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QI Panel:

Book Talk - A Misfit in Moscow: How British Diplomacy in Russia Failed: 2014-2019

June 13, 2024
12:00-1:00 PM EST

Anatol Lieven 0:29

Hello welcome everybody, I am Anatol Lieven, Director of the Eurasia program here at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. It's a great pleasure today to introduce Ian Proud, former British diplomat to talk about his book, a misfit in Moscow, how British diplomacy in Russia failed. Before I do, so I just like to flag a couple of upcoming webinar webinars next week, here at the Quincy at 2pm. On Monday, the 17th, my colleague, Andrew Weinstein, will be chairing a panel on Iraq in the US return to status quo or calm before the storm, obviously, of great interest in what's now happening in the Middle East. And on Tuesday, the 18th that this time 12. Yesterday, I will be chairing a webinar on the Ukraine peace summit in Geneva, which is happening this coming weekend on its consequences, if any, I hope that some of you at least will be able to join us for that. In and I will talk for about half an hour, and then I will throw it open to questions from you. But I'll also probably pass them on as part of the discussion, please put your questions in the Q&A, which you see at the bottom of the screen. And then I will pass on as many as I can. And I apologize in advance if I cannot get around to everybody. So with that in welcome. Just let me introduce you briefly. Ian Proud is a former British diplomat from 1999 to 2023. He organized the G8 summit in Northern Ireland in 2013, which was the last time that Vladimir Putin visited the United Kingdom. That of course, was before the Maidan revolution and the Russian annexation of Crimea. And from 2014 to 2019, in the station at the British Embassy in Moscow, where amongst other things he advised on sanctions policy, which we will of course be discussing. And Ian was head of the Russian crisis committee, not I think a job which is ever likely to go out of fashion. Alas. So Ian, welcome. It's a great pleasure, I have to say, partly because of a strong sense of fellow feeling. I also regarded myself as a misfit in a British misfit in, in Moscow. And I also did my best not as a diplomat, but as a journalist, try to explain Russia to the British and try to maintain some kind of reasonable working relationship. So could you just to begin with, could you briefly describe your book and tell us something about your your time at the British Embassy in Moscow.

Ian Proud 3:36

So, I mean, particularly back to Northern Ireland, is really fascinating times you can have Putin on the lawn with David Cameron, when is Prime Minister, and at that time, the UK had a functional, always easy, but a functional relationship with Russia, and I thought to myself, gosh, you know, paste into Russia next year, because Russia was due to be the presidency of the G8. In 2014. I can go to G8 summits in two years, what a cracking idea. That is, so that kind of

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really stimulated my interest in, in having a posting in Moscow, and of course, between June of 2013, and my arrival in July of 2014, that there was a run up to the Lithuania kind of Summit, the MyTown protests, you know, everything that happened, the annexation of Crimea, hostility in the Donbass here, insurgency, and so on sanctions, and I arrived at a time when the, what we call the tier three kind of harshest initial bunch of sanctions against Russia were imposed on the 31st of July in 2014. And that kind of form having a sort of, you know, not always easy, but sort of fairly constructive relationship, you know, the imposition of sanctions and obviously, the onset of the Ukraine crisis kind of set the tone, if you like for four and a half years of being a British diplomat in Moscow constantly under the kind of scrutiny of the local intelligence services having a difficulty because of getting access to kind of build decision is in the Kremlin and other places, but also another think critically actually trying to kind of as you did, b2c, as a journalist tried to educate UK ministers on what the Russians were thinking how we could sort of influence them in a context of a situation where the UK stepped out of any ability to influence peace talks in Ukraine, having some sidestepped involvement in the Normandy format, sort of back in, you know, in June of 2014.

So, trying to educate so UK ministers that are becoming had become and we're becoming increasingly kind of hawkish in their policy towards Russia. And so sort of the sense of kind of butting heads up against both the Russian authorities but also the British authorities into trying to make sense of, Well, how can we have a better working relationship with Russia? And then of course, in March 2018, you know, the, the Salisbury nerve agent attack happened and as the, as the head of the crisis committee had to kind of piece together the MC awfully lost 76 colleagues in the space of, you know, a month than which was possibly the saddest moment for me the kind of lowest point not really seeing the diplomats chucked out, because I knew that the office would look after them, but seeing kids have had to go home at seven days notice and, you know, not sure where the schools, you know, juvie and all that sort of thing.

That's why we're, in fact, I was shipped in to sort of keep it afloat. Because because the FSB was basically kind of moving to shut it. And I was shipped into basically outsmart the Russians in terms of gaming out, you know, how we responded to that. So tactical ambiguity that I'm making elaborate on that in more detail. But yeah, that was another one of my little side. sidewalls was out there six Ember and of course, sadly, that that school has now been closed recently, as recently as well, very sadly. So yeah, I mean, why food kind of going back to the UK, and then all thought having advice on sanctions and authorizing kind of sanctions against Russia, including sort of following the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022?

Anatol Lieven 7:15

Tell me, I mean, you arrived in 2013? Did your colleagues expect the kind of Russian reaction that we saw to the Maidan revolution, and in Crimea and in the Donbass?

Ian Proud 7:37

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Well I wrote in 2014, but as obviously following it as a Russian language, June 2013, after the summit, the g8 summit finish, I think we were the we expected it, I think we underestimated you know, the strength of Putin's response to what happened in after the kind of, you know, the downfall of Yanukovych? Absolutely. I don't think we thought that Putin would take such a bold and drastic step to, you know, occupy Crimea. I mean, that wasn't in our thinking. And I thought, I think it took everybody sort of caught everybody off guard. Really, I think that's absolutely, absolutely clear. And that partly informs our posture towards Russia ever since it kind of business, the lack of trust that existed before 2014 was going to deepened after kind of Putin's sudden lurch in the direction of getting into Ukraine and taking their territory and all the consequences we see today.

