

News from Natoland di Tariq Ali

Since 3 December 2021, when the *Washington Post* 'broke' the story – based on some aerial photos of tents in a field and other helpfully selected nuggets of US intelligence – the Anglophone world has been subjected to a highly orchestrated media campaign, trumpeting at top volume the 'massive' and 'imminent' Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the absence of any actual news to report, unnamed US security officials are wheeled out like clockwork to issue pronouncements, NATO figures (Stoltenberg, Borrell) are pushed forward to fill any gaps. Daily front-page headlines hammering home the threat of war have been backed by a loyal chorus of opinion-makers, remarkably unanimous in their views.

Sotto voce, the cat had already been let out of the bag as to the Biden Administration's main goals. American officials were 'pushing European countries' to create a 'common prescription' against Russia, a *New York Times* [piece](#) heavily briefed by US security had announced three weeks before. In London, the broadsheet press jumped to, the *Financial Times* reliably out-hawking Washington, with the *Economist* piping up alongside. Even the LRB felt obliged to join in with a particularly aggressive [piece](#), whose author was apparently unaware that Georgia, not Russia, had invaded South Ossetia in 2008.

What tropes do the warmongers offer? First, Putin is the unilateral source of aggression, mobilizing a vast invasion force out of the blue for 'imminent' action. Second, NATO's expansion is non-negotiable. Third, it is impermissible under the 'rules-based [read: US-led] international order' for borders to be redrawn by force. Fourth, national sovereignty must be inviolate; Ukraine must determine its own foreign

policy. What are the realities?

First, far from unilateral, the Russian force is the same as that mobilized last spring in response to NATO's two-month 'Defender Europe' exercise, involving 28,000 American and European troops on Russia's borders, backed by ostentatiously aggressive US-UK naval operations in the Black Sea. The Russian counter-mobilization on its own side of the border was, as the US [acknowledged](#) at the time, 'standard operating procedure'.

Moscow was also alarmed when the Biden Administration [winked](#) at the Ukrainian military's use of drone warfare in the Donbas in October 2021, when aerial weapons were strictly prohibited by the Minsk agreements – and the lethal escalatory effects of drones had just been demonstrated by Azerbaijan's 2020 [war](#) on Nagorno Karabakh. The Biden Administration had also stepped up NATO exercises in Ukraine itself – the summer 2021 [Cossack Mace](#) exercise in the south, between Odessa and Crimea, for example.

Militarily, in a broader perspective it is NATO's forces that have been on the offensive, advancing 800 miles eastward over the last thirty years, deep inside the borders of the former Soviet Union and now penetrating the Russian-speaking heartlands. The Kremlin proved at first gullible and slow-witted in responding to this, both Yeltsin and Putin willing to swallow US assurances, and then – after the Bush-Blair 2008 diplomatic thrust to expand NATO to Ukraine and Georgia – often inept and clumsy in formulating a more resolute response.

But NATO expansion – subordinating the advanced-capitalist European heartlands to US military command – is a voluntarist imperial strategy, not a question of national defence. Ideologically and strategically, Washington's liberal-international militarism – dividing the world into 'good' and 'bad' states and pledging to regime-change the latter – is a

recipe for war, as [Stephen Walt](#) has argued. The commentariat's cry – 'no sphere of influence for Russia!' – neglects to add that this is because the US presumes to command a global sphere. Where US interests collude, redrawing borders by force is not a problem – viz. the green light for Turkey's occupation of northern Syria, not to mention Cyprus, or Israel's of southern Lebanon and the Golan Heights, or the de facto US-Israeli protectorate in northern Iraq. Relatedly, under the 'rules-based order', national sovereignty is at Washington's bequest. The vice-regal language of [operatives](#) like Victoria Nuland, selecting Ukraine's next prime minister after the toppling of pro-Russian Yanukovich in 2014, speaks volumes about realities on the ground.

