

Irresponsible braggadocio won't help Ukrainians

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The Ukrainians are fighting a just war against an imperialist invasion and they therefore deserve to be supported. Their right to self-determination is not only relevant against Russia. It is also relevant to their decision to fight. They alone should decide whether to carry on fighting or accept whatever compromise is put on the table. They don't have a right to involve others directly in their national defense though: no right to get NATO powers to impose a no-fly zone over their country or to send them weapons and equipment that could widen the war's scope. They deserve to be supported, but it is only a moral obligation.

NATO countries, for their part, have no right to dictate to them the terms of a peace deal with Russia and compel them to surrender, or conversely to sabotage the prospect of a compromise and pressure them to continue to fight until exhaustion, thus turning them into a disposable NATO proxy. The statement made by U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in Poland on 25 April that "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine" expectedly drew a lot of attention.

Was it "carefully orchestrated ... to set up President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine with what one senior State Department official called 'the strongest possible hand' for what they expect will be some kind of cease-fire negotiations in coming months," as David Sanger explained in the New York Times? Or was it the expression of a shift in U.S. goals towards cynically pressuring the Ukrainians to fight until Washington deems Russia weakened enough? We'll know from Washington's attitude over the next few weeks if it is exerting maximum pressure in order to bring the war to a close more rapidly, thus shortening the Ukrainians' suffering and limiting the damage caused by the war to the U.S. and global economy, or if it is continuing to dangerously play with fire.

The matter is much less open to question in the case of British warmongering. Beyond Boris Johnson's obvious headlong rush into the war in the hope that its blast would cover the noise of the many scandals that he provoked, the prime minister and his cabinet have been engaging in a highly dangerous game of one-upmanship. Unlike discreet purveyors of weapons to Ukraine like the French or the German governments, they have publicly boasted about every item they have delivered and every form of military assistance they have provided to the embattled nation. Boris Johnson even brought upon himself a scathing rebuke from a former head of the Polish army who accused him of "tempting evil" after he bragged that "we are currently training Ukrainians in Poland in the use of anti-aircraft defence".

More recklessly still, statements by members of the British governments have been quite more provocative than those made in Washington, let alone those of EU member states. Speaking on BBC Radio 4 on 25 April, the UK minister for the armed forces, James Heappey, made a flabbergasting response to the question of whether it is acceptable for British weapons to be used by the Ukrainians against military targets *inside* Russian territory. The minister asserted that "it is entirely legitimate

to go after military targets in the depth of your opponents to disrupt their logistics and supply lines, just as, to be frank, provided the Russians don't target civilians, which unfortunately they've not taken too much regard for thus far, it is perfectly legitimate for them to be striking targets in Western Ukraine to disrupt Ukrainian supply lines."

It is of course "perfectly legitimate" for a country whose territory is invaded to strike at military targets inside the invader's territory, but is it wise for it to do so and, especially, is it wise for a British minister to encourage it to do so? Of course, not - not least because that may incite the Russian aggressor to escalate its bombing across the depth of Ukraine's territory. Probably realizing that he had blundered, the minister tried to make up for his initial assertion by magnanimously granting the invader an equally "perfectly legitimate" right to do precisely what is to be feared by the Ukrainians if they were to follow his advice!

In a solemn speech pompously titled "The Return of Geopolitics" delivered on 27 April, British foreign secretary Liz Truss, whose role model is Margaret Thatcher and who seems to confuse the Ukraine war with the Falklands war, declared,: "The war in Ukraine is our war - it is everyone's war because Ukraine's victory is a strategic imperative for all of us. Heavy weapons, tanks, aeroplanes - digging deep into our inventories, ramping up production. We need to do all of this. ... We are doubling down. We will keep going further and faster to push Russia out of the whole of Ukraine."

Unless the British government decided to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea, the secretary is thus pledging to partake in prolonging the war, not only until the Ukrainians have repelled Russia's forces beyond the territories in Donbas where they were deployed prior to 24 February, i.e. beyond the status quo ante, which is in itself reckless enough, but even until they forced Russia out of Crimea, which is utterly irresponsible for both Ukraine and Britain itself. The prime minister must have realized how dangerous the foreign secretary's words were, for he took special care in his 3 May address to Ukraine's parliament to amend the impression that her statement had created by emphasizing that "no outsider like me can speak lightly about how the conflict could be settled ... no one can or should impose anything on Ukrainians."

Noticeably, Boris Johnson bragged a lot in that address about British military aid to Ukraine but did not utter a single word about humanitarian aid, although he did mention that today "at least one Ukrainian in every four has been driven from their homes, and it is a horrifying fact that two thirds of all Ukrainian children are now refugees, whether inside the country or elsewhere." About those refugees, the prime minister had nothing to boast. The day before his speech, *The Guardian* had revealed that his crueler-than-thou anti-immigrant home minister Priti Patel is "facing mass legal action over delays that have left thousands of Ukrainians at risk of trauma and Russian bombs, or in limbo in eastern Europe."

Meanwhile, the leader of the Labour Party, "Sir" Keir Starmer, whose main obsession is to project himself as anti-Corbyn thus reneging on the pledge of programmatic continuity that he had made in order to be elected head of the party, has kept approvingly silent on the Johnson cabinet's braggadocio. Ever since he got elected, Starmer has been indeed mostly busy outbidding the Conservatives in pro-NATO and pro-Israel stances. A climate of sacred pro-NATO unity hence prevails in the British parliament, allowing Johnson to carry on outbidding everybody else in perilous warmongering.