Anatol Lieven 8:37

But of course, it wasn't a sudden lurch, if you would have been following Russian attitudes, statements. And I have to say, I mean, as a fellow Brit, thought people might remember a little bit the Crimean War. And now, you know, to understand the importance of Sevastopol, emotionally.

Ian Proud 8:59

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. And, of course, that the Georgian boy, you know, much, much closer to home 2008 which the build up to which, you know, was not dissimilar, you know, set of circumstances to that which kind of preceded, you know, Russia's annexation of Crimea. So know, if you look back in history, I mean, you, you shouldn't really be surprised, and, and certainly on the back of kind of, you know, Obama's statements on red lines in Syria, I think sort of Putin did then and still today makes a play of him setting red lines and actually not allowing people to cross them. And I think that very much played to his narrative of actually, we are tougher than the kind of feckless you know, liberals in the West, and if they cross our red lines, and we will act I think that, you know, his response in Colombia can apply to that narrative too.

Anatol Lieven 9:57

But, I mean, does anyone in the foreign office room read history these days?

Ian Proud 10:02

A way that they don't tell me unfortunately, two things. You know, the modern generation of diplomats has very little kind of Russia knowledge and experience. And, and the body of experience that exists is that kind of core kind of a search core, if you like, who've been kicking around the block since the downfall of the Soviet Union, whose views on Russia kind of shaped by that experience, that kind of, you know, that that sort of experience of seeing Russia emerge from this decaying sort of corrupted kind of Soviet system and being diminished by that experience. And, you know, that that's, that's the kind of knowledge base that we haven't gone off, it's that there's no real kind of depth of knowledge of contemporary Russia and think and the

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way that we deploy diplomats, you know, to Russia, where they can mostly sit inside the MC building, they don't speak Russian, because they haven't played they're taking their exams, and actually, that they spend most of their time going to talk and secure video conferences, going to policymakers, just exacerbates that because, you know, diplomats exist to go out like journalists, right, you know, to go out and actually meet ordinary people in the country where they operate to kind of make sense of what they think why they think the way they do, they're gonna historical contexts kind of the way that they are, and that just hasn't been happening happening for a very long time.

Anatol Lieven 11:24

I have the strong impression that they're also very, very afraid of Russian women.

Ian Proud 11:29

Well, of course, that's true. Yes. I mean, there's always a honey trap. And let's be honest, you know, some people that detail some people fell foul of that even you know, while I was while I was in Moscow, unfortunately, but there's as happy made man with the young kids, you know, thankfully, that was never kind of fear that encroached on my, my daily life. But uh, ya know, the honeytrap risk, and, you know, we're told to kind of look in the ugly mirror every day, you know, we'd go behind the secure doors have the chance to kind of confidential area of the building. And the security officer would regularly mind a second of looking the ugly, ugly mirror, you know, as a middle aged men that when gorgeous, gorgeous, is taking interest in us and Starbucks, she's not really interested in our looks, she's probably interested in the fact that we work for the British government and have access to kind of highly sensitive, highly sensitive material.

Anatol Lieven 12:22

I mean, how about, you know, having dinner with other, you know, with middle aged, or elderly? Also not particularly beautiful, male Russian Think Tank people, for example, or academics?

Ian Proud 12:36

Well, I did. I mean, I do. I know you did, but what about your lot of the time and made very good friends and still friends with people who are on a different side of the fence to me in terms of how they think, you know, very much kind of pro wall and that's, and I'm sort of very much against the wall. So but, you know, yeah, that sort of relationship building, which is another kind of core part of diplomatic statecraft, you know, wasn't really there, people would go in a set peace meetings at the Foreign Ministry. And, you know, the Russians were like, their standard lines would were that our standard lines, but there's little on the kind of relationship building outside of the confines of the formal day marching and, you know, the the daily transaction of diplomatic business between the Russian government and our embassy, sadly,

Anatol Lieven 13:22

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Which is a bit strange, given, you know, there is a very extensive Think Tank world by now and perfectly open to discussions. And absolutely,

Ian Proud 13:33

And on the economic side of things, there's a far more open and vibrant economic debate in Russia, arguably, than there is a political debate, you know, you get the people like the cushions, the cliffs, and, you know, these folks and the people in the kind of, you know, the banking system. All these kind of think tanks who talk about economics, and do we don't we liberalize and that sort of thing, you know, brilliant sort of insight and thought leadership in terms of Russia's future, some of which, interestingly, kind of Putin takes on board some, which obviously, he doesn't, because he's going to crave into the silver key, but that kind of balancing act, I think, for Putin, between the silver key and the kind of the, the nebulin as a silhouette, and obviously, you know, the kind of economic liberals is a fascinating one to watch, even today, where nebulin and Sylvana was still, you know, retain, you know, kind of really pivotal role in his his state apparatus.

Anatol Lieven 14:32

I think a good many people have been surprised, and of course, in the West also disappointed with the efficiency of the Russian response to sanctions. And they do seem to have some very able people, you know, working on economic policy and the government. But were you were you surprised by just how, as it would appear so far in effect, well, not just ineffective, but it would seem that in certain respects, sanctions have actually contributed to strengthening the Russian economy, you hear a lot of Russian saying they have forced us to do. I mean, basically to, to get out of what we used to call the Dutch disease and all kinds of things that we should have done in the 1990s. Testing. Do you think that that is fair?

