

Interview transcript: Peter Jennings, Paul Dibb and Kyle Wilson, 31 January 2022

Peter Jennings: Well, I'm joined with Paul Dibb and Kyle Wilson. Gents, thanks very much for joining ASPI today. Let's start, Paul, with you. Is a Russian invasion of Ukraine inevitable?

Paul Dibb: I don't know whether it's inevitable, but some nasty reaction from Putin is almost guaranteed. We might talk about this quickly later, but we need to remember Ukraine has a population of 44 million. It's not a small country; it's not one of the Baltic countries. There are about eight million people that are declared Russian citizens as far as I know. A full-scale invasion, let alone an occupation of Kyiv, a city of three-plus million, is in my view will bog them down. But that does not mean to say, underlined, that he isn't going to do something nasty and we can discuss what that might be.

Jennings: Okay. Kyle, your perspective on the inevitability of an invasion?

Kyle Wilson: Without wanting to be pedantic about it, it seems to me that what's important here is our definition of invasion. I agree, of course, with what Paul has said, and it seems to me that the likelihood of the traditional sense of invasion—that is, sending divisions of infantry and armour into Ukraine—is unlikely. Presumably, some of the military options must have been put to him by the general staff, and you can't help suspecting that the notion of taking the Black Sea littoral south through Mariupol to the isthmus in Crimea and even further to Odessa must be very tempting. But it seems to me that given that under the new Russian doctrine of new-generation warfare, they've essentially repackaged Sun Tzu and said the best way to win a war is not to have to fight one. And we know that there are now many other ways of fighting wars in their collective head, so it seems to me that that notion of the traditional invasion across the plains is very unlikely.

One final comment would be that the way I read the travel advice that the Americans and our own government have given to their citizens, suggesting they leave, well, that suggests to me that there's a fair bit of classified information to which we don't have access, and it seems to me that extrapolating from that underlines Paul's point, that he's now so committed that he is contemplating something.

Jennings: Something is going to happen. What I have found curious—and Paul, this is for you—is we've now been in this situation at least since Christmas, with the 120,000 troops. Some extra numbers now going into Belarus as well. Do you think Putin is now starting to hesitate when it comes to military action? And if so, why would that be happening?

Dibb: I'd be interested to hear Kyle's reaction on that. Hesitancy is not a descriptor of a KGB *rezident*. I think the key response to your question is he's now getting precisely from the West what he wants. He's now acknowledged as the head of a major power, not some small European country, and he's had Biden in virtual talks twice. He's had the head of NATO, Stoltenberg, he's had Macron, the new German foreign minister, he's back for Russia to be recognised as a great power. That in itself is a big win for him. Whether he will react soon, I know there's a lot of talk about next month. And again, Kyle knows better than me, if you were to mount a traditional military operation, you've got to do it, unless things have changed, before the *rasputitsa*, the melting of the ice, which makes the roads impassable. But that's a fair distance away.

He could be waiting. He's playing this game like a trout fisherman. He flows out the lure of a draft treaty, no less, between Russia and the United States demanding that NATO not expand to Ukraine, and demanding that NATO military equipment and forces in Poland and the three Baltic republics be removed. Now, that in itself, and they were cleverly written pieces of work. The other one was the

agreement with NATO along the same lines. So, he's getting more attention right now than Xi Jinping—a much greater power, to say the least. But the key question is your first one, under what conditions might he use some form of different military force, as he used in Georgia, particularly in the Crimea, little green men and women with no badges of rank, committing sabotage operations, and that those sabotage operations might include killing some of his own people.

Classic KGB disinformation operation, which he did—and Kyle would know this better than me—in Moscow with the destruction of high-rise buildings with regard to Chechnya, that's a different story. But he could mount massive, overwhelming cyberattacks, and you know and I know that Russia is very, very good at cyber.

Jennings: Kyle, just to get your perspective on this. The pause, if it lasts long enough, can start to look like weakness, don't you think? What's Putin's plan here?

Wilson: Yes, I wish I knew. I could probably earn some money by selling some platinum-quality analysis. We don't know, but we can seek the truth from facts. We know that this is a long campaign that started back in April last year when we had the first build-up of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border followed by Putin's, for many people, bizarre article, 5,000-word article, published in July last year in three languages including Ukrainian. People I think were startled and puzzled by it. He follows up in November with the statement for the second time, 'I'm sick of this. I've had enough of this, we're put pushing forward.' Then, as Paul says, comes the ultimatum, the treaties, et cetera. I'm not a military person. I don't really understand military issues, and these are crucial here. But one thing's obvious to the lay observer, that this has been a long, slow, steady build-up, unlike 2014.

