

Russia is as much of a threat to Britain as the Klingons

*Britain could not cope with an attack by Russia any more than it could one by the Klingons, but then neither are likely to invade any time soon, writes Mail on Sunday columnist **Peter Hitchens**.*

This article first appeared in Peter Hitchens' blog as well as Russia Insider, and is used with full permission of the author.

I can't blame the Army for trying to save itself from the current mad round of cuts, but could there be anything more ludicrous than a warning that we need to beef up the Army because it can't cope with an attack on Britain by Russia? Likewise we could not cope with an attack on Britain by Klingons (who don't as far as I know exist), or, come to that, by the Chinese People's Republic (which does exist). But these attacks are not likely, let alone imminent.

I say, please plan for what is realistically likely, rather than frightening people with bogeymen, and so perhaps creating the preconditions for a war which, if you had not been so silly, would never have happened.

General Sir Nick Carter, head of the army, was all over the media this morning warning of the Muscovite threat.

What is he talking about? Years ago, the great conservative satirist Michael Wharton (who wrote under the name 'Peter Simple' in the old *Daily Telegraph*, a very different newspaper from the one that now bears that name) invented a war between Sweden and Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was then a country in the South-East of Europe, not having been dismantled to suit the

convenience of the EU. It was also about as far as one could get from Sweden, while staying in the European landmass.

I forget what grievance had sparked this fictional conflict. One day I shall write a Wikipedia entry on the Suedo-Yugoslav war (I wonder how long it will take them to notice) which will doubtless explain all these things.

But the real lasting joke was of course that the two enemies could never find each other. They had nothing to fight about, no common border, no territorial dispute. It could have lasted for decades without an actual shot being fired.

Much the same is true of our relations with Russia. We have no land or maritime border. We have very little mutual trade or any other connection which might lead to war. We are far away from each other.

Silly media reports contrive to suggest that Britain is ceaselessly 'confronting' or 'escorting' Russian ships or planes which fly through international waters or airspace near our islands. But read them carefully. They often seem to suggest that Russian planes have violated our airspace. As far as I know, this has not happened. Likewise, Russian naval vessels have a perfect right under the International Law of the Sea, to pass through the North Sea and the Channel (I have checked the laws on this) provided they undertake no hostile action. Indeed, it would be hard to see how else they could get from their home ports to Atlantic or Mediterranean destinations unless they took these routes.

As I have pointed out in myriad posts on this indexed, archived and searchable blog, Russia is not a very significant country, even though it takes up a lot of space on the map. Its GDP, the best measure of economic importance, is roughly the same as that of Italy, a country which rightly does not trouble us.

Its nuclear weapons are unusable (like ours). Most of Russia's

conventional army and air force is deployed to defend its home territory, because (unlike us) it has no natural physical borders in the shape of seas or mountain-ranges, and is vulnerable to invasion (see recent history). Its second most important city suffered countless deaths by starvation thanks to a siege by German invaders within living memory.

Many widely-believed myths about Russia are not true. Russia did not start the recent conflict between Russia and Georgia. The EU's own Tagliavini report concluded that this was begun by Georgia.

Russia has long regarded NATO eastward expansion as hostile and expansionist, and sought to counter it through diplomatic warnings at the highest level. These were ignored. NATO expansion was not the consequence of some desire by the peoples of the region. The Baltic States, for instance, gained their independence from Moscow in 1991 and maintained it for many years without any threat or danger, without needing to join NATO. Expansion was in fact the result of expensive lobbying of the US Senate by American arms and manufacturers in the 1990s, exposed by the New York Times at the time. It was specifically warned against by George Kennan, architect of the containment of the USSR, who came out of retirement aged 93 to say it was dangerous folly.

Russia's response only became military when NATO countries openly backed the violent overthrow of a non-aligned government in Ukraine in a lawless putsch, and its replacement (contrary to the Ukraine constitution and with armed men present in the Kiev Parliament building) by a pro-NATO regime. Russia's response has in fact been highly limited and cautious. Russia has as legitimate a claim to Crimea (largely populated by Russians who were prevented from voting on their future by the Ukrainian government in 1992) as Britain has to the Falklands, and at least as good a claim as NATO Turkey has to North Cyprus. Russia's troops were stationed in Crimea quite legally in accordance with international treaties.

Russia is undoubtedly using covert and undeclared forces in Ukraine, but it should be pointed out that Western countries have done the same or similar things, notably in the Middle East and SE Asia. It is at the very least likely that NATO countries have also taken (and continue to take) covert action in Ukraine, and in my view laughable to suggest that they have not. But the important thing is that the conflict was initiated by Western, not Russian action. Russia's principal policy since 1989 (dictated by economic weakness which still persists) has been to retreat without violence from the countries it previously occupied. It did so on the basis of what it took to be promises that NATO (an alliance against whom, by the way?) would not expand into the areas from which Russia had withdrawn.

I have no purpose in writing the above except that it is the truth and that (having witnessed some of it) I hate war and wish to ensure that we do not wander into one through stupidity and ignorance. I also have some experience and knowledge of the region, having lived in Moscow from 1990 to 1992 and travelled in the former USSR reasonably extensively. I regard Vladimir Putin as a sinister tyrant, repeatedly say so in unequivocal terms and have no relationship, direct or indirect, with the Russian state or any of its organs. If we are truly so worried about Russian internal politics, it is odd that we were entirely complacent, and even supportive while Boris Yeltsin was using tanks to bombard his own Parliament back in 1993. The fact was that Yeltsin let the west push him around, whereas Putin does not. That, and not Mr Putin's internal regime, is the reason for the change in posture towards Russia. Beware of this stuff. History shows that those who pick fights with Russia are seldom glad that they have done so, once the combat is over.