

Dangerous Ambiguity: UK Policy Towards Ukraine. “A War of Attrition with No End in Sight”

British ministers seem to be making policy towards Russia's attack on Ukraine on the hoof, and risk heightening the prospect of a war of attrition with no end in sight.

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For decades many in the West may look back in horrified wonder at the killings of men, women and children, the war crimes and the attacks on hospitals and schools in Ukraine.

Was it avoidable? It should have been.

Declassified has [highlighted](#) Vladimir Putin's long standing threats over Ukraine and Russia's special links to the country, which have been emphasised not least by former British defence chiefs.

Through an unstable mixture of complacency and greed, successive British governments have encouraged Vladimir Putin to believe he would get away with his designs on Ukraine.

But now, as if to make up for past misjudgments, the foreign secretary, Liz Truss [says](#) the West must “keep going further and faster to push Russia out of the whole of Ukraine.”

Her speech, at London's Mansion House on Wednesday, implies that Russia must leave Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula that Putin annexed in 2014. After expressions of disapproval over the illegal act, then and since, Britain and its allies in the West continued dealing with Russia similarly to before.

If Truss was not indulging in mere rhetoric – very dangerous though that would be – her speech has far-reaching implications with the prospect of a war of attrition with no end in sight. What other European countries think of an increasingly risky strategy remains to be seen.

The British government's response to the war so far has been infused with a particularly

heavy dose of hypocrisy.

Revelling in the distraction from his problems at home, including Partygate, Johnson has repeatedly insisted that Britain is in the forefront of helping Ukraine – supplying a vast arsenal of weapons while also erecting a wall of obstacles preventing a few refugees from the country coming to Britain.

Although the UK military trained 22,000 of Ukrainian troops after 2014, successive prime ministers for [years](#) dismissed Ukraine's pleas for weapons. At the same time, they continued to grant Russian oligarchs golden visas with the freedom to invest in British property and the City of London's stock market.

After resisting Ukraine's pleas for help for so long – while sending entirely wrong messages to Putin – the government now seems to do whatever Volodymyr Zelensky wants both in supplying weapons and in war aims.

In a muddle

The defence secretary, Ben Wallace, has [told](#) the House of Commons:

“In its simplest form, Britain wants to help Ukraine be free to choose. What it chooses is slightly secondary to the fact that it has the freedom to choose in the first place as a sovereign state.”

Wallace added:

“There can be no return to normality for President Putin and his inner circle... What they have done, despite international warnings from presidents and prime ministers who endlessly asked them not to do it, is build their own cage—and they are living in it. From my point of view, they need to remain in it.”

He also [told](#) the Commons:

“I want Putin not only beyond the pre-February boundaries. He invaded Crimea illegally, he invaded Donetsk illegally, and he should comply with international law and in the long run leave Ukraine”.

What does keeping Putin “in a cage” mean? If Ukraine is a sovereign nation will Britain accept anything Zelensky says about war aims or a negotiated peace with Russia?

Zelensky has [said](#) he is prepared to hold separate talks on Crimea. Would the British government accept Ukraine conceding Crimea to the Kremlin if that was the price of peace?

And what would “success” look like? The top civil servant at the Ministry of Defence, David Williams, called this “a fluid question” at a recent [session](#) of the House of Commons defence committee.

Also, what do British ministers mean by saying Putin must “fail”? Or is the goal really that Putin must fall?

Historian Niall Fergusson [says](#) senior British figures believe that “the UK's No.1 option is for the conflict to be extended and thereby bleed Putin.”

‘Proxy war’

Tobias Ellwood, the defence committee’s Conservative chairman and former defence minister, [said](#):

“I do encourage the MoD, through Nato, the Defence Secretary, to establish and confirm what mission success looks like, because that then determines what equipment you pile in”.

He added:

“This is ever-increasingly a proxy war which will spill beyond Ukraine if any part of Ukraine remains in Russian hands”.

Truss appears to want to go further than her Cabinet colleagues by [suggesting](#) Britain should send warplanes to Ukraine.

“Heavy weapons, tanks, aeroplanes – digging deep into our inventories, ramping up production. We need to do all of this”, she said in her speech.

The prime minister’s office [told](#) the BBC, however, that “there are no plans to send things like planes from the UK”.