Ian Proud 15:23

No, I do, actually. I mean, I mean, bless it. Other cheesemakers? Yeah, well, when I, when I arrived in muskiness, a cheddar very quickly appeared or disappeared off the shells, African, a mushroom post, its so called kind of counter sanctions. And but that, that sprouted this enormous kind of artists and sort of cheese industry in Russia. And actually, all these kind of Soviet style kind of markets were refurbished and tatted up and pop up restaurants, you know, artists and cheese stores in the space for is, is quite remarkable. But I mean, on the kind of macro on the macro side of things. You know, I think sanctions, the important thing is that sanctions always had a kind of much smaller effect than bigger macro impacts. But the impact of the first oil price collapse in November 2014, the impact of the second oil price collapse in January 2016, the impact of COVID, in all of these things had a far bigger impact on on the Russian economy than sanctions themselves. And the second point is actually going to policymakers, certainly London weren't really interested anyway, I mean, sanctions were an end in themselves, they weren't really interested in all the while, they were just leveling on layering

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on more and more sanctions, actually, kind of Russia, increasingly was able to kind of brush them off and emerge, as you say, in some respects, kind of strengthened. In other respects, you could argue that it's kind of solidifying their dependence on on mineral exports, and that sort of thing and setting back, you know, real kind of change in the economy. But But yes, I mean, you know, that they have been in some regard strengthened by, by what's happened.

Anatol Lieven 16:56

In Russia, and liberals of my acquaintance are more worried that you will have a real ascendancy of the military industrial complex, that will that, you know, basically, now re embed itself in a quasi Soviet fashion, and that will never you'll never be able to escape it again. Because, of course, you have, by now, I mean, huge, as you could say, in the US, I mean, huge popular constituency in the industrial areas of the country for military spending and Military Industries. And they've done they've done very well out of it. Right.

Ian Proud 17:37

Yeah, no, and you could say the same about the UK where we increase our commitments. 2.5% there's kind of bipartisan support for quite bizarrely within the election campaign. But yeah, I mean, I've been talking for some time about the V sovietization of Russia's economy, I mean, that, that really started back in back in 2015, you know, with the, you know, last tech, you know, becoming great, became a conglomerate, military industrial kind of conglomerate. So it's been, it's been a gradual process, that ended and kind of shifting balance of power between the silver key and the kind of liberals, you know, culminating in the kind of fantastic arrest of your guy of, you know, when searching gave him that basket of sausage and wine with the million bucks, you know, in notes in the bottom of it. So, it's been a fascinating sort of, it's been fascinating to watch, you know, that shifting balance of power between the sort of the key and the economic liberals by still, you know, feel hopeful by the fact that, you know, the liberals are still there, they still have a voice, they still fully influencing day to day economic macroeconomic decision making in Russia in, in quite a positive way, albeit a way, of course, which is enabling sort of Russia to continue its war in Ukraine quite successfully. With very little pressure on Putin, you know, we're increasingly less pressure on Putin domestically, you know, around that particular campaign.

Anatol Lieven 19:05

You see, the appointment of yellows of as significant in that regard, as a certain sector of Russians have great place great hope in him as a force and what he represents as a force for the future. He of course, is he's very skilled economist. He's not a liberal exactly, but he's not one of the silver key either. He has no stake and he's supposed to be wholly uncorrupt. And he has no stake in the, in the oil and gas and minerals, industries. Yeah.

Ian Proud 19:36

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And of course, he was the economic, the key economic adviser in the presidential administration while I was while I was there, you know, in Moscow, so he's very well regarded. And of course, you know, sure.

Anatol Lieven 19:46

Do you know him personally?

Ian Proud 19:48

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I used to get into the presidential administration sort of quite a bit. I wouldn't say we were close but we've we've, we've met so Yeah, I mean, I think it's try you only, I mean, sure use not military person either. I mean, he only got there because of his role in kind of forming it any other Sia, you know, in the early days, so he's not military personnel either. I mean, my contacts in Russia very much see this is him being sent in to kind of sweep out kind of widespread corruption, you know, within defense, you know, particularly procurement and that sort of thing. Some people interpreting it is kind of doubling down and getting ready for a long protracted sort of, you know, war in Ukraine. But I see him as kind of going in your new broom sweeping clean as it were, particularly on the back of you know, what happened, you know, last year with pedagogy and in his spat with Choi Gu is very good as increasingly kind of fallen out of favor. And corruption issues with the mid have made his position untenable, it seems to me.

Anatol Lieven 20:53

I don't know anyone who regrets, personally, anyone who regrets Shoigu's departure in Russia.

Ian Proud 21:00

Been interested in like, Medvedev, he's loyal to Putin. So that's why he's been able to hang around so long. And he's been booted upstairs into a non job like mediative was after he was kind of in his scandals around corruption and revealed by Nirvani became so great that you know, Putin had to sort of clean out and get interested in.

Anatol Lieven 21:23

When in the middle of your, your service, of course, you have Brexit, Britain leaving the European Yes. How did that affect your work and and policy towards Russia? Or if it did?

Ian Proud 21:39

Well, of course, we didn't actually, I mean, that the vote happened, you know, while I was there, it certainly had a demotivating effect on on the transfer, you know, because diplomats, not all of them, but by and large, tend to be kind of more internationalist, in more kind of pro European, therefore, in focus and Outlook, but it's a bit of a non event in terms of the Russian news, and in

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terms of the things that we wanted to discuss with, with Russian kind of policymakers anyway, so it had remarkably little impact on my work, but you know, when it when it had an impact was actually after I came back, when we had to take all EU sanctions into UK sanctions on the UK kind of law as part of this kind of big drive, you know, so. So I, when I got back, I must have authorized almost half of all of the, you know, sanctions that the UK took on when you're taking them over directly from, you know, from the EU law. So that's the only for me personally, you know, that's the only kind of influence, you know, for me, you it was remarkable, isn't it? And in any case, you know, given that the sort of discussions on peace process in Ukraine are very much driven by the Germans and in the French anyway, within, you know, the Normandy format. You know, we've been excluded from that since the summer of 2014, you know, two years before the Brexit debate, I mean, that, you know, we had no influence on that process before Brexit. After Brexit, we still had no influence on that process. So nothing really going to change in terms of our ability to influence European policy thinking until the Ukraine crisis, you know, after that, that vote.

