

Warpod: Ep#1 Understanding security trends in Europe and Central Asia with Lord Peter Ricketts and Nargis Kassenova

Welcome to Warpod. A podcast brought to you by Saferworld, asking international experts from around the world about the impact of security policy on contemporary conflict.

In this series we'll be taking a closer look at the big shifts in security policy, examining military interventions, arms control and the impacts of upcoming elections in the UK, US and elsewhere.

I'm Charlie Linney, Project Coordinator in the Arms Unit at Saferworld. And I'm Lewis Brooks, UK Policy and Advocacy Adviser at Saferworld.

To start the series, we're going to take a step back and look at the trends shaping contemporary security policy, what's changed and what hasn't, and the challenges of different approaches.

To help us do this, we've interviewed two experts who bring different perspectives to the table. Lord Peter Ricketts, a former British diplomat of 40 years who was the UK's first National Security Advisor and now chairs the European Affairs Committee in the House of Lords.

And we also spoke to Nargis Kassenova, Senior Fellow and Director of the Programme on Central Asia at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.

We originally intended to record this as one episode but found ourselves wrapped up in really fascinating discussions with both our guests, which we think deserved more time. So, we've split this conversation into two parts.

In episode 1, our guests identified the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a key moment driving security trends. We discussed militarisation in Europe and Central Asia, as well as the potential risks and blind spots of these dynamics. In episode 2, we look at the wider patterns of geopolitical competition and alliances, and we discuss some unreliable approaches to partnerships.

LEWIS: So Charlie, before we turn to our guests, we need to acknowledge that it's 2024, a lot has happened in terms of security

dynamics since our last episode of WarPod. Huge topic, where do we start?

CHARLIE: I think the most obvious place to start is with the conflict in Ukraine following Russia's invasion in February 2022. That's attracted loads of media attention, it's been a huge conflict where we've seen massive civilian casualties, and policy-makers around the world have turned their attention to addressing this conflict.

More recently, we've seen the situation in Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories start to take over news cycles and that has continued to escalate and evolve since we recorded these interviews with our guests.

LEWIS: I guess there's also been a few other crisis moments in conflicts elsewhere, particularly we can think about Nagorno-Karabakh, we can think about Ethiopia, we can think about the upsurge in fighting in Khartoum in Sudan as well, as other moments which perhaps haven't had such transformational impacts on security policy, but governments have still scrambled to try and react to.

CHARLIE: Yeah and we've also seen lots of political crises around the world, for example we saw coups across the Sahel, in Gabon, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad, all of these places since 2021, with varying degrees of success but still really really important.

LEWIS: I mean the Sahel's a really interesting context because as well as those political crises we've also had I guess much more attention on the role of private military companies as well, with the Wagner Group in particular causing headlines and security headaches. But obviously that dynamic's been around for a while, but just kind of renewed interest in it. I guess also there's other types of non-state armed groups as well, and increasing interest in gang violence particularly in places like the Caribbean and South America.

So I guess there's these new events there, some of these dynamics are quite old but continue to be relevant like non-state armed groups, like mercenaries. I guess there's a number of other trends that we could point to here as well.

CHARLIE: Yeah I think we're still seeing the really damaging impact of gender inequality, harmful masculinities and all of these kind of gender dynamics playing out, both in conflict and in non-conflict situations around the world that are having an impact on security policy. Then we can also think about climate change as something that's really started to hit the headlines in the last few years. That might include emissions produced by militaries, but also environmental shifts that are leading to migration, or other challenges for security actors and for governments.

We can think about trends in global health and how that's becoming a bit more securitised, both in terms of the narratives from political decision makers but also in some cases we've seen the direct involvement of the security sector in delivering and responding to crises, particularly if we think about the COVID-19 pandemic.

And then finally I think I wanted to draw out the role of cyber-attacks, disinformation, artificial intelligence and all of these new technologies that are really starting to shift the way both in which conflict is being undertaken and carried out in certain countries, but also in how conflict is impacting people and how it's received by populations.

LEWIS: Ok, thanks Charlie, let's turn to our guests now. We spoke to Lord Peter Ricketts a former British diplomat, and Nargis Kassenova, an academic at Harvard University. We started with Nargis by asking her, what are the most significant policy responses to these events?

NARGIS: Thank you very much, Charlie and Lewis, for inviting me on this podcast. For Central Asia, of course, it is Russia's war against Ukraine that is the most important event among the ones that you listed. It is having a profound impact on the region. And if you look at the bigger picture, it is the political and security order that we were used to in the form that had emerged in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR that has been undermined. And at the foundation of that order was the recognition of existing borders, as we had them in 1991, no matter how imperfect, contested, etc. And for Central Asia, that principle is extremely important for peace and security, since our borders were drawn and redrawn by the Soviet authorities in a pretty arbitrary manner.

