

Adrift and Rudderless –

The Sad Story of SS United Kingdom



By

[CDRE Patrick J. Tyrrell OBE RN \(Ret'd\)](#)

Chair of the SAGE Advisory Board

Senior Non-resident Fellow

Global & Maritime Security

The British have long prided themselves on their arm's length distance from Europe. Indeed, a London Times headline in the 1920s read, "*Fog in Channel, Continent isolated!*" Now, in the third decade of the 21st Century, it is the UK that is drifting, rudderless, and fog-bound – isolated from both Europe and the Western World.

The three British Prime Ministers of the last twelve months have each declared the importance of supporting Ukraine and have provided stocks of military hardware, proclaiming themselves to be the defenders of Western values. They have travelled extensively and spoken often about the absolute need to ensure that Putin's Russia does not emerge from this ugly war with any territorial gains or political advantage. I fear, however, that the UK is now a little like the Wizard of Oz, for all our roar, we have nothing to back up our commitments to either Europe or our American allies.



8 March 2023

Our military forces are hollowed-out by years of cutbacks and bad compromises. Our procurement processes are as bad as they have ever been over the last 50 years. And our ability to field adequate forces; on the ground, at sea or in the air is severely curtailed.

The UK Government has promised to review defence expenditure once the current strategic review has been completed and has been at pains to stress that there is no spare money 'in the kitty' to provide new equipment or replace diminished stockpiles in the immediate future.

This head-in-the-sand approach is unsustainable if the UK wishes to retain any moral authority within NATO or to demand places at the Top Table in the councils of the Western Alliance. If we look at Poland, France, and Germany, they have each recognised, however imperfectly, the need to move, if not to a war-footing, at least to an enhanced Cold War footing.

How then do we recover the situation? How do we restart the engines of the 'SS United Kingdom' and ensure we steer away from the rocks and shoals of political mismanagement? To be able to do so, we need to repair the engine and grease the machinery. More than six years have been spent in a self-defeating debate on where the UK is heading. Each faction trying to steer us in whatever direction takes their fancy. We have lost sight of that ability that has guided our nation so successfully over the last 200 years through the contemporary institutionalisation of short-termism.

From a strategic perspective, successive governments accepted Fukuyama's basic theory that the end of the Cold War marked an end of history. That we cut back our defences to save money but, more importantly, we completely ignored the strategic analysis of world events and their often-unpredictable long-term trajectories. We became focused on the UK to the exclusion of what was happening around the world. We interpreted international relations from the perspective of what the UK wanted from other countries rather than understanding what other countries might demand from us.

David Cameron and George Osborne were so fixated on trade with China that they pursued their China policy without any understanding as to what the cost might be. We wined and dined the Russian leaders, and Putin in particular, without any detailed study of the political imperatives within Russia.

As a result, we allowed the EU and NATO to unconsciously continue their sleep-walk eastward, ignoring a fearful and paranoid Russian autocracy's anxiety at being out-competed and "surrounded" by the West.

Europe had a good case to make, but it should have been clearly enunciated within the diplomatic arena. At the same time, the bean counters in HM Treasury decided that defence and foreign affairs were fruit,



8 March 2023

ripe for plucking. The Ministry of Defence, for its part, failed to learn the expensive lessons of the past, particularly in the realm of defence procurement where poor oversight, lack of clear specification and poor project management led to huge cost overruns and poor governance. This was especially disappointing given the procurement lessons expensively learned in the eighties, nineties, and the Millennium!

In 2014, the West committed its most egregious offence. We ignored the attacks by irregular Russian forces on Ukraine. Like some form of children's beast, we harrumphed and blew smoke but did nothing. We encouraged the Russian Bear to think that anything they wanted to do would not be obstructed by a maniacally materialistic and otherwise disengaged West. The UK's anticipated Strategic Defence Review, currently being undertaken, might be a good place to start.

Europe is far less stable than we thought and Russian aggression towards Ukraine, Moldova and the Baltic States demonstrate that there can be no peace with the current Russian government. Russian leader Vladimir Putin has repudiated the rules by which Europe hoped to avoid repeating the wars of the last Century. The UK needs to rebuild trust with the major European institutions, including the EU. We need to regain our much-envied position both as a major military power within Europe, particularly within the maritime arena, and our historic position as a diplomatic powerhouse in helping Europe, especially resolving long-standing and complex political issues.

A key issue is going to be the resolution of the current conflict in Ukraine. The longer it goes on, the more vicious the fighting, the more difficult it becomes. The more protracted the struggle, the tendency will be for it to drag on until one side or the other emerges victorious. That is an outcome we, in the West, cannot countenance. If Ukraine is defeated, it will mark the end of Western values in the governance of the world and see the rise of bullying and cajoling as the primary means of foreign and strategic policy. We will inherit a vastly more chaotic and war-like world. If Ukraine emerges victorious, it will lead to regime collapse in Russia and a violent and unpredictable time for all of Eurasia as Russia and its many neighbouring states adjust to new realities. In such circumstances, with the added risk of nuclear weapons, we cannot determine the outcome with any certainty.

The West needs to be developing mechanisms for managing such eventualities and how best to avoid extreme scenarios.

For example, we might be able to negotiate a ceasefire where each party agrees to withdraw to their positions in 2022 with those territories taken in 2014 being administered by a UN mandate for a period of 5 years. During this time, no armed forces from either Russia or Ukraine would be permitted. After 4 years, a plebiscite would be held amongst those voters who could show residency within the area since prior to 2014, as to whether the areas should



8 March 2023

be integrated into one or other of the nations. But this requires the acceptance of compromise. Paris and Berlin might see the power of compromise to restabilise Europe, but those 'front-line' states of Eastern NATO, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and the Baltic states, all formerly under the jackboot of Soviet/Russian totalitarianism (1947-91) do not. Neither does the aggrieved Kyiv or its primary supporter, the U.S. Biden administration. Unless or until the Western and Eastern parts of Europe start seeing things from a 'European' rather than 'regionalist' perspective, a genuine commitment to peace will not be forged.

Furthermore, to develop and negotiate these highly complex solutions needs the European nations to act in concert, with diplomatic skills that equal those of Lord Palmerston and Otto von Bismarck. We also need strong bipartisan strategic leadership from the USA and a working mechanism to ensure that any agreement is adhered to by all parties.

There is an important role for the SS United Kingdom to play but it needs the UK government to wake up, restart the engines and steer a coherent course. We need it, Europe needs it and so does the rest of the world.

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