So this is a long-term strategic plan and at the same time, there's all sorts of things happening which we don't know about because they're classified. So I'd hesitate to use the word hesitancy. It seems to me, and I like what Paul said, he's thrown out this challenge and it seems to me that that was a key decision. Throw out the challenge, see how the adversaries respond, and we will adjust our strategy for round three or round four from what we learn about what they might do. So it seems to me, there's a degree of improvisation here. That said, here he is on record as having said that he wants two things: he wants the abolition of NATO and he wants a friendly government in Kyiv. And so it seems to me, nothing stops. Whatever else is in place to try and achieve that—diplomacy, the cyberattacks, the subversion, the buying of influence, the corruption, the exploitation—all that is presumably continuing.

Jennings: One adversary response has been considering tougher sanctions against Russia, and Kyle, I'm interested in your perspective on that. Russia's been under sanctions since 2014. Is this really something that has the capacity to deter Putin from military action?

Wilson: I think no. Why? We know that as part of this long-term strategy, he's built up a war chest. Over \$600 billion worth of foreign exchange reserves.

Jennings: Yeah.

Wilson: \$180-plus billion in a contingency plan. My sense is that Putin is probably ambivalent about sanctions. On the one hand, they are an insult to great Russia. On the other hand, they're useful. Import substitution has proved useful to him. It seems a reasonable conclusion that he's among those Russians who is attracted by the idea of autarky. We don't want to be dependent on anyone, we want to be self-sufficient. Sanctions help us to be self-sufficient. Diplomatically, of course, the Russians have to condemn them and condemn them vociferously, which of course is double

standards because no country has used sanctions with more alacrity and enthusiasm than Russia. But, no. So I think the answer to your question is, no, it won't deter him.

Dibb: And Kyle, you may remember when you and I were in Moscow five years ago, the sanctions had just been put on and we saw the way in which in the shops, Russian-grown fruit and vegetables, and whatever, were substituting, which in a way is the point you're making. In addition to the \$628 billion US in foreign currencies, gold and what have you, my information is, sure, for the last four or five years the Russian economy has scarcely grown. But this is a nation used to hardship on occasions, and as a source of mine in Moscow reminded Kyle and I recently, the weather's not bad, the shops are full, vodka is on sale, we will manage. The other economic point by the way, is the price of oil is crucial for managing his budget. He needs it to be at least \$40 US a barrel. What is it now? \$90 and going up, and the same applies to natural gas. And there's another story about natural gas and the weakness of that NATO country, Germany.

Jennings: It's probably timely to bring China into the picture as well, Paul, because clearly China, it looks to be backing Russia to some extent, certainly is at a public level and won't be party to sanctions. So, in a tougher sanctions regime, is China the salvation for Russia at this point?

Dibb: I won't use the word salvation, but as you recall, I've written for ASPI at least for three years now about how the West was ignoring this strategic alignment. It is not a formal alliance, but even Russians whom Kyle and I respect are describing it as a de facto alliance. That doesn't mean to say that they agree on everything. If I recall correctly, Xi Jinping was careful about what he said about Crimea, didn't endorse it. Russia's been careful about the South China Sea, hasn't endorsed China's view. But if push comes to shove, and we're at that situation now, frankly, two authoritarian, powerful countries, one very powerful economically, the other very powerful militarily, see the weaknesses of the Western alliance. Frankly, who actually believes that America is going to put troops into Ukraine to fight against Russians?

And if they do, by the way, they'll get wiped out. I've got a lot of respect of how Putin and his defence minister have brought back the strength of the Russian military. It's not the former Soviet Union, but it has some different cards up its sleeve, which we can talk about. So, the China issue, I thoroughly expect them to align on this issue. Putin, is it this week he's going to Beijing for the Winter Olympics?

Jennings: He'll be in Beijing on Friday for the opening of the Winter Olympics.

Dibb: Okay, well, the attack won't occur then. But I think a number of commentators I've noticed have picked up this idea about, so does Putin hit Ukraine in some way or another? And we agree in some way or another he will. And this is a bigger question, will Xi Jinping hit Taiwan even more vigorously now than 50 aircraft a day penetrating their air identification zone? That is the key question.

Jennings: Let's talk about the overall strategic objectives of Putin in this game. And I'm also interested in how you think he sees this from a personal perspective. He's now in his early 70s, he looks pretty healthy.

