

HMA Moscow Nigel Casey's interview on UK-Russia relations

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British Ambassador to Moscow Nigel Casey gave an interview about the state and prospects of relations with Russia to RBC outlet on Friday 27 March 2026.

Russia and the UK have gone through different periods in their histories—the countries were allies, and they were at war with each other. How would you characterize these relations now?

It's not what we wanted, it's not the relationship we wanted, it's not the relationship we were trying to build when I was last working here in Moscow 20 years ago, and it's not the relationship that a succession of British Prime Ministers, from Lady Thatcher to Tony Blair, invested a lot of time in trying to build with their Soviet and Russian counterparts in the late 80s, 90s, early 2000s, but I think bilateral relations don't exist in a vacuum.

They are inevitably shaped by the context. And the most important fact in the current context is Russia's invasion of a sovereign European state, and that is, that is the single biggest fact which dominates and defines our current relationship. If and when that ends, the possibility of a different relationship will reopen.

What would London like to see for Russia and its role in the world? What is the current real goal of British policy towards Russia?

We would like normal, predictable relations with Russia, free of threats and hostility. What happens in Russia is none of our business, but how Russia operates globally, especially in Europe, is important. And this is what will determine the future. In the 2000s, there was a broad, positive agenda: science, education, culture, defence, counterterrorism, and climate change. We had ambitious plans. Obviously, circumstances have fundamentally changed, and the key thing we must achieve first and foremost is ending the military conflict in Ukraine. After that, I believe the context will change, and I personally hope that this will gradually allow for the restoration of normal relations.

You mentioned the 1990s and 2000s. Do you consider that the best time for UK-Russia relations?

I first joined the embassy in 2003, when President Vladimir Putin paid a state visit to London. We had a lot of investment in Russian energy – BP and Shell, in particular, were active here. There were also investors in other sectors of the economy. Conversely, investors from Russia were active in the UK. Relations were experiencing a kind of heyday back then. For me, personally, that was a turning point; I saw what could happen. I doubt anything has improved since then.

Do you currently see any interest from British companies in returning to the Russian market?

Businesses are taking a sober view of the Russian market. They've noticed the restrictions imposed on foreign investors. And when it comes to strategic economic sectors, especially energy, it's clear that the context has changed significantly since 2003. They'll be cautious.

How many Russian assets are frozen in the UK, and what share of these funds are held by private individuals, and what's the worth of Russian sovereign assets? The Kremlin has stated that it is prepared to transfer some of the sovereign assets frozen in the US to the Peace Council, with the remaining funds "directed to the restoration of territories damaged during the fighting, after a peace treaty between Russia and Ukraine is concluded." Is the UK prepared to negotiate a similar option with Russia?

The UK does not participate in the Peace Council. Like Russia, we are studying and trying to understand this concept. Therefore, we don't know whether this initiative was serious or more rhetorical.

We worked closely with G7 countries in developing the sanctions. G7 finance ministers have clearly established a link between the future of Russia's frozen assets and the end of Russia's war on compensation. In our understanding, there is a clear connection between these two.

I don't have precise figures on the distribution of assets in the UK. The total value of frozen Russian assets in G7 countries is approximately \$285 billion, and the majority are held in Euroclear. For this reason, we will act in tandem with our G7 partners, although the UK has had a legally autonomous sanctions regime since leaving the European Union.

Is the Peace Council an alternative to the UN?

It's too early to judge. We haven't joined the Peace Council. Like Russia, we're studying it, trying to understand its goals and intentions. We haven't ruled out joining later, but I think it's too early to judge how far its powers will extend and what its impact will be.

If the potential asset unfreezing, as you say, is related to funding the reconstruction of devastated territories, could we be talking about reconstruction on both sides of the line of contact?

To be frank, no one is working on this matter at that level of detail yet.

How do you assess the effects of the sanctions regime on the UK economy? And don't you think the sanctions' impact on Russia is close to exhausting itself, with absurd situations emerging at various levels? Students' tuition payments are being blocked, and even members of the Royal Family, including Princess Eugenie, alongside British businesses are being accused of evading sanctions.

I understand that many consider sanctions a blunt instrument, noting their unintended consequences. But the goal of our sanctions policy is not to punish individual Russians, but to reduce the resources available for waging the war and end it as quickly as possible. The impact of sanctions on the UK economy is not a significant factor. We obtain oil and gas from other sources, primarily from Norway.