Anatol Lieven 23:18

So what did we talk to the Russians about from 2014 to the Ukrainian invasion?

Ian Proud 23:25

I mean, got very little access. I mean, I got better access on the economic side. But we didn't have we couldn't talk about Ukraine, because the Russians, just source is totally irrelevant, you know, on that, we we wanted to, but couldn't really talk on Syria, which was another kind of big, big foreign policy priority, because again, the Russian saw us as Tiki after going to Westminster, you know, vote where parliament voted against the UK military involvement in Syria, from that point on Russia sources, totally Bitbar players in Syria, so the Turks, the Americans always have bigger. So we talked about Libya as a Middle Eastern DPRK, you know, North Korea and stuff, and all these, all these things. But in terms of the issues that mattered, Ukraine, Syria, you know, we are pretty voiceless, I have to say, even though we kind of kept pushing on that door, I mean, we actually the seaweed or we stopped pushing the Ukraine door on the back end of 2014 and feel.

Anatol Lieven 24:27

On Syria, I have to say, I mean, my Russian acquaintances, including, I suppose what you'd call maybe status liberals or patriotic liberals or MIT or actually just a good many analysts in general, they, they honestly could not understand our policy towards Syria. I mean, especially after what happened in Iraq and then Libya, that they would ask me, I mean, how could you set out to destroy another Middle Eastern State where having any idea what will follow? I mean, how can you do this? Do you not understand the the I mean, the obvious danger that ISIS can take over?

Ian Proud 25:12

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Well indeed, yeah, and the massive migration crisis that swept over too.

Anatol Lieven 25:18

But how did British diplomats respond to that?

Ian Proud 25:23

Well, I mean, like, I think like we responded to a situation in Ukraine it and absolutely kind of molded sort of a sense of moral righteousness that actually, you know, because, because,

Anatol Lieven 25:34

But Ukraine, I can understand, but but in the Middle East, there's surely there ought to be less room for given everything that's happened over the years for righteousness.

Ian Proud 25:44

Sure, yeah. I know. But unfortunately, righteousness as a baker is a very strong sort of guiding influence in terms of how our foreign policy moves in the UK, certainly under the Conservative government, and and actually, also a tendency just to kind of align ourselves too closely at times with with chaotic, US foreign policy as well, I fear.

Anatol Lieven 26:11

Well, I mean, that brings me to an obvious question, which I'm sure you heard from the Americans, or sorry, from the Russians, which is, I mean, is there in fact, British Foreign Policy anymore? Or is it made in Washington, in all serious matters?

Ian Proud 26:26

Well, my personal view is it's increasingly kind of, we increasingly kind of follow the the American line. So you, some would interpret that as meaning that's made in Washington. I mean, we had a, we had a policy when we're within the European Union as a Common Foreign and Security Policy. You know, okay, it's very consensual in its orientation. But But nevertheless, you know, within that sort of framework of 28, states, UK was a very, very powerful voice. You know, within the EU, we were very powerful voice and imposing sanctions against Russia at the start of the Ukraine crisis. You know, within the EU, we had a sort of important role in the JCPOA, you know, when that was going in, as opposed to direction on Iran, for example. So, you know, within the EU framework, actually, the UK had quite a sort of powerful voice in shaping, you know, foreign policy, we don't have that now, because the Americans will do what the Americans will do and will like it or lump it. And, you know, more often than not, we're lumping it. So that fear, yes, that influence is going, it doesn't really even relate to any particular

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association, or with a particular party, you know, whether it's Democrat or Republican in the US, whoever's in charge, you know, in the US, and we just kind of tend to follow the lead.

Anatol Lieven 27:47

I have noticed a tendency now, on the conservative side, but perhaps on the labor side, as well, for a much closer party identification among some British politicians and reading the daily Daily Telegraph recently. You know, in the past, there was more of a feeling that, you know, the Democrats and the Republicans are American parties with, you know, with very specific American character and don't really unit influence British domestic policy. But now there seems to be a tendency among the Tories to feel that you actually have to identify with the Republicans, which now of course, means identifying with Donald Trump, and perhaps a natural reaction against that on the left in Britain.

Ian Proud 28:36

Yeah, I don't know that I really see that given how closely we're associating ourselves with Biden's policy on Ukraine, for example. So I don't really see that. I wasn't talking about this. Though. There are some things in the white that kind of would intuitively kind of fully prefer Donald Trump, but in terms of, you know, the facts of our foreign policy, you know, we are in complete lockstep, you know, Conservative government is in complete lockstep with the democratic government on on policy in Ukraine. And you know, what, when Obama was in power, you know, a, David Cameron was closely aligned with him when Bush was in power, Tony Blair from the Labour Party, he was very, you know, closely. In fact, Tony black, she wrote to Jack Straw, you know, shortly after 911, saying that the UK is number one foreign policy priority was being close to the USA. I mean, how is that even a foreign policy priority? But there you go. I mean, that's what, that's what Tony Blair wrote, so, so I don't see it. I mean, you know, maybe in the bars or in the bars of Westminster, people talk about these things, but in terms of the facts of foreign policy, you know, you can't really make that argument. I don't think so.

Anatol Lieven 29:49

What does happen if Trump wins in November, as far as British policy is concerned?

