

Remarks by George Kent, Deputy Assistant Secretary in the European and Eurasian Bureau at the U.S. Department of State, delivered at the July 16th event at the American Foreign Policy Council to mark the 5th anniversary of the MH 17 shootdown tragedy.

"This week is a time of looking to the skies and remembering. On a positive note, fifty years ago today, Apollo 11 took off for the moon, leading to Neil Armstrong's giant leap for mankind. On a decidedly more negative note, tomorrow marks the fifth anniversary of the shoot down of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH 17 over eastern Ukraine, a giant step backward for the rules-based international order, and the tragic death of 298 from nine countries.

As we speak today, the United Nations Security Council is meeting to discuss Ukraine. You can be assured the United States and other friends of Ukraine and the rule of law will call on Russia to account for its role in the downing of MH 17, reminding Russia of the Security Council's demand that: "those responsible...be held to account and that all states cooperate fully with the efforts to establish accountability." We will also underscore unwavering U.S. support for Ukraine in the face of ongoing Russian aggression.

I look forward to today's panel discussions on Russian disinformation and hybrid warfare; we are particularly fortunate to have Aric Toler from Bellingcat, which has done so much to marshal open source information to tell the story of the forces behind the MH-17 shoot down. I welcome all of your thoughts on how the United States and our allies can better respond, and how Ukraine can improve its resiliency.

What Western experts have dubbed "hybrid warfare" is not a term that exists in Russian doctrine, it is worth pointing out. Regardless of what you call it, the full spectrum of aggression has been on display in Ukraine for the past five years: conventional; special forces; dirty war acts of assassination and bombings; cyber attacks; the weaponization of information, disinformation, and energy; as well as more traditional levers of economic, political, and diplomatic pressures.

Similar tactics have also been employed elsewhere in Europe, from the Baltics to the Balkans, and beyond, but Ukraine remains the primary front line. The collective need to counter such Russian malign influence, and to be prepared to do so over the long haul, is clear.

It's now more than five years since Russia occupied Crimea and instigated a conflict in eastern Ukraine. Yet the international community is still grappling with how to adequately counter a revisionist, aggressive Russia.

Russia adamantly opposes Ukraine's trajectory toward the West. Since 2014, Russia has carried out a multifaceted campaign to destabilize Ukraine with the goal of establishing a neo-imperial sphere of influence and denying Ukraine the right to choose its own destiny, or an orientation independent from Russia.

It is perhaps worth recalling what led to the shoot down of MH 17 on July 17, 2014. When former Ukrainian President Yanukovych refused to sign an EU Association agreement under Russian pressure in 2013, Ukrainians rose in what came to be known as the “Euromaidan” protests throughout the winter of 2013-2014; Yanukovych fled to Russia in February 2014.

Even before Yanukovych had departed Ukrainian soil, Russia had launched its takeover of Crimea, employing not only special forces but systematic disinformation and erosion of the concept of truth – in Peter Pomerantsev memorable phrase: “nothing is true, and everything is possible.” Russian special forces were referred to slyly as “little green men” or “polite people.” Manufactured results were branded a “referendum.”

Flush with its illegal seizure and occupation of Crimea and blatant contravention of a core international principle--that no country can change the borders of another by force--Russia then weeks later launched a war in eastern Ukraine, which to date has caused the deaths of approximately 13,000 people.

Russia set the stage for the shoot down of MH 17 by financing, organizing, and leading proxies in eastern Ukraine. To this day, Russia continues to deny the presence of its forces and materiel in non-governmental controlled areas of eastern Ukraine.

The Russian lies are regularly exposed by reports from the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in Ukraine. The SMM have on numerous occasions observed modern Russian equipment in eastern Ukraine that was never in the inventory of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Bellingcat has documented how specific pieces of sophisticated equipment photographed in occupied Donbas have then been photographed deployed in Syria.

So, the refusal of Russia to account for its role in the shoot down of MH 17 is no surprise, but rather demonstrative of a pattern Russian malign behavior. In May 2018, the findings of the Joint Investigation Team made clear that the BUK surface-to-air missile launcher used to bring down MH 17 is owned by the Russian Federation and was assigned to the Russian 53rd anti-aircraft brigade near Kursk.

It was brought into sovereign Ukrainian territory from Russia, was fired from territory controlled by Russia and Russia-led forces in eastern Ukraine, and was then returned to Russian territory.

On June 19, 2019, Secretary Pompeo welcomed the announcement by the Joint Investigation Team that the Dutch criminal justice system indicted three Russians and one Ukrainian for their role in the downing of MH 17. All four were members of Russia-led forces in eastern Ukraine.

The United States remains confident in the ability of the Dutch criminal justice system to prosecute those responsible in a manner that is just and fair. We fully support the work of the Dutch authorities and the Joint Investigation Team, an independent criminal investigation led by the Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Malaysia, and Ukraine.

U.S. support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders is unwavering. Secretary Pompeo made clear in his declaration on July 25, 2018 that the United States rejects Russia's attempted annexation of Crimea and pledges to maintain this policy until Ukraine's territorial integrity is restored. He repeated our position again in Hanoi on February 27, the fifth anniversary of the takeover of the Crimean parliament by Russian special forces, stating: "Russia attempted to upend the international order, undermined basic human freedoms, and weakened our common security...The United States reiterates its unwavering position: Crimea is Ukraine and must be returned to Ukraine's control."

Over the past five years, the United States has provided to Ukraine over \$3 billion of assistance of various kinds, as well as three \$1 billion sovereign loan guarantees. Appropriators in Congress continue to increase assistance levels for Ukraine year after year. Our assistance includes programs to strengthen resilience and counter Russian malign influence – in media, on the ground in the Donbas, and on the seas around Crimea.

The United States will continue to engage in private and public diplomacy, levy sanctions such as those announced on March 15, 2019, in concert with our EU and Canadian allies, against Russian individuals involved in the November 25 attack on three Ukrainian navy vessels in the Black Sea near the Kerch Strait, and provide security assistance to Ukraine to ensure that Russia pays a price for these actions.

The unified message from the United States and our Allies and partners has been clear: Russia's ongoing attempts to destabilize Ukraine will not go unanswered.

To date, the West's modest steps have not been enough to change Putin's cost calculus – that too is clear. Russian pressure on commercial shipping in the Sea of Azov, as well as freedom of navigation in

the Black Sea and through the Kerch Strait, is a deeply worrying trend. So we will need to be ready to maintain our resolve for the long term, and to consider additional measures.

In the meantime, it is crucial that Ukraine do everything possible to strengthen its democracy, its institutions, and its resilience against Russian aggression. This includes pursuing critical political and economic reforms, in line with new President Zelenskyy's stated agenda, in particular to address corruption and a lack of accountability. The Ukrainian people have another opportunity to shape the country's future at the ballot box this Sunday, July 21.

The United States will remain committed to ensuring Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russian aggression. We will continue to stand with the people of Ukraine, including those in occupied Crimea and Donbas, as they seek a prosperous, democratic, and free Ukraine, one that sees its border and territories, including Crimea and all of Donbas, fully restored.

Thank you.