Wilson: 69.

Jennings: 69. Looks pretty healthy. I'm not seeing a challenge to his domestic political situation anytime soon. But Kyle, let's start with you, and in as crisp way as you can, what is the strategic objective for Putin in this situation?

Wilson: Trying desperately to avoid sounding glib and superficial, it's to win and to win in his terms. There's an old Russian saying no cloud without a silver lining, *net khuda bez dobr*. And one of the silver linings, it seems to me, is that the commentators, particularly those who take a favourable view of Putin and his policies, have stopped talking about demonising Putin. The argument has always been that we have exaggerated his relative importance within the Russian political culture that he has refashioned, and that we should be talking about the limits on his power. Well, it seems to me now it's absolutely clear that the decisions are being taken by one man and one man alone.

You've got to be a little careful here about analysing Putin, and I for one have a tendency to attach probably too much weight to personal experiences, but back in 2016, when Paul and I were in Moscow, thanks to his initiative, there was a conversation between the most influential Australian in Russia, whose name was Glenn Waller, and he was the president of ExxonMobil, and one of the representatives of liberal opinion in Russia. I'd better not name him, but this was a man who sees Putin regularly, has a great respect for Putin. And Glenn said to him, 'What in your view makes Putin tick?' And this man said, 'Vladimir Putin is a Brezhnev-era KGB officer who is thirsting for retribution for the humiliation of the Soviet army in Afghanistan, the humiliation of the loss of the Cold War and the serial humiliations meted out to Russia in the 1990s. That seemed to me to be an acute comment that there's something inside Putin, although the word used about him often is 'pragmatic', there's something inside him which burns. And one could go further down that track.

And the final point I'd make is that undoubtedly Putin is said to be a student of history; he certainly writes about Russian history. And I wonder whether he has read the famous account of Genghis Khan, the only man successfully to invade Russia. Others may have invaded, but they failed. They were beaten eventually, but Genghis Khan wasn't. Genghis Khan, according to the secret book of the Mongolians, he asked his court, 'In what lies happiness?' And his answer was, 'Happiness lies in savouring the humiliation and suffering of your defeated enemies.' And so it seems to me that's what Mr Putin wants. He said, 'I want to reverse the outcome of the Cold War.' That's where he's heading. Apart from that, he needs to stay in power.

Dibb: Also one of the differences in the Soviet era, even under Stalin, there was a politburo. They were captive in Stalin's time, but in the Brezhnev and post-Brezhnev bureaucratic politburo, there is no politburo. There's him surrounded by his KGB adoration crowd. And that is an important difference. He hears what he wants to hear, and whether we like it or not, as Kyle said, the humiliation of the former Soviet Union, we need to remember what a huge military power it was—12,000 strategic nuclear warheads, 300 divisions, 280 submarines, including, by the way, 94 nuclear-powered attack submarines, familiar figure for you. But he quotes other things in a book I'm currently reading. At the height of '91, as Russia was begging, Gorbachev was begging, for economic aid, and George Bush was getting advice from his people like Gates and others that this was just a pretense situation, as the whole damn country collapsed. And one of the quotations that I hold in mind in '91 September is Nicholas Brady, the secretary of the US Treasury, saying to George Bush, 'Let's not waste money on trying to save this Soviet Union place. We should aim to see it reduced to a third-rate power.' Now, if I know that, he knows that. It's not to excuse him; it's to try and answer your question as to what motivates this man.

Jennings: Well, from the big strategic to the tactical. This is the 31st of January, let's have some fearless predictions. Gentlemen, are we going to see conflict this week? Do you think, Paul?

Dibb: No. But next month, starting tomorrow, for all sorts of reasons, I think, and I could be really wrong, is highly likely. We're seeing field ambulances and blood supplies being forward-deployed. Kyle knows that I have a particular obsession about this, one of my key intelligence indicators, which

I've raised with ONI, is the 76th Guards Airborne Assault Division at a place called Pskov, which is within sight of the Estonian border, has got units in, guess where? Belarus. They spearheaded the assault in Crimea and parts of the Donbas, and I think in '79 in Kabul, but I stand corrected. Now, whereabouts, because I don't have the classified information neither does Kyle, if I saw elements of that division, which is a key intelligence indicator, it's in Belarus, if it's in the very southern part of Belarus, do you want to know the distance from the southern Belarus border to Kyiv? How about 20 kilometres.

Jennings: Kyle, conflict this week?