Ian Proud 29:56

Yeah, I mean, I think I mean, the famous and other cringy may of treason, a walking hand in hand with him through the UK and at the White House garden. I think we'll just deal with him as we sort of dealt with him before. And whoever is going to be the US ambassador, hopefully will be less a little more discreet than Kim. Derek, if it's Tim Barrow, I'm sure you know, he most certainly wouldn't be because timber is a sort of character who would be much more discreet in his reporting on on Donald Trump. But as it relates to kind of Ukraine and Russia, I think, you know, I mean, Trump's position on that is quite clear he that he would want seen in the war. And what that basically means is, you know, stepping away from complete and unconditional support

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for Zelinsky, and actually encouraging, encouraging him to put his suit back on and sit at the negotiating table, which is really the only thing that's going to change the status quo on the battlefield.

Anatol Lieven 30:49

Well, yes, but I mean, that's surely as the whole thing. I mean, Britain hadn't having taken such a hard line on Ukraine, and yet, at the same time being so deferential to the United States. I mean, what if the United States does a Virtual U turn under Trump, and adopts a completely different policy? Where does Britain stand then?

Ian Proud 31:09

we'll just be kind of left flailing. But I mean, we had this if you remember, back in halfway through my time in, in Moscow, Maidan, Trump came into power halfway through, you know, my time in Moscow, we were kind of left flailing, you know, then prior to that the Americans lobbied us constantly not have economic engagement. With Russia, Trump come in that completely, that completely changed. You know, Philip Hammond cut a full direct ministerial engagement with between the UK and Russia, Donald Trump came in had his Helsinki summit with Putin. We were just kind of left flapping around, and ultimately sort of coming back into an equilibrium with whatever, you know, the Americans are doing, it seems to me.

Anatol Lieven 31:53

You wouldn't expect Britain to actually to oppose a Trump peace policy, if such a thing?

Ian Proud 32:00

I don't see how we could. Because I think If Trump were to do that, the Europeans would, would be more inclined to come on board like Schultz and Macron or whoever, you know, if they're constantly bad, who knows, at that time, but I think, you know, if the Europeans come on board, that leaves us in no man's land, or leaves us to, let's say, still in no man's land, on policy as we have been before, so we'd have to sort of come on board. I mean, I think the poles or bolts would kind of oppose that. But I think if France and Germany were to kind of support that, then you know, would either have to kind of stick or just move and I think, will ultimately probably have to move. And one of the interesting things for me at the moment is, you know, with the Labour Party, at the moment, not having a foreign policy, not having a state and foreign policy, because it doesn't want to kind of appear to have a point of difference from the Conservatives and the moloto general election is expected to win. The interesting thing for me will be actually how they kind of spin that because, you know, we will probably have a different color of government in the UK, you know, when and if Trump were to come to power, so I think that that would be actually quite significant. And I think that they would probably have more scope to kind of flex their position than the toys do now where they're totally entrenched.

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Anatol Lieven 33:17

In following on from that, we have a question from the floor. What is the issue? Or I suppose is there an issue on which the US or the UK I'm sorry, could most conceivably choose to follow an even slightly more independent foreign policy than they have recently? I mean, where do we have still a measure of autonomy?

Ian Proud 33:40

What I mean, the purpose of Brexit was actually to kind of gain greater control of our lives in terms of foreign policy and but also kind of trade policy and on trade policy has been a bit of a failure, because actually, all the kind of promised free trade agreements haven't been really, really materialized. And we've kind of gone nowhere. Without our sort of Russia policy is gone into decline or influence from already very low basis kind of sunk still further, where do we have influence in the world now? I mean, I think I think we're a country that has declining power because of self isolation that we've imposed on the cells who Brexit but that's just my personal view, is it pro European internationalist? So you know, when good question maybe in some years, overseas territories, and it may be interested in Decatur, if this is great, who knows? But I don't see any kind of major. If you look at Israel, Gaza, you know, we have no influence there. I mean, ultimately, the Israelis will take their guidance from you know, where where the US are positioning themselves, you know, on that DPRK we don't know nor do we ever really have much influence on that anyway. You know, China, you know, we're only in orcas because, you know, we're sort of lying, aligning with kind of the US on that into Latin America and Africa. I mean, the Russians and the Chinese now have increasing influence, you know, they're far more than we do. So yes, very good question. I wish I knew.

Anatol Lieven 35:12

So too, I mean, one incident, which inevitably, we have a question from the floor about where Britain is seen mildly to have played an important role was when Boris Johnson, allegedly, we know that he did, we don't have board and it was strongly discouraged the Ukrainians from seeking a peace with Russia. That, of course, was in March of 2022. That was, you know, after you left Moscow, but do you think that that was as important as some people say, and was that very much a, you know, Boris thing? Or did that reflect a consensus in the in the British foreign security establishment?

Ian Proud 36:07

Well, let's just be completely clear that the consensus in the British foreign and security establishment is hawkish on Russia, and has been well had been for the eight years and longer kind of proceeding that, you know, arguably for 1415 years, you know, preceding that their breakup when Ukraine so so, you know, Boris wasn't swimming against the tide, in that respect, you know, what he was doing was channeling his inner Churchillian and wanting to be seen as some sort of big savior of Ukraine, a big brother, you know, you know, we're going to help you

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and you should keep fighting to the last Ukrainian. And actually, you know, just a few weeks later, Liz truss, will still appear in mansion house, you know, making a speech encouraging Ukraine, not only to reclaim the land that it had lost after the war, started in February 20, to 22, but actually to aim to take back its borders, right back to sort of February 2014, as well, you know, retaking Crimea, it completely irresponsible kind of shift and actually sort of encouraging Ukraine in this endeavor and promising something that we couldn't really deliver, which is support for as long as it takes. And it as we've seen, since the war started, actually kind of support, you know, military support for Ukraine has, has been dwindling. And actually, there are big question marks about how long the West will continue to sustain this kind of massive investment of cash and material to kind of prop up a war, which, you know, could at least in ceasefire terms be ended fairly quickly, it seems.