Despite rising prices?

This is more related to the current crisis in the Persian Gulf.

In February, you switched to issuing visas primarily electronically. Can you provide up-to-date statistics on visas issued to Russians?

We recently introduced e-visas for the entire world, and this simplifies the process of applying for visas to visit the UK. This means that you only need to visit the visa application centre once instead

of twice. And you can keep your passport while your visa application is processed. In each of the last three years, we have issued over 40,000 visas to Russian citizens, and approximately 93% of all applications were approved. This is a fairly high percentage by global standards.

How are Russians generally treated in Britain, and how are Britons treated in Russia?

There was a strong shock in British society in response to what Russia did in Ukraine. I don't think people understand how we got to this point. But I live in West London, and in my area there's a Russian school, an Orthodox church, and I hear Russian spoken on the street outside my house almost every day, often quite loudly. No one's afraid. Russophobia, in my view, is a myth. It doesn't exist in the UK. And in Moscow, I don't sense any hostility towards the UK or Europe from Russians. I don't encounter any of that in my contacts with Russians.

Did you learn about Russia as a child? How did you react to the prospect of working in Moscow? Has your attitude changed now?

I first came to Russia in 1986, on a school trip to Moscow and then to Leningrad. I still have photographs of myself standing on the bridge right here, with the Kremlin in the background. Like almost every schoolchild in Britain, I studied Russian history; we all read about the Revolution, the Soviet Union's role in defeating Nazism, and Stalin. My mother took me to see *The Nutcracker*.

Russian literature—especially in film—is very popular in Britain. We all grew up with Russian culture and Russian history. I myself grew up perceiving Russia as part of European history, as a major force in European history. And a significant part of European culture—Russian culture is European culture from our perspective. My view hasn't fundamentally changed since I came here.

But the UK trains Ukrainian military personnel, participates in the development of Ukrainian Armed Forces plans and operations, and hasn't ruled out sending its troops to Ukraine. It also supplies Ukraine with weapons, and recently, following the British Storm Shadow missile strikes on Bryansk, you were summoned to the Foreign Office. Does the UK consider Russia an enemy?

We don't use that term or think of Russia in those terms. We say openly and honestly that we view Russia as a threat. The UK's National Security Strategy identifies Russia as the most pressing threat. It's a response to Russia's actions over the past couple of decades: the use of military force in Crimea and Donbas in 2014 and 2015, the war with Ukraine, acts of sabotage, assassinations and assassination attempts, cyberattacks, disinformation. That's how we see the picture from our perspective and respond.

But we don't view Russia as an enemy, and never have. We were allies in both world wars. Last year, I was able to travel to Arkhangelsk and Murmansk to pay tribute to the British soldiers who sacrificed their lives delivering aid to the Soviet Union. This is also our shared memory and part of our heritage. We also think of Russia in those terms.

What's the difference between "enemy" and "threat"?

I think the term "enemy" implies we're seeing something constant. We don't see it that way. We see specific actions by Russia that pose a threat. If those actions change, our perception will change too.

How did the conversation go at the Foreign Ministry after you were summoned there about the strikes on Bryansk?

I'm a diplomat, and I prefer private conversations to remain private. I'd prefer to keep this

discussion between us and the Foreign Ministry.

How do you assess the prospects for a peaceful settlement in the trilateral Russia-Ukraine-US negotiating format?

We fully support this process. The idea that we're trying to undermine it is false. On the contrary, we want it to succeed. We want the military conflict to end at the earliest possible opportunity.

In the context of these negotiations, Russia raised issues that it calls "the root causes of the crisis", which extend beyond Russia-Ukraine relations. These include questions of the European security architecture and relations with NATO.

If you want Europe to be part of a future agreement, you'll have to consult with Europe at some point. That's how international politics works. Therefore, we are in constant dialogue with Washington and Kyiv in order to contribute constructively to this process. We don't want to undermine or replace the current dialogue. We want it to succeed. But in order for it to succeed, we must take into account the interests of Europeans, because the security of the continent is at stake.

Is the trilateral format sufficient, in your view?

The trilateral format is preferable. We support it and are not seeking to join it at this stage. But there must be interaction between this process and us.

Based on the progress of the trilateral negotiations on a settlement in Ukraine, do you believe that an end to the conflict is possible this year?

I hope so. But if we look at the current state of the negotiations from our perspective, it seems that Russia is insisting on its positions without willing to offer a compromise or even a hint of a compromise. Negotiations are about moving towards the position of the other party.

