

Lord Howell calls for ‘Mobilizing the world, not just the West, to halt Putin the pariah – Speech to the Lords 25.02.22

My Lords, like others, I greatly look forward to the maiden speech of the noble Lord, Lord Sedwill, in this debate.

It seems generally agreed that the Prime Minister’s speech on sanctions yesterday was a fine one, as was Keir Starmer’s. This package of sanctions now, although massive, will not be enough. More will clearly be needed—of all kinds; not just financial but on control of supply chains.

It is also fairly clear—to me, anyway—that Mr Putin is losing some of his grip on reality, which is extremely dangerous, with his rambling speech to his people and his threat of consequences never experienced before in history, which seems to come very near to implying the use of tactical nuclear weapons. This really is moving out of the realm of sane and rational calculation. It is said that Mr Putin is supposed to be a very religious man, but I see nothing religious at all in what he is now doing in Ukraine.

I remain concerned about one key aspect of our stance and the western stance. Too many people seem to talk about this as a European crisis, when of course it is actually an Asian crisis and a wider world crisis, not just a NATO matter or a replay of the Cold War and 20th-century East-West confrontation. The world has changed totally since then. Although obviously we need a united NATO—I hope Germany can be kept on board despite the pressures on it about gas—we need a wider unity than that. I slightly disagree with the noble Lord, Lord Newby, about that point.

People keep forgetting that Russia is half an Asian nation. It really is essential to co-ordinate all trading, business and supply chain sanctions with the major Asian players. I was very glad to see the Foreign Secretary speaking today, apparently, not just to Australia, India, Malaysia and Japan but even to China, the other great Asian power. They are so clearly all threatened by a new world war as much as the rest of us—indeed, even more so because that is where all their growth will be in future and war would undermine it.

Britain should be able to use all our Asian and Commonwealth connections to make a real contribution on this front. If all our sanctions are simply neutered by major Asian economies carrying on business as usual with Russia, western sanctions will have very little deterrent effect on Mr Putin,

frankly. I suspect he probably calculated that before he embarked on all this. I was very glad to hear the noble Lord, Lord Ricketts, a former Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Office, make this very point about our world involvement on the “Today” programme on the radio yesterday. It seems the message is really getting through on that vital point.

My second concern is that the crisis should be a real wake-up call on the need for this country to have a proper energy security policy. Russian gas via Ukraine has not yet been cut off, but it will be at any moment. When it is, all gas prices—which are already crucifying us—will soar ahead even further. Because we import so much gas, not necessarily from Russia but from world markets, and use so much for our electricity—much too much—we will be hit very hard again. There is no reason at all why this nation should not be able to regain a full energy security and food security policy, despite all the past colossal errors. We should have a clear plan and a strategy for doing so as from now. One final hopeful outcome that one looks for in this horror could be that, if we play this right, we will want neither Russia’s gas nor its oil. It can keep them. I hope that at least that message will get through.

In all this let us never forget that our enemy is not the Russian people but the leader they have who has grown into a pariah amongst humankind.