Anatol Lieven 37:45

And what I mean, I suppose two questions, though. One is that, of course, if there had been a real chance of Ukraine retaking Crimea with Western support, I mean, that would appear to be the swiftest path, actually, towards the use of nuclear weapons. And Armageddon. Was that, once again, I mean, do people actually understand the state that Russia has in Crimea or not?

Ian Proud 38:18

I don't think they do. Or if they do, they don't really care. And there's kind of their willful and oblivious to the risks of nuclear escalation. And a good example of that is, is, you know, the annexation of the traditional blasts in Ukraine in its since war started, and I think one of the reasons that actually Russia legally mean illegally, my view, but but legally, in their view, so claim those are, bless you, as their own wants to give it the justification, a justification to its sense of domestic constituency, to use nuclear weapons in those places, there should there be so incursions by Ukraine or NATO back to the Ukrainian forces, to reclaim them? So the whole point of that was to give them legal justification to use nuclear weapons? And if we don't understand that, and I think actually, it's incredibly dangerous, if European security to kind of keep pushing this idea that there can be some sort of conventional military victory when very clearly there. They can't be.

Anatol Lieven 39:28

Yeah, exactly. And who will also frustrates me very deeply is that I'm sure you as well, is that there is a conflation of trying to work for a compromise piece, which are all the military, economic demographic, political indicators suggest you know, will be inevitable at some stage whether through just running into the sand With possibly a formal agreement, the conflation of that somehow with the idea that when is supporting the war, you oppose the invasion. I oppose the invasion. You know, we all thought it was a crime and a terrible idea. But that's, you know. Now the question is how the hell to get out of it, right?

Ian Proud 40:19

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Well, nobody, nobody's putting up a credible alternative to peace. And as I say, as I often say, actually, you know, we're stuck in this kind of no man's land between war or peace to riff off kind of Leo. Leo Tolstoy, you know, we've never wanted war with Russia. You know, we've avoided NATO that is having a direct kind of conventional war with Russia, but we haven't wanted peace, either. You know, we have to choose, do we want peace? Or do we want war and this this horrible no man's land, which is only really the Ukrainians, and actually, arguably, the Russians that are suffering is in a nobody's winning, nobody's winning in this situation at all. So we had to either fight with with Ukraine or preferably actually help Ukraine to make peace.

Anatol Lieven 41:04

But I mean, that goes back to the whole question of NATO membership for Ukraine, because I mean, it was always evident that we never had any intention of fighting to defend Ukraine. And yet, as many people warned, I mean, to take Ukraine into NATO war author to do so with the eventual prospect of Russian expulsion from Sevastopol. Well, I mean, you, you must you must have been warned about.

Ian Proud 41:32

While meanwhile, fast tracking Sweden and Finland into NATO. But after the woods started, and nobody thinking that, you know, that doesn't look even slightly duplicitous. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's a totally kind of answer unsustainable kind of proposition that the Ukraine should join NATO and know that this, I mean, this is a red line that the Russians have been setting setting for a very long time now. So Ukrainian membership of NATO going right back to kind of, you know, 2008, you know, really added it hasn't changed. And while I was in Moscow, you know, we had this John Simpson, the BBC kind of veteran journalist had his really telling interview with Peskov. And you can still look it online, I encourage people to do so. And just watch it, you know, the Simpson Peskov interview on BBC from about November 2014, Pascal's lines, to this day haven't changed, you know, sort of NATO expansion. And yet we keep ignoring, you know, we keep ignoring this, with the results, sadly, that we, that we see today, at some point, we need to kind of there needs to be a final reckoning on on actually, you know, Ukraine's kind of future in terms of its NATO aspirations, and so on. And I think my personal view is we should be taken off the table, while at the same time thinking about the appropriate security assurances that we can give Ukraine to prevent this happening in the future, both of which, by the way, when this proposed, you know, a peace deal at Istanbul.

Anatol Lieven 43:12

It often struck me that, you know, it was part of many such conversations. And you know, I was reading an off the cuff comment by So Laurie Bristow, who was ambassador for your time right. Oh, yeah. Well, he said, somebody from a Russian Think Tank. I think I know who it is, said to him back in every was like, You do realize that that NATO membership for Ukraine will mean war. And Russia that says, Oh, I but I just laughed it. I said, What are you talking about war?

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How ridiculous and so why? Why didn't we listen? I mean, I was brought up to think that was the job of both diplomats. And as I was journalists to listen. And yet with Russia, there seems to have been a simply a willful refusal to listen.

Ian Proud 44:03

There has been a willful refusal to listen and that, in a way, it goes back to this kind of culture of the foreign office where most of our Russian experts kind of old sweats from the 1990s, who still think of Russia is this kind of depleted, diminished state that emerged out of the decay and the collapse of the Soviet Union. And that actually, you know, if push comes to shove, they'll back down. And of course, you know, they won't. And everything about Russia now, but Russian history, you know, tells us that they won't, and yet we still, you know, blindly can stumble forward and and, you know, hold Ukraine gently by the hand and lead them into calamity.

Anatol Lieven 44:47

Is there a deeper problem than from the cold several questions about this from the floor, from the Cold War or for that matter from the 19th century in terms of particular at To Toots to Russia, rather than, you know, as opposed, for example, to attitudes to China, or wherever, I was always struck by the fact that I had rather expected after the end of the Cold War that Britain, you know, having lost an empire. And, of course, we mostly manage to scuffle away before the real disasters happened, you know, the end of the British Empire was an extremely messy and nasty affair in India, in seven in Nigeria, well, actually, I'm still with

Ian Proud 45:38

India is another great example of a country where we think we have far more influence. So we actually have, yeah,

Anatol Lieven 45:43

Yes. But But is there a particular pathology with regard to Russia?