And Central Asian states – the five Central Asian states – found themselves embedded in various regional, Eurasian, European and

global security arrangements, treaties, organisations such as Collective Security Treaty Organisation or Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, NATO's Partnership for Peace, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and so on.

And now these arrangements are either undermined or under a lot of stress, and the level of uncertainty is high. How shall we think about our alliances with Russia in the light of the war? And is Russia a potential security threat? If we look at what happened in Nagorno-Karabakh and around it, can we rely on Russia as a security provider? What is the credibility of the Collective Security Treaty Organization? Is the will to provide security there? Does Russia have the capacity to provide such security? And last but not least, can we maintain security partnerships with the West? What will happen to the OSCE? What will happen to the NATO Partnership for Peace? To other bilateral partnership projects?

And of course, it's scary and disorienting, and here I want to discern three policy responses that Central Asians, Central Asian governments have adopted in this new situation. The first one is trying to maintain good relations with Russia while not fully siding with Russia. And we see that in the way Central Asian governments vote in the U.N. General Assembly. Second is deepening relations with other actors such as China, Turkey, EU, US, the Gulf countries, and also diversifying transport routes and so on. And third is regional cooperation inside Central Asia.

CHARLIE: I really like the points that Nargis made there. I think the last two specifically feel as if they really summarise the position that Central Asian countries find themselves in. That simultaneous balancing of relations with both Russia and the West, and also this desire to seek new or deeper relationships with countries like China, Turkey, the Gulf States and others.

So we asked the same question about shifts in security policy to Lord Peter Ricketts and here's his answer.

LORD PETER RICKETTS: I was a British diplomat for 40 years, and I think the world is more dangerous and more unpredictable than at any time in my career. I certainly never knew a time where there were so many crises going on simultaneously, pulling policymakers in different directions. And for us in Europe, the war in Ukraine has been a massive upheaval. I think it's actually the most intense fighting in Europe since

1945. And you can see the impact that has had on all the security actors.

It's brought America back to European security in a way it hasn't been for many years, reinforcing American troops in Europe, a much more active diplomatic engagement on and supporting Ukraine as well. And in European countries, I think in Germany particularly, they have moved further in the first three months of the war than they did in 30 years, in looking at Germany as not just an economic superpower and a soft power player in the world, but having to face up to the fact that they need to develop their security and their defence power.

Europe has been weaned off dependence on Russian gas, which is another strategic upheaval, actually accomplished very quickly. NATO is now larger and more united than I've ever known it, I first started working in NATO in 1978, and so the Western security structures have responded effectively to this massive upheaval. The question is, how long can that be sustained? Is it durable, and will it lead to shifts in European thinking about security that will outlast the Ukraine war?

LEWIS: Charlie, Peter has mentioned the huge transformation in Germany's security outlook there. Are there any specific components of that that you want to tease out?

CHARLIE: Yeah I think we've seen Germany really, for example, increasing its defence spending over the last few years and also starting to play a slightly harder role than it used to in its arms export policy, both in terms of how it approaches European joint manufacturing and exporting and also from its own national export perspective. And I think that's really interesting and definitely something within Europe that has been noticed as a definite shift.

I think the other thing I'd like to draw on that Peter mentioned in his segment there was about this question that he ended on of how long can this be sustained, and is it durable? That for me is really the big question on people's minds when they're thinking about security policy in Europe and these kind of trends towards increased militarisation. So we asked him to go into a bit more detail on that.

LORD PETER RICKETTS: I think there are some quite complex trends at work. The Ukraine war brings the security focus in Europe back to

Europe. NATO is back to its original purpose, which is territorial defence in Europe, and ensuring deterrence against Russian aggression. Of course, also since the Cold War, most European countries took a massive peace dividend and actually cut their defence spending very sharply, and the readiness of their armies. We found now that we need to be rebuilding that. And so we're in a period, both of defence coming home to our own continent, and also having to step back up to a higher level of defence spending, both for resilience for our own armed forces and also to help Ukraine in the future. So those two things, I think, are quite powerful.

LEWIS: This shift to a European focus on European security is not risk-free, and it's here that Peter starts to turn to the risks of this big uplift in defence spending.

LORD PETER RICKETTS: I think there's a big question about how long European commitment to rearmament, to increasing defence spending, giving it higher relative priority in national budgets, how long that will last beyond the war in Ukraine.