Amid the general hysteria, we should welcome even mildly dissenting voices. In addition to Walt [Simon Jenkins](#) warns that NATO's treatment of Russia virtually guaranteed a chauvinist reflex. Like [Anatol Lieven](#), Jenkins argues that the way forward lay in implementing the confederal constitutional arrangements of the Minsk accords – largely blocked by Kiev's objections to Donbas 'home rule' – plus an end to NATO expansionism, Russian withdrawal and the reinstatement of Ukraine's borders. Countering narratives of unilateral Russian aggression, [Adam Tooze](#) extends the analysis he first developed in *Crashed*. Anatomizing 'sphere of influence' realities, [Peter Beinart](#) calls for de facto recognition that Ukraine will remain a buffer state. [Rajan Menon and Thomas Graham](#) have proposed a moratorium of 20-25 years on Ukraine's NATO membership. [Robert Kaplan](#) calls for Finlandization. [Ross Douthat](#) ponders how the Biden Administration could conduct a successful retreat.

More analytically, David Hendrickson has [highlighted](#) the 'super-aggressive but also super-cautious' approach of the Biden Administration, following the script of Anders Åslund and others at the hardline [Atlantic Council](#) to 'restore Moscow's respect for the international rules-based order' –

further militarization of the region under NATO, step-by-step integration of Ukraine in the outer circles of NATO membership, putting the Crimea and Donbas back on the table and ending Nord Stream 2 – with a focus on Ukraine ‘from day one’, as a Biden official said, while at the same time, under pressure from the China hawks, avoiding any large-scale commitment of US forces. That meant gearing up the Old World allies for action.

If the British media has been the most frenzied in Europe, UK politicians have followed suit. Johnson’s warmongering – and Labour leader Keir Starmer’s avid backing for it – was analysed [here](#) by Oliver Eagleton. Now Starmer has launched an [attack](#) on the UK peace movement, Stop the War – one of the few groups to organize against the current escalation. Assuring *Guardian* readers that ‘Labour’s commitment to NATO is unshakable’ – as if the party’s shameful Cold War and Blairite record left any room for doubt – Starmer rails that Stop the War is ‘giving succour to authoritarian leaders’ and ‘showing solidarity with the aggressor’.

This is the tired old slogan raised against the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the 1950s and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in the 60s. In the latter case, those of us who founded the VSC were proud to stand with the Vietnamese people against the US bombers and napalm. Many of us opposed both the entry of Soviet troops to crush the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. My own position on Afghanistan was to oppose both the Soviet occupation in December 1979 and NATO’s ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ in 2001 (see [The Forty-Year War in Afghanistan](#), Verso 2021).

The millions who marched in Europe and the US in 2003 against the coming invasion of Iraq were not supporters of Saddam, whose authoritarian regime had been nurtured, cultivated and armed for many decades by the United States and its NATO allies. They rightly foresaw the carnage and destruction Bush

and Blair would be inflicting on the Middle East and fought to stop it. Do Starmer and MI5 regard Simon Jenkins as a sinister figure in hock to Putin? And let's not forget the support given by NATO members to the royal torturers and killers who rule Morocco and Saudi Arabia today, inflicting the [bloodbath](#) on Yemen. If moral grandstanding is the basis for war, why didn't the London blowhards stay on in Afghanistan?

Let's revive a few more memories. Who backed Putin's murderous assault on Chechnya in 1999-2000, and watched contentedly as its capital Grozny was razed to the ground? Clinton and Blair did – the latter rushing to Moscow to be the first to congratulate Putin on his subsequent election victory – with other NATO members looking on. Russia was then considered a loyal subordinate, since it backed the West on most issues – not least throwing open its bases to aid the NATO occupation of Afghanistan. Tony Wood's fine analysis in [NLR](#) provides chapter and verse on Putin's role in the Chechen tragedy as well as the collusion of NATO members at the time.

What has changed is that NATO's auto-pilot expansionism has put it on course to swallow Ukraine and Georgia, which Russian *raison d'état* is bound to resist. At the same time, Russia's blundering militarized response may have served to weaken its hand by throwing away the strongest card it held in Ukraine – the friendship of the Russian-speaking or Russia-oriented half of the population. In 2008, when Bush and Blair pushed through NATO's 'open door' policy to Ukraine and Georgia at the Bucharest summit, barely 20% of Ukrainians supported joining NATO. The majority was split between supporting a military alliance with Russia or maintaining the neutral status enshrined in Ukraine's 1990s constitution (it was altered by the Zelensky government in 2019 to set national goals of EU and NATO membership).