Ian Proud 45:50

I think there's a very particular I don't like to use Russophobia. You know, but, but that's the the only convenient, I suppose, term to use view towards Russia that, you know, that, that there's unlike in the US, it's fascinating this, unlike in the US, where there's genuinely kind of open debate about what should we should we, you know, have a different approach on Russia, Ukraine, there's no debate in the UK, there's this bizarre sort of bypass and Tory and labour support for what we're doing. Maybe that will change after the Labour Party becomes, you know, the new government. But the press, it's almost impossible to kind of take a view that differs from the government's view on our policy. It's almost like we are Russia. And actually, somebody wants said that, actually, that the problem with the UK and Russia is too similar kind of mindset.

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So maybe, maybe that's it, but it kind of feels like by propaganda, very much drives the thinking. And actually, you know, ordinary people in the UK have very little knowledge of what's happening in Russia, about Russian people about Russian history, and then they just live off this kind of endless drip feed of propaganda from both the Tories and the Labour Party. Let's say that they buddy, but their message doesn't differ. It's fascinating.

Anatol Lieven 47:14

Yeah. Well, thank you for the plug for the the broader US debate. That is, of course, why I'm speaking to you from Washington.

Ian Proud 47:22

Indeed, well, I mean, it's amazing, you know, that there is genuinely more open debate, you know, in the traditional alternative media and in the think tank world, and that's good. You need that kind of pluralism. We don't have it in the UK.

Anatol Lieven 47:37

Oh, indeed. Very, very, very depressing. The America, you know, suffers from the change of parties. And then everybody reversing what the previous administration did. How damaging was the, of course, under the same party, but the extraordinary how many foreign secretaries were there while you were there?

Ian Proud 48:08

Eight? Well, I mean, now it's eight with Cameron.

Anatol Lieven 48:11

But did that have a rip? Again? Did that have a really does?

Ian Proud 48:14

No, it's actually the other way around, it had no impact, you know, because what what Trump would call the swamp, you know, the swamp effect, you know, that the bureaucracy, you know, really kind of drives policy makers policy kind of thinking on Russia. So, your any new temporary can Foreign Secretary we get in would have, you know, the Foreign Office, you know, the intelligence agencies, the mid briefing their new ministers, you know, on how they should think and, and most of the time, they just, you know, follow along. I mean, interestingly, Jeremy Hunt, you know, hills, his foreign secretary, that he showed signs of actually wanting to kind of the, you know, more laterally about our approach to Russia, but every attached to a lame duck Prime Minister, and Theresa May and basically ignored him, they just waited for him to leave. And, of course, inevitably, he did leave so they were so actually that, you know, the, the, the

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bureaucracy that the secure the secure cracy is so powerful in Russia, that doesn't really matter if ministers come and go.

Anatol Lieven 49:22

A question you mentioned the interview with between John Simpson and and when was that?

Ian Proud 49:29

In November 2014

Anatol Lieven 49:34

A question. The increasing closeness of Russia and China, although, of course, one should never so far, at least call it an alliance. It's not an alliance, but it's certainly a much closer partnership. Was this predicted when you were in the foreign office that they would draw closer and close together because there was a lot of, of course, skepticism about it? Oh, no. You know, the Russians are much too scared of the Chinese. They don't have anything to offer each other. But it seems they do.

Ian Proud 50:06

You know, we definitely thought about it. In fact, I was, I was sent off to Beijing and Manchuria to kind of do some thinking on it. But early on, in my time in Moscow, so yeah, the thinker, one says necessarily kind of extensive thinking about it, about my sense has always been, you know, for many years now, actually, that the depth of the relationship is easy to exaggerate. Now, clearly, you know, Russia is shifting its focus east on the back of an almost complete severing of its relationship with countries in the West, but, but it's doing so on the basis of quite an unequal partnership with with China, it's a country that is 10 times smaller than China, both demographically. And economically. It has much deeper moreso historic, if you like, sort of relations with India, which you know, has a kind of quite difficult relationship with China. China is increasingly kind of replacing Russian influence in Central Asia with a flood of investment money through the fast mode initiative in trade. And so actually, for me, I think people, it's easy to exaggerate the depth of the kind of the sino kind of Russian relationship. I mean, it's important for Putin to kind of have a stable and strong relationship with with the G, obviously, but I think for him, BRICS is as important it's going to balancing, you know, for them for him to kind of balance, Indian influence, Chinese influence, but also have these kind of really good conversations with the Global South, as part of this drive the multipolar world on which obviously, the Russians and the Chinese in particular very closely allied.

Anatol Lieven 51:42

Yes, yeah. The the Russian reach out to the global South, and of course, that has been greatly assisted by what's happened in Gaza. In terms of moral say, I mean, not so much moral

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equivalence, as I mean, there is simply a widespread view that the West is morally bankrupt, I would say by now.

Ian Proud 52:08

Yes, absolutely

Anatol Lieven 52:12

Um, one question, just how rigorous were the Russian language requirements for British diplomats you suggested, I think that most more or less evaded?

Ian Proud 52:24

It see one is the requirement is like a bachelor's degree level. And actually, they have the option to go up to kind of master's degree level in the language. And actually, most of the kind of political type, I would facings of diplomats or everybody is expected to kind of hit that hit that standard. And what was a kind of a very few days, and I understand that they do even even today, you know, since I've left and but but you know, language is a vital part of the toolkit of being a diplomat to get out and just talk to only people. I mean, if you're in Moscow, I mean, it's fine, you know, you'll easily find people who want to talk to you in English, including when you're meeting bankers, think tank is going to universities and that sort of stuff. But if you get out of Moscow, get out to the fields get Siberia and that sort of thing. You won't. And actually, if you want to kind of get a real conversation going, you need it.