Ukraine, after all, is a very exceptional war for European countries right on our doorsteps. Incredibly intensive, huge loss of life, cities smashed to pieces. When that is over – as it will be at some point, we don't know what kind of settlement yet – will the will to find the resources, to sustain a higher level of militarisation, if you like, of increased emphasis on the defence, the hard power element, will that continue? I don't know the answer to that because there will always be many, many competing pressures for national budgets.

And so I think for Europe in particular, less for America, there is a real question, have we passed a turning point? Are we going back to a permanent basis of higher defence spending, larger armed forces, larger stockpiles of weapons? In which case, what are we going to cut from national budgets to achieve that? And how are we going to adapt to the lessons of the Ukraine war in terms of military, which is actually that a lot of rather cheaper things like drones are probably more effective than a few very, very expensive latest generation fighter jets. There's an awful lot that Western countries have to absorb.

I myself am not certain that we will see a continued upward momentum in defence and security once the immediate crisis in Ukraine is passed.

CHARLIE: So we discussed this increasing trend of military build-up in Europe with Nargis as well, and she highlighted that this isn't just a phenomenon in Europe, it's impacting countries elsewhere.

NARGIS: Well, there is militarisation and securitisation in Europe, but there is also militarisation and securitisation in Eurasia, in our part of the woods. And it is, of course, very, very worrying.

We see the national governments investing in the military sector, investing in acquiring new weapons, new weapons systems. Now, the acquisition of drones is a big thing, Turkish drones are particularly popular.

And given the existing conflict potential in the region, this militarisation is worrying. And speaking of the conflict potential, first and foremost, I would refer to the ongoing border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Over the past years, there have been armed clashes on border. And if both sides securitise the issue of the border disputes that can have pretty bad consequences for the countries themselves and for the region at large.

We see some good signs lately as well. The Kyrgyz and Tajik governments made some good statements saying that they are moving ahead with the negotiations. But of course, the problem is not gone yet.

CHARLIE: And so we wanted to ask Nargis, what is driving this military and equipment build-up in Central Asia? Is it being driven by outside powers pushing for security allies in the region, or is it something within the region itself that's driving this build-up?

NARGIS: Russia's invasion of Ukraine created even more insecurities and also doubt that Russia can play the role of a regional security provider. We saw what happened in Nagorno-Karabakh, that Russia could not protect its ally, Armenia that was also a Collective Security Treaty Organization member. Apart from that, there was a bilateral treaty between Russia and Armenia. So basically Armenia was a client state and nevertheless it lost the war, it was defeated.

Linked to Russia, and to some extent I would also put Iran into the picture, there is certain militarisation on the Caspian Sea and while

growing insecurity in the Black Sea – of course we are not littoral Black Sea littoral states – but the transport routes that connect us to European markets, to other markets, we do need access to the Black Sea. So it's a big trend, it's a big trend primarily around the region, but to some extent it affected us as well.

LEWIS: So I think it's really interesting that we have these two military build ups, one in Central Asia and one in Europe, simultaneously happening, linked to each other but also with their own dynamics.

Now neither of our guests thought that there was this imminent threat of those build ups cascading into open conflict but obviously there needs to be some caution in ensuring that there's not an escalation.

I also think there's a really interesting point about Central Asian governments questioning their long-standing security relationships with Russia, and definitely something to keep an eye on.

CHARLIE: Yeah, I think that's a really good point, and something that Peter mentioned earlier which is this real problem that policymakers are now going to have to contend with, is how to balance that heightened military spending alongside all of the other pressing issues of the 21st century in a way that doesn't exacerbate conflict but helps to prevent and counter the associated risks. So, we asked Peter for his thoughts on how governments could better balance these priorities.

LORD PETER RICKETTS: Military operations don't achieve political objectives. For that, you need a plan that follows military action and that can deliver stability and reconstruction – all the needs of conflict countries. I think there's a real concern that while military spending is rising, development aid is going down, particularly strongly in the UK, in other countries as well. And the climate change priority is being downgraded as a result of high energy prices and public attention on other things.

So I think that by addressing the direct military threats that are right in front of us, we risk neglecting the investment in development work, in climate finance to enable poorer countries to adjust and adapt to the requirements of lower carbon economies, global health. I think all of those risk suffering as governments scramble to spend enough on defence, as well as all the other domestic priorities.

CHARLIE: So I think some of those points that Peter made on climate change are really important, and it's interesting because this is something that we mentioned at the beginning of the episode, but we didn't directly bring it up with either of our guests.

