

A Post-Brexit Britain Will Necessarily be Aggressive

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Global Research, January 21, 2020

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

On January 19th, following his brief meeting with Vladimir Putin at the Libyan peace conference in Berlin, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's press office released the following statement:

"The Prime Minister said there will be no normalization of our bilateral relationship until Russia ends the destabilizing activity that threatens the UK and our allies and undermines the safety of our citizens and our collective security."

Russian officials expressed surprise at this statement, considering that Johnson himself had sought a one-on-one with Putin in Berlin. A government source in Moscow later added that

"his tone was closer to conciliatory, there were no harsh statements whatsoever... the main message of the British prime minister was a bid to improve relations with Russia."

This is a classic case of a government official attempting unsuccessfully to appear naïve.

Both sides understand perfectly well that there is no contradiction whatsoever between the absence of hostility in Johnson's demeanour toward Putin in Berlin and the wording of the subsequent statement released by his press-office.

In interpreting the machinations of international relations, it is almost always best to assume that all sides are rational actors in an amoral game. Behind closed doors, neither side will take the least offence if the other side publicly condemns them using the harshest moral language. Everybody understands that moralizing is just another cynical stratagem in the game. It has a strategic value. Use what you've got.

Let's imagine, hypothetically, that Johnson and Putin were to have an entirely private, off the record, one-on-one conversation, allowing them both to speak with total candour. Of course, protocols make it impossible that this could ever happen, but if it did, it might sound something like this:

JOHNSON: Okay, Vladimir, you already know our game-plan. You know we're going to press the Skripal button ad nauseam. You know we're going to moan about human rights and international law. You know we're going to use the collocation "Russian aggression" at every available opportunity. You know that we're going to back US sanctions to try to freeze you out of markets. What else do you expect us to do? We've got business to protect. No hard feelings. It's just business....

PUTIN: Don't worry, Boris. Of course there are no hard feelings. I get it.

This will especially be the case in the post-Brexit era. Britain will once again have to be aggressive on multiple levels in order to protect its remaining markets and penetrate new ones. The inaugural UK-Africa Investment Summit on January 20th quickly followed the inaugural Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum held in Sochi in October last year. These developments provide yet 2 more thematically resonant illustrations of the idea that "the nineteenth century will never end."

Firstly, with the global power-vacuum created by the steady contraction of American hegemony, there is a new economic scramble for Africa, just as there was in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic wars.

Secondly, Russia and Britain have decided to resume playing "the Great Game," except this time on a different continent.

Furthermore, Johnson has to, at all costs, protect Britain's core-business, which is offshorization. With the deindustrialization and financialization which has taken place in the British economy over the past half century, Britain's global archipelago of tax-havens becomes even more important. In fact, it is highly arguable that protecting these channels for the washing of black money through the City of London was the main impetus behind Brexit in the first place. In economic terms, Brexit essentially hinged on the decision to switch to an almost totally financialized economy, based almost exclusively on offshorization (made easier through the dissolution of treaty-arrangements), rather than a normal economy based upon the production, import and export of goods. Now more than ever, economically, Britain is one giant, post-industrial laundromat.

It just so happens that some of the laundromat's most voluminous clients are former Russian oligarchs. Boris has to keep his clients happy.

However, with this in mind, it immediately becomes clear how Britain's economic interests would most concretely be served by the economic re-colonization of Russia, the re-oligarchization of Russia, or the balkanization of Russia. All and any of these developments would require a massive shadow-infrastructure for clandestine financial transactions. Whereas American interests would benefit from Russia's balkanization principally through renewed direct access to cheap natural resources, Britain's primary interest would consist in mediating the flows of illicit capital through a global labyrinth of financial entities. Nobody dreams of the balkanization of Russia more than fund-managers in Jersey, the British Virgin Islands or the Cayman Islands. Can you imagine the quantities of "chorny-nal" ("black cash") that would generate?

Well, Britain and its dependencies have about 60% of the entire global financial clandestine infrastructure which would handle that kind of traffic.

So don't blame Boris. What do you expect him to do? He's got business to protect.

In many ways, the role of a prime minister can be thought of as analogous to the professional role of a criminal defence attorney. The criminal defence attorney's job is to act in his client's interests. The criminal defence attorney usually knows that his client is guilty, and should go to prison. But it's not his place to make such judgments, because he is not acting in his capacity as a private moral agent. In his professional capacity as an attorney,

he has a professional duty to try to get the client off. He has a professional duty to park his private moral impulses.

Analogously, the prime minister's perspective must be "My country, right or wrong."

It's simply not his job to render an impartial moral assessment of the justifiability or otherwise of his nation's conduct or its internal culture.

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This article was originally published on [InfoBrics](#).

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