Anatol Lieven 53:26

And I wondered, I mean, it's something that I certainly saw in the 1990s. And I've seen in other parts of the world, I don't know how true it was in your time was that, you know, insofar as British diplomats did socialize, and go out and actually form friendships and, and not so much talk to people. But listen to people, it tended to be a very self selected group of westernizing Russian liberals, who would then act in effect as a kind of echo chamber, or as I've sometimes called, yeah, usually confirming Western diplomats in their views of Russia, but not, of course, representing the vast majority of Russians, let alone the Russian government.

Ian Proud 54:13

Yeah, no, absolutely. I think that's I think that's right. And, of course, lots of modern diplomats who just go for meetings with other diplomats, as well, you know, from the American Embassy, from the Eritrean embassies, not from the Chinese Embassy. But for me, I didn't I took the opposite approach. I tended to end up getting to know people who were not, you know, echo chamber, Western liberals and had a good friend of Gazprom, who used to be a Soviet my back in the day and it was very firmly aligned with kind of the Kremlin policy, a good friend at university same thing. You had a great big carpet of Medvedev on on the wall of his office, you

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know, Rich said very clearly and carefully. You know, where he stood, I went to a local park on group and it's all kind of middle class or working class people going out for 5k run every Saturday morning. And that was really interesting, because they welcomed me in, you know, we talked about running in and all that sort of stuff. And yeah, so, but that's what you kind of have to do. And sadly too few people do do that.

Anatol Lieven 55:23

We're kind of fairly close to the end, one question, I have to say, in my case, the answer would be none whatsoever. But question while you were stationed in Moscow, did you feel that any of your work actually had a positive influence on the British government?

Ian Proud 55:44

Well, I think I would say that none of it had a positive, positive influence on UK foreign policy, because we see, it hasn't changed. As soon as Philip Hammond came into power, so so no, but but in terms of actually making real contacts that I'm still in touch with, on both sides of the fence, you know, for me at a personal level, it did I mean, you know, my good friend to touch with, but in the big scheme, sadly, I hate to admit that I was a complete failure in that regard.

Anatol Lieven 56:18

My time as a, as a journalist and commentator, of course, as well. Well, that brings me I suppose the final question, which is, obviously completely hypothetical and speculative and maybe utopian. But can you see circumstances in which there could be a, an actual measure of reconciliation or detente between Britain and Russia in future?

Ian Proud 56:47

Well, I think it has to start with an ending of the facilities in Ukraine, there has to be a ceasefire. And then sadly, I think what's going to happen is it's going to be a very long, decades long kind of peace process, it's just going to be like Nagorno Karabakh, you know, really, all over again. And while that's going on, there'll be a kind of slow normalization, I think of kind of European sort of Russian relations. And I think inevitably, will will follow will follow the pack, I don't think will lead it, I think will be at the back of the pack. But I think, you know, will, will drift in that direction. But I mean, that that assumes that there'll be some sort of, you know, we won't all be emulated by nuclear war before then, of course on so that doesn't happen.

Anatol Lieven 57:36

I've been one final question on that score, which I have, say a lot of Russians have asked me is in the British foreign security establishment, all these statements about a coming war with Russia, and about a Russian attack, a deliberate attack on NATO, not a stumbling into war, but a deliberate attack on Poland or Baltic states. Is this do they actually believe this? Is this

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sincere? Or is this that people do think that we need to spend more on the military? And of course, this isn't just Britain, it's across Europe that a measure of rearm is necessary and that the only way to bring this about is to given budgetary constraints and economic situation is to scare the hell out of people? Or is this fear real? Because the Russians say, Look, this is madness. Why that's what we attack, NATO, everything we're doing is to try to stop NATO intervening in Ukraine, do you think, is completely baseless?

Ian Proud 58:32

I've seen absolutely no evidence that rushes either desire nor more importantly, the capability to kind of do that. I mean, NATO is more than 10 times bigger than Russia, even the European bid of NATO spends more than four times more than than Russia, you know, on defense is complete. It's complete scaremongering. And I think the irony for me is actually, you know, NATO, for me, it's just like the EU is this kind of undemocratic kind of bureaucracy that that needs to exist that needs to kind of accrete power that, you know, needs to justify its existence. So all this can nonsense about spending more on on on, on defense is just to support its own sort of undemocratic existence, in my view. But if you look at the 2%, for example, you know, commitment, I think, 17 NATO countries don't currently hit the 2%. If they did, and we that alone would add \$81 billion a year alone, to NATO defense spending, which is almost as much as going to Russia spends in one year now so that, no, we don't I mean, how much more than Russia do we need to spend on defense, not, you know, to reassure ourselves, it's not about to invade Latvia, which he has obviously no intention of doing from my perspective.

Anatol Lieven 59:51

And of course, it would be different if if we actually plan to fight in Ukraine, but as as I always say, you could consider it every every German from the age of 18 to 40, into the German military, and they still wouldn't go to fight in Ukraine. That's hope they don't do that. Indeed, indeed, they did that once and it did not turn out terribly well for anybody. Well, Erin, thank you so much. That was fascinating. I urge everybody to buy the book, which I have to say is both extremely insightful and interesting, but also highly amusing. It's, it's a very good read. Thank you. And I apologize to anybody in the audience who couldn't get to the question because obviously, time was limited. So thank you, and I hope that some of you will be able to turn up to our webinars next week. Thank you again.

Ian Proud 1:00:46

All the best, goodbye.