Characterizing Russia's position, how do you assess Donald Trump's statement linking the lack of progress in the negotiations to Volodymyr Zelenskyy's position?

I've been working in Moscow for two years and haven't seen a softening of Russia's position. As a diplomat, I don't think this is the kind of approach that can lead to a deal. Perhaps it's not even intended to be one.

After the American settlement plan emerged, the EU3 developed its own plan. It turned out there were many differences between them. Why? What are the fundamental differences?

I don't see much difference between the US and European approaches. The fundamental issue here is Ukraine's survival as a sovereign state. And that requires security guarantees. Ukraine would like to join NATO. Russia said that was unacceptable. We, together with our American and European colleagues, developed an alternative: the Ukrainians would be able to have strong armed forces of their own, reinforced by a military presence from the UK and other willing parties after a peace agreement, with a guarantee of American support in the event of an attack on these forces.

Russia rejects the presence of NATO or European troops on the ground. But if the alternative is paper guarantees similar to the Budapest Memorandum, then it's unlikely that Ukrainians will be confident that their future is secure.

The "Coalition of the Willing" concept will only be activated in the context of a peace agreement reached by the United States, Ukraine, and Russia. It must be agreed upon by all parties, including

the United States and Russia. And this cannot be done in opposition to what the United States or Ukraine want. I see no contradiction here. Fundamentally, to end the war permanently, we need to develop a framework that guarantees the war will not resume, because the fighting has effectively been going on since 2014, for 12 years now, and a firm end must be reached.

It's complicated. Russia itself can offer something constructive and credible. But if it's the same answer they offered in Istanbul in 2022—namely, a security guarantee over which Russia has veto power—then it's not credible. We need to resolve this issue together, and that's what we're all working on. Russia has repeatedly insisted that this is not a war over territory. We agree—it's a question of Ukraine's sovereignty.

The SVR reported on the possible transfer of British military developments in nuclear technology to Ukraine. London denied this. Even without this context, do you believe Ukraine could possess nuclear weapons? If so, why and under what conditions?

I can repeat that this is a false story that magically appeared on February 24. No, we do not see Ukraine as a nuclear state. It is legally a non-nuclear state under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). We are very firmly committed to the NPT. And we, like Russia, were signatories of the Budapest Memorandum and participants in the withdrawal of the Soviet nuclear arsenal from Ukrainian territory. So the idea that we would now want to return it is completely nonsensical.

How did London react to the recent US decision to ease sanctions against Russian oil? Is the UK participating in consultations on this issue?

We have not advocated for easing sanctions on the Russian energy sector, and this is not our policy.

US President Donald Trump has spoken of his readiness to discuss the process of lifting sanctions against Russia after the conflict in Ukraine ends. Is the UK prepared for this?

I look forward to a collective discussion on the future of sanctions policy at the G7 level, including in the context of a peace agreement. It's difficult to imagine peace in Ukraine being imminent, so this is not a pressing issue at this time.

In a recent BBC interview, you compared Russia to the looking-glass world from Carroll's books. How, in this context, do you explain the difference in the UK's response to Russia's military operation in Ukraine and the US military operations in Venezuela and Iran? Don't you think this resembles a looking-glass policy?

I used this metaphor because Alice in Wonderland has become part of our shared culture, to try to describe for the British what it's like to come from our side of the mirror and live in a world where, contrary to everything we know and believe, the rest of the world is supposedly seeking to destroy Russia. This is simply not the reality we know.

As for Iran and Venezuela, we were not involved in either of these operations. And we have clearly stated our position that the best solution to the Iranian nuclear program is negotiations. Incidentally, in the old days, when I was last here, we worked quite successfully with Russia on this issue. We share the same fundamental position as Russia: Iran must not possess nuclear weapons.

We call for a de-escalation of this war and are deeply concerned about the consequences, just as we are concerned about Iran's attacks on Gulf states that are not involved in military action. I know that in Russia, it's common to hear criticism of the UK for supporting US military operations, but this is not what's happening today.

Yet, the response to the situation in Ukraine, on the one hand, and in Venezuela and Iran, on the other, is radically different.

In both cases, our approach is based on international law. In Ukraine, from our perspective, we are helping to defend against armed attack in accordance with the UN Charter. In the Persian Gulf, we are helping our allies defend against armed attack by Iran in accordance with the UN Charter. I think there is a fundamental consistency here in our broader approach to international relations.