Peter discussed the climate issue in relation to economies and changing priorities with climate finance and other types of government spending. Whereas climate change also came up in our discussion with Nargis, however, rather than focussing on domestic spending and the implication for national budgets, she spoke about the urgent need to address the impacts of climate change around the world, particularly in Central Asia.

NARGIS: It is a very big problem because Central Asia will be among regions of the world most affected by climate change. Many areas of Central Asia are arid areas, and they might become hyper-arid. There is a looming water shortage, the glaciers have been melting at a very alarming pace.

So it is a huge issue. The governments are aware, and if you look at the rhetoric of the leaders, if you look at the programmes that have been adopted, if you look at the pledges that the Central Asian governments have made. All of us, all the five states are part of the global processes, and we have the nationally determined contributions. Kazakhstan made the pledge to decarbonize by 2060, and so on and so forth. So there is an awareness among the governments, less so among the public, but I think it is growing.

CHARLIE: Another key trend that we mentioned at the start of the episode was disinformation and misinformation. So at Saferworld – as an organisation working in conflict-affected countries around the world – this is something that we've heard time and time again from our colleagues and partners.

We're now at the stage where we can all recognise the link between disinformation and security, whether that's through government propaganda which harms social cohesion and trust in institutions, or foreign influence through media and social media. All of these things can

have a really destabilising influence on countries, particularly those with conflict or underlying tensions.

Nargis had a lot to say on the role of media and disinformation or misinformation in Central Asia.

NARGIS: Well, Central Asia has been in Russia's media space, in Russia's cultural space. So, of course, the local societies, many people inside these countries are consumers of Russian media. And Russian media nowadays is extremely, extremely toxic. So there is definitely some impact and there are divisions – divisions inside the societies with some people listening to Russian propaganda and believing it, while others are consuming their news elsewhere and being pro-Ukrainian.

So we do see, we do see these divisions. It is propaganda. It is disinformation. So definitely that's an issue in the regions and the governments are aware of the problem, but they somewhat undercut themselves. Being authoritarian states, they have been suppressing independent media for many years, for decades, which made the positions of Russian media strong. So we didn't have much to help us counterbalance Russian propaganda.

But at the same time, there is independent media. And although they are under constant pressure, they are doing their job. And the societies I think are more awakened now, and if you look at the youth, I think they are less susceptible to propaganda. So there is also a generational kind of generational factor that plays into it. So it is a battlefield.

LEWIS: So we've got disinformation and misinformation, as well as media freedom and clamp-downs on the media more generally as these big issues in Central Asia. Clearly those are issues we've seen in other contexts as well, and I think, you know are a reoccurring feature of different conflict dynamics, as well as authoritarian societies.

So what's interesting here is we also have a set of issues that risk being ignored whilst there is this military build-up and this militarisation. So that clearly links to what Peter and Nargis were saying about climate change. It also harkens back to something that Peter said about the declining aid budget, particularly in the UK but we've seen other donors as well threatening to cut back their development budgets or reassign them.

And so I think we've ended up with, yes a focus on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and these big policy shifts to respond to that, but we've also seen an undercurrent of other dynamics that are changing and possibly that risk being overshadowed to the detriment of global security.

Charlie, as we think back about this episode, is there anything else that struck you in the conversation that's come up?

CHARLIE: Well I think it's not a surprise that there's been a lot focus on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I think if we look at the security policy landscape at the moment, it's easy to see why Western policy makers and analysts and experts have placed such an emphasis on that conflict. It's spurred a lot of change – and rapid change – in Western policymaking.

And of course the conflict in Ukraine is still relevant, but as the situation in Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories continues to escalate, we're seeing policymakers being pulled in different directions in terms of their attention.

But I think this episode has started to reveal a few blind spots, for example as you said the climate change and also the issues of disinformation and misinformation.

I think these are some of the points that I'm keen to delve deeper into in episode two, some of these broader points like other conflicts around the world, for example the Sahel.

I think it will also be good to pick up on some of the points that our guests started to make about partnerships. So, for example, we heard about Russia's role as a security guarantor and how that's changing since the invasion of Ukraine. Nargis also mentioned the role of Turkey, China and the Gulf states in the Middle East, as countries that are starting to step up and fill that security vacuum.

LEWIS: Yeah I can't wait to delve into those areas as well Charlie. For me, as you know I'm a massive UK policy and advocacy nerd. So, I'm really intrigued to understand how the UK and US elections in 2024 are going to impact some of the security policy trends that we've discussed so far. And luckily, we asked Peter and Nargis about this, which will feature in episode two as well.

CHARLIE: That's all we've got time for, catch the rest of the interviews in the next episode.

Warpod, from Saferworld.

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