minister has had relatively strong indications of support from the United States, France and Germany. NATO has expressed “deep concern” at what it has called a “clear breach of international norms and agreements”.

These “international norms and agreements”, that have been built up over the course of the decades since the Second World War, have depended upon a willingness of those that support them to act collectively in their defence. This has been as much about the summoning of collective political will as it has been an issue of military capability. On this point, while talk of a Cold War 2.0 should be avoided, there are important lessons from history. Indeed, because of the recriminations surrounding the Skripal affair, an important anniversary has passed unnoticed in recent days. It illustrates the safest long-

term approach for British national security strategy: one that avoids the trap of unilateral escalatory brinkmanship with Moscow, a game that Putin is better equipped to play.

On 17th March 1948, almost exactly seventy years ago, the Treaty of Brussels was [signed](#) which provided for “collective self-defence” in the event of attack on Belgium, Britain, France, Holland or Luxembourg. The Treaty was a vitally important step in the stabilisation of post-war Europe and establishing the security which allowed for the economic and political reconstruction of Western Europe, as the Continent aimed to move beyond the scourge of war and totalitarianism.

Of even greater significance, the Treaty of Brussels was the most important staging post in the creation of NATO. After intense British-led efforts, the North Atlantic Treaty was [signed](#), in Washington DC, in April 1949, expanding the Western alliance to include all the principal players in the Atlantic community, bringing in Canada and the United States.

As the British Foreign Secretary at the time, Ernest Bevin, understood, Europe had to show a willingness to do more for its own defence if it was to seek the guarantee of protection from America, in which a strong skein of isolationism (sometimes framed as an “America First” agenda at the time) still held sway among an influential portion of the political class. Significantly, Bevin was also aware of the fact that the UK was facing pressure from the US to participate more fully in the early stages of European economic and political federation. In choosing to stay aloof from this process, the British simultaneously decided to take the lead on the matter of European defence. This was because of a shared European sense of community but also because the defence of the Continent was recognised as essential to British national security.

Seventy years later, then, some of the parallels with today’s situation are striking. First of all, there was a sense that it did not have to be like this. Much as has been tried recently, in the late 1940s the West had hoped to establish a more effective working relationship with the Soviet Union after their combined struggle to defeat Nazism in the Second World War. Despite cooperation in the formation of the United Nations, serious tensions resurfaced between Moscow and the West over fundamental clashes of interests. In the early stages of the Cold War, it is often forgotten, these tensions were more pronounced in relations between the UK and the Soviet Union than they were between the Soviet Union and the US. The idea that Bevin had briefly entertained in 1945 – that Britain could be a social democratic “third force” in international affairs, mediating between Communist Russia and capitalist America – was soon disabused.

Next, while the UK was not blameless in this deterioration of relations, Russian behaviour in a series of episodes crossed a set of red lines. Memories turned back immediately to the failed policies of appeasement which had played out before the start of the Second World War. The work on the Treaty of Brussels was given added urgency by the events of February 1948, when a Russian-sponsored coup in Czechoslovakia brought in a new Stalinist regime and moved the Soviet sphere of influence further

west. That Czechoslovakia fell to totalitarianism again, having been bullied into submission by Stalin just as it had been by Hitler in 1938-9 was regarded as particularly saddening and alarming for the future of Europe. (It was also significant too, that in 1948 the Labour Government was informed by MI5 of a widespread infiltration and subversion campaign being orchestrated by the Soviet Union against the British state). Geopolitical bullying and covert action were seen as one and the same.

It was those lessons that inspired Labour's Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin – working hand-in-glove with his Prime Minister Clement Attlee – to take a lead on both the Brussels and the North Atlantic treaties. Bevin talked of nothing less than creating a “spiritual union” of the West in the face of totalitarianism. The nature and scale of the threat from Russia has been transformed in the decades since. What is more, the sense of spiritual unity that has underlain the Atlantic alliance has come under great strain on a number of occasions. The sense of shared values and purpose that has unified the Atlantic world on many occasions has been somewhat dimmed in recent years.