By 2014, after the Maidan uprising, Russian annexation of Crimea and the ongoing low-level war in the Donbas region,

support for NATO had risen to 40%, but with another 40% of Ukrainians still against. (Ukrainian pollsters now excluded the populous Donbas and Crimea regions, which also affected the figures.) In the western regions – more integrated into EU economic networks via migrant workers in Poland – there is now majority support for joining NATO. But as [Volodymyr Ishchenko](#) has written, many Ukrainians feel that NATO membership would forfeit still more of Ukraine's sovereignty while increasing tensions with Russia, escalating internal divisions among Ukrainians and dragging the country into another of the US's 'forever wars', one of which has just ended in humiliating defeat.

The Western media attack-dogs have been congratulating themselves that, whatever else, their propaganda onslaught has united NATO. Not quite. The relentless spotlight of the past twelve weeks has also shown up its fissures. Germany's chief naval officer, Admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach, was forced to resign after telling a military think-tank in New Delhi that all Putin really wanted was a little respect: 'My God, give him respect! That costs so little, really nothing at all. It is easy to pay him the respect which he desires and really deserves. Russia is an ancient country, Russia is an important country. Even we, India, Germany, need Russia, we need Russia against China.'

The admiral was posing a Maoist-Althusserian question: the NATO masters of war must decide between Russia and China – which is the primary and which the secondary contradiction? Nixon's visit to Beijing undoubtedly helped to weaken the Soviet Union. Yet the West-China collaboration made the PRC the political-economic force it is today and re-subordinating it will be difficult, if not impossible. Given the Biden family's lucrative involvement in Ukrainian affairs, not to mention the Clinton-DLC investment in the bogey of Russian trolls swinging the 2016 election, the current administration is unlikely to attempt a parallel move in Moscow. Washington

still seems bent on forging a pan-Eurasian counter-hegemonic alliance. Putin and Xi duly issued a joint statement from the Beijing Winter Olympics against the expansion of NATO and deepening economic ties, not least increasing Russian gas imports to China.

The official response to Admiral Schönbach was swift. The new German Minister of Defence, Christine Lambrecht, a Social Democrat in the Starmer mould, suspended Schönbach immediately from all duties and titles. Embarrassingly, however, the retired General Harald Kujat, a senior figure in the German armed forces and former Chair of NATO's Military Committee, then gave a TV interview (that rapidly disappeared online): 'If I were still in office I would have stood up for Admiral Schönbach, and tried in every way to prevent his dismissal... it must be in our interest to achieve a sensible result, to de-escalate and arrive at a relaxation of tension with Russia, of course with consideration of Ukrainian security interests as well.' Even within Natoland there are differences: Johnson-Starmer preach war-war, many Germans favour jaw-jaw.

British posturing is designed mainly to stress to the White House and Pentagon that a Brexited Britain can be even more loyal than in Blairite times. The dog-like coital lock could be permanently sealed with cement. Meanwhile, Starmer accusing Stop the War of supporting authoritarians shines a light on his own politics. He will do whatever he's asked to by the British state. If tomorrow Putin is designated a friend, Starmer will go along. He certainly knows something about authoritarianism himself, having expelled dozens of dissident Jews from the Labour Party and suspended his radical predecessor on spurious charges. In McCarthyite fashion, he might proscribe the peace movement altogether and try to force its Labour supporters to quit. He could go further than Blair by making support for NATO a necessary pre-condition for party membership. It would be just an extension of weaponizing anti-Semitism and effectively outlawing criticisms of Israel.

Stop the War is not a political party. It has Tory supporters, as well as many who favour Scottish independence. Its aim is to stop wars waged by the US or NATO, whatever the pretext. The politicians and the arms merchants who back these wars do so not to enhance democracy, but to serve the hegemonic interests of the world's largest imperial power. Stop the War and many others will carry on the task of opposing them despite threats, slanders or blandishments.

Read on: Tariq Ali, ['Springtime for NATO'](#), NLR I/234. (16 FEBRUARY 2022)

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