Wilson: No, but I've been proved wrong in the past. In this context, I'd just like to offer a point. It seems to me that you can reasonably argue that what Putin is doing is in fact very bad policy. That if he was seeking to strengthen NATO, to drive, say, Finland and Sweden into NATO, then he couldn't be doing a better job. And some people, analysts whom Paul and I respect, for instance, Bobo Lo, they see Putin's Ukraine strategy as his greatest failure. And now as you published some surmises of mine recently in ASPI, and one was just the point that some Russians, one of whom, an authoritative Russian figure called Kortunov, whom Paul and I know and respect, has actually said, in so many words, 'This is unwise policy. If we don't want other former neighbours of ours, former friends of ours, to join NATO, then we should be offering some alternative that would reduce the allure of NATO and make them change their attitude.'

Well, Putin, if there's one thing that he has achieved, in a country which is fragile—because Ukraine is, we know, highly fragile—if he's seeking a failed state in Ukraine, he's achieving exactly the opposite. So, I guess my gut feeling is that this looks like unwise policy to me. It's all in Putin's head; we can't read it. And the final point I would make is that, and again, this is not my view, it's a common view, that the beneficiary of all this is likely to be China. Because everyone else loses and China wins.

Dibb: And in the meantime, China, however, is suffering some of the same misjudgements in a different way from Putin. Look at how it's not just Australia, Japan, America, Canada, but it's a lot of the Asian countries are now waking up to the coming threat and pushing us off Xi Jinping and even the Europeans are waking up to that. So there's a couple of parallels there.

Jennings: A final question to the both of you about Australia. Should Australia be doing anything more than the little it is right now with regard to Ukraine? We are providing apparently some cyber help to Ukraine. And obviously we're making diplomatic statements calling for peace and calmness. Paul?

Dibb: I'm a bit torn on this, but when push comes to shove, there's only one answer, contrary to some of my academic colleagues. And that is, although we're a strategic partner of NATO and therefore if a NATO country or one associated with it is attacked, in the name of democracy, you'd expect us to think about making some contribution. But as Neville Chamberlain said, that's a long way away to a country that most people in Australia can't put on a map. I was sadly amused by the extremely wet German decision to send 5,000 helmets. Really. And I see that, that bolshy Tory Johnson is going to send some fighting equipment and maybe some troops. Well, again, if they're in one of the Baltic countries, the Russians could wipe them out very, very quickly.

So, the issue is we should make some things like cyber contribution, maybe some, we don't have military equipment worth exporting, but some advice in certain areas and information. But I imagine that's being done at the Five Eyes level in any case. The more important one is that you and I know

we must be ready no matter what happens in Ukraine, and I'm not belittling it, if push comes to shove in Taiwan, that's where we should focus.

Jennings: Kyle, your thoughts on Australia and the current situation?

Wilson: I thoroughly agree with what Paul said. It seems to me, the best support we can give the Ukrainians is to confirm their sovereignty. And we do that by maintaining an embassy in Kyiv. We have an embassy in Kyiv only by chance, mischance, because of the accidental tragedy of MH70. Otherwise, we wouldn't have an embassy there, but we do. It seems to me what we should do is let the Ukrainians know that we're in for, if not the long haul, at least the medium haul, that embassy will continue, it will be funded. And I'd be inclined, it's an embassy of two people—I don't know if you're aware of this, but the present government has this policy of very small missions of two people each; I think it's bad policy myself because at any one time, one of them is going to be sick or on leave—but I would suggest that we tell the Ukrainians that, yes, we are here, we support your sovereignty. Our embassy will continue.

And I would send another officer to Kyiv, because at the moment we have only two. By sending a third, we also send a very clear signal to the Russians. The only other thing I would do, and I'm sure that Paul is in clamorous agreement with me here, is that we simply need to be aware that, since the fall of the Soviet Union, we have tended to get the judgement on Russia's relative political importance, strategic importance to Australia wrong. I'm not suggesting for a moment that we should exaggerate the importance, but what we should be bearing in mind is that I think for the Russians, although we are not an important target, we are a significant target, a significant country. We are certainly a target of sustained espionage. Because historically we have been a second source of espionage. So, we should be continuing to think about how what Russia is doing is affecting us and giving, I think, relatively more weight to Russia in the wider scheme of things.

Jennings: Well, gentlemen, it's a fascinating conversation, and in fact, I'd like to continue it in a couple of weeks by getting you back so that we can see what's happening. Thanks for joining us.