And yet the point about the Treaty of Brussels and the North Atlantic Treaty is that they were designed to transcend, and therefore outlast, the vagaries of the Western alliance – divergences between policies and agendas, but also the personal relations forged during the Second World War. One reason why the Labour Government sought a defensive alliance of this nature was because of the recognition that the United Nations was an imperfect vehicle for the preservation of international security (and a fear that it may therefore follow the fate of the toothless League of Nations). Crucially, as NATO Article 1 made clear, the signatories did not see their commitment as separate to the United Nations Charter, but as expressing the firmness of their continued commitment to it. It read, “The Parties undertake, as set forth in the Charter of the United Nations, to settle any international dispute in which they may be involved by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security and justice are not endangered, and to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations.”

Another reason why the Labour Government pursued the Treaty (Bevin regarded it as his greatest achievement) was the belief that the approach favoured by the opposition leader, Winston Churchill, was too fond of “summitry” as a means of dealing with international crises. In their view (and in Churchill's), this approach was too dependent on the Conservative leader's personal rapport with his counterparts, such as Josef Stalin.

The most fundamental grand strategic principle of the UK – on which so much else depends – is the preservation of “collective security”. It was the failure of collective security which had seen the collapse of the international system in the League of Nations era. It was the maintenance of collective security that was intended to prevent such a breakdown happening again after 1945.

When one takes a short historical lens, it is easy to find reasons to criticise NATO, or to ask question the durability of the overlapping system of alliances that underpin it. It is

not unreasonable to argue that NATO has made missteps since the end of the Cold War, or that NATO's expansion has had unintended consequences in alienating Russia. The problem with some versions of this narrative, however, is that it transfers all the agency and blame to the Western alliance.

Either way, there is a fashion for running down NATO today that stretches across the political spectrum and has different manifestations across the Atlantic world. Donald Trump has veered from calling NATO "obsolete" to revisiting his position and suggesting that it was "no longer obsolete". It is highly unusual for a president to be so undiplomatic about this issue but American questioning about the failure of other allies to do more to "burden-share" within NATO has a long-established heritage.

In the UK, meanwhile, the idea that NATO is somehow to blame for the current souring of relations with Russia is particularly self-harming to the painfully constructed system of collective security which the post-War Labour Government put in place. In spite of this history, this suggestion has a growing number of recruits. At a National Youth Policy conference in October 2017, Young Labour delegates backed a motion opposing NATO. The [motion](#) stated that "Labour should commit to withdrawal from NATO on the basis that it no longer meets our collective security needs, is headed by a man variously viewed as an authoritarian and a fascist [Donald Trump], and that its continual aggression makes people in the UK less safe than they otherwise would."

Throughout his career, Jeremy Corbyn has consistently criticised NATO, blaming its "[belligerence](#)" for Russian incursions into Ukraine and suggesting it should have been [wound up](#) after the end of the Cold War. His latest equivocations over the Skripal case fit within this pattern. The criticism that the Labour leader has received from the Labour backbenches also demonstrates that the tradition of internationalism and a belief in collective security is still strong within the parliamentary party.

The importance of NATO to British national security cannot be overstated. The achievement of preventing a return to international anarchy after the Second World War was immense. The United Nations provided an important framework for that, but NATO provided the security guarantee that the League of Nations had lacked in the interwar years. In historical and political terms, the UK is arguably the nation which is most invested in the health and robustness of the NATO alliance. It is one thing to say that the [dialogue](#) between the West and Russia needs to improve. But as a number of Labour backbenchers have [pointed out](#), there can be no coherent response to the Skripal affair without an appreciation of collective security, underscored by NATO, as the foundation of European peace and security.

It is not in the UK's interests to see the Skripal affair escalate. But should this be the result of Russian counter-measures then the next step should be for the UK to seek further consultation with its NATO allies, possibly under the terms of Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. Immense caution should remain about the exercise of Article 5 which holds that an attack on one treaty ally is an attack on all of them. It has only been invoked once, by the United States, after 9/11. But the point of Article 4 – which has

been invoked several times in the past – is that it provides a device for NATO signatories to bring any issue of concern to the table for discussion within the North Atlantic Council. Most recently, in July 2015, Turkey requested that the North Atlantic Council convene under [Article 4](#) in view of a series of terrorist attacks, and Poland did so in March 2014 following increasing tensions in neighbouring Ukraine. Such a focused discussion is long overdue.