We have not supported, condoned, or participated in US or Israeli actions against Maduro or Ayatollah Khamenei. As for Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy has repeatedly stated that there have been attempts to kidnap and assassinate him. Our policy is based on what we consider legitimate under international law.

Military operations have previously often been explained as a fight for democracy. But Pentagon Secretary Pete Hegseth, in response to the strikes on Iran, said: “No stupid rules of engagement, no nation-building, no democracy-building... we fight to win, and we don’t waste time or lives.” In your view, does this mean that the slogan of fighting for democracy is no longer relevant? Does the UK have this in mind when formulating its foreign policy?

We have never fought wars for democracy. You quoted the US Secretary of State for War, not the British one. In Afghanistan, it was a response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In Iraq, it was a response to Iraq’s alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction. In Libya or Kosovo, it was a response to protecting civilians. The phrase you quote doesn’t define UK policy.

Does the fight for democracy figure in your policy of supporting non-state actors and civil society organizations?

No, we don’t use that term, and it’s certainly not our policy today. You know, we don’t interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, including Russia.

Is the UK considering involvement in a conflict in the Middle East?

We will not be drawn into a wider war in the Persian Gulf. We are consulting with the US and other allies on how to promote the openness of international shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz. These consultations, I would say, are at an early stage, but they will continue. And if a clear and adequate concept emerges, I am confident that the UK, like others, will be ready to play its part.

The UK and France have begun actively creating a new “nuclear umbrella” over Europe, in addition to the US one. In March, it was announced that the UK, like Germany, agreed to host French nuclear forces on its territory. Do you really believe that this reduces the risk of nuclear weapons use or incidents, rather than increasing it?

We have a minimum nuclear deterrent, which has always been tied to NATO. And nothing has changed except that we decided to slightly increase the number of warheads in our arsenal. But we’re talking about a few dozen, a minor change.

This reflects changes in European security: the deployment of Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad and Oreshnik missiles in Belarus, the growth of China’s nuclear arsenal, and the development of missile defence systems. Our goal is to maintain a reliable minimum deterrent to prevent war on the continent. I consider the irresponsible rhetoric we hear from Russian commentators about using nuclear weapons against European cities as a way to wake us up. Anyone who understands anything about nuclear war knows why. We are trying to ensure a deterrent so that it is never needed.

To prevent war, there must be no doubt about Europe's readiness and ability to defend itself. No one in Europe wants a war with Russia. Everyone understands that it would be a catastrophe and must be prevented. We are trying to remove any ambiguity on this issue.

With the expiration of the New START Treaty, Moscow and Washington are talking about the need for a new strategic arms control agreement. The US is insisting on China's inclusion, while Russia is insisting on the UK and France. Is London prepared to do so?

We are committed to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The next Review Conference will soon be held in New York, and it is important that it remains vibrant and effective. In recent decades, it has been supported by the architecture of US-Russian (previously US-Soviet) strategic arms control agreements. Looking at the numbers, including China's significant arms build-up, it doesn't make much sense at this stage of the process to include the nuclear arsenals of the UK or France. We have fewer than 300 nuclear warheads compared to thousands held by the major nuclear powers. It would make more sense to include China first.

France, like the UK, has a strictly defined and limited stockpile of nuclear weapons, and their goal is to make clear that we have deterrence and a response to the threat of nuclear use by another state. This will not fundamentally change. One of the reasons I'm here, and one of the reasons we consider relations with Russia important, is that in situations of heightened tension, it's crucial that we communicate clearly and unambiguously. Misunderstandings are dangerous.

Has the old system of international relations finally broken down? What does London envision for a new one, and does it appreciate the costs—the expenses, the sacrifices—that may accompany its formation?

We live in a more chaotic and unstable world; that's absolutely clear. And we want to try to achieve greater stability, greater predictability in interstate relations, and a greater focus on mutually beneficial outcomes. We haven't abandoned the UN, which is scheduled to elect a new Secretary-General this year. We remain a permanent member of the Security Council, as does Russia, and we have a vested interest in the future of this organization.

I don't think we should rejoice in the chaos and unpredictability of the world. It's bad for our security and prosperity, and it's bad for Russia, too. Our job is to mitigate conflicts, reduce uncertainty and tension, not increase them.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hma-moscow-nigel-caseys-interview-on-uk-russia-relations>