Among the difficult questions that need answering is whether Britain and other European members of Nato are equipped to withstand an escalating conflict with Russia. There were [disagreements](#) about that in the defence committee.

The government’s policy is a muddle, ministers seem to be making policy on the hoof, with rhetoric masquerading as clarity.

One thing is absolutely clear – the conflict is a boost to those demanding higher defence spending and to arms companies.

Defence of selling arms

In a telling though perhaps inadvertent defence of selling arms to any government, Defence minister James Heappey [said](#) in response questions about arming Ukraine:

“There are lots of countries around the world that operate kit that they have imported from other countries; when those bits of kit are used we tend not to blame the country that manufactured it, you blame the country that fired it.”

That is also the defence of the UK arming Saudi Arabia in its war in Yemen, and other Gulf states with appalling human rights records.

Britain continues to cuddle up to Saudi Arabia’s rulers, whose de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Salman, now [appears](#) to be banking on Donald Trump’s return to the White House.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – another of Britain’s close allies in the Gulf – have declined to oppose Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. These are two of Britain’s biggest markets for arms and the British government says its links with them are important for Britain’s security. Yet they abstained on the UN vote condemning Russia’s invasion of

Ukraine.

So too did India, though this did not prevent Johnson from visiting the increasingly autocratic Indian prime minister in search of trade and arms deals.

Acting against Russia

The government did not act against Russian oligarchs with assets in Britain until after the second Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24.

In August 2016, two years after Putin's annexation of Crimea and occupation of the Donbas in eastern Ukraine, Johnson, then foreign secretary, told Sergei Lavrov, his Russian opposite number, that he wanted a new "constructive" relationship with Moscow.

The following year, at Christmas 2017, Johnson was the first British minister to visit Moscow for five years. Despite continuing Russian attacks by pro-Russian forces in the Donbas and cyber attacks against British targets, he described Russia as a large untapped market for British goods that should be exploited by post-Brexit Britain.

In 2018, despite the poisoning in Salisbury of the former Russian spy, Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, with the powerful nerve agent, *novichok*, the government pursued its "golden visa" scheme allowing rich Russians to buy the right to live in Britain.

The government took no action against Putin's associate, Oleg Deripaska, founder of the large aluminium company, Rusal, who has a large property portfolio in Britain and alleged [ties](#) to Putin.

The Conservative Party was at the time receiving a record £700,000 in Russian-linked donations, a figure that increased to £1.5 million in the election year of 2019. Russian oligarchs with links to Putin carried on benefiting from secretive British tax havens.

London libel lawyers continued to try and help stop investigations into Conservative Party donors with links to Putin through SLAPP (strategic lawsuits against public participation) [operations](#).

Moscow's gold

In 2018, the Commons foreign affairs committee published a [report](#), *Moscow's Gold: Russian Corruption in the UK*. It said that despite all the rhetoric,

"President Putin and his allies have been able to continue 'business as usual' by hiding and laundering their corrupt assets in London."

It added,

"These assets on which the Kremlin can call at any time, both directly and indirectly support President Putin's campaign to subvert the international rules-based system, undermine our allies, and erode the mutually-reinforcing international networks that support UK foreign policy."

The report was ignored.

The parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), meanwhile, was drawing up a [report](#), simply entitled “Russia”, whose publication was blocked by Johnson until after the December 2019 general election.

This was partly because of suggestions the Kremlin had tried to interfere in the Brexit referendum in June 2016. The ISC did not mince its words.

“Russian influence in the UK is the new normal”, it said.

It continued:

“Successive Governments have welcomed the oligarchs and their money with open arms, providing them with a means of recycling illicit finance through the London ‘laundromat’, and connections at the highest levels with access to UK companies and political figures. This has led to a growth industry of ‘enablers’ including lawyers, accountants, and estate agents who are – wittingly or unwittingly – de facto agents of the Russian state.”

The West is on the defensive after the failure in Afghanistan and the illegal war in Iraq, events that unsurprisingly Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, repeatedly cites.

Officials in Whitehall – the permanent government – who have been revelling in post-imperial complacency, should start to worry when even their long standing allies, the Gulf regimes, are reluctant to upset the Kremlin even when it is engaged in brutal warfare.

As we enter a new world disorder, sustained and rigorous scrutiny of British foreign and security policies is more vital than it has been for a very long time, perhaps since before the outbreak of the second world war.

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