

Britain's Paul Mason: A left liberal warmonger

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Paul Mason, economics editor of "Channel Four News" in the UK, has emerged as one of the foremost apologists for military intervention in Syria. More significant still, he is a vocal advocate of US-led military action against Russia and China.

For the past week, Prime Minister David Cameron has been insisting that the terror attacks in Paris have strengthened the case for UK participation in air strikes against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria. The UK already participates in air strikes in Iraq, but MPs, led by the opposition Labour Party, rejected strikes against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government in 2013 and did not agree to change that policy in 2014.

Cameron needs to secure a majority among MPs given the depth of public opposition to action in Syria. But with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn opposed to such a move—at least without United Nations backing—the pro-war faction of the party, which includes Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn, has stressed the need for a "comprehensive strategy" to be outlined before they can back Cameron.

An article by Mason in the November 16 *Guardian* was an attempt to outline such a "comprehensive strategy" on Cameron's behalf—or rather, to offer up the propaganda needed to dress up a Syrian intervention as a necessary defensive and even humanitarian move against the Islamic State, as well as a means of combating supposed Russian aggression in the Middle East.

Mason headlines his article, "What would the world look like if we defeated ISIS?" [Emphasis added].

He regurgitates, as a supposed "left liberal," all of the lying claims of the Conservative government in the UK and the Obama administration in the US that their essentially benevolent role is to act as the world's peacekeepers.

Mason criticises Washington for losing its way, "sometime between 1991 and 2003," by not leaving itself in a position to dictate the terms of peace. He describes how US-led wars have as a result left Iraq "effectively dismembered into Shi'a, Kurdish and Isis-run territories," parts of Afghanistan "reconquered by the Taliban," and Syria's "disintegration" having "propelled millions of refugees into Europe, Turkey and Lebanon."

Mason's answer is not to oppose war, but to urge that the next war in Syria be better prepared.

His first priority is to insist that war is legally justified by the events in Paris. He writes, "In British security circles, there is tacit acceptance that, if it wanted to, France could invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty... [that] gives all signatories the right to wage war legally, as an act of self-defence, under principles recognised by the UN charter."

This is an extraordinary assertion. Article 5 authorisation would be a signal for a war involving the US, UK and France working together in Syria, under the NATO umbrella, with Russia already active there. Implicit in such a situation is the danger of the NATO powers coming into direct conflict with Moscow.

"If the French requested it, and major states refused, it would mark the end of the alliance's credibility," he warns. This is an issue of immense concern to Mason. In the service of restoring the credibility of the imperialist powers, he opposes all those who express doubts about military action against ISIS. He urges a "political rethink" after the Paris attack, complaining, "If you've watched social media since Friday night, you will have seen wave after wave of arguments in favour of avoiding a fight with Isis."

Denouncing the "doomsayers," he provides a partial list of the arguments made against intervention—all of which centre on the role played by imperialist wars in destabilising the Middle East region and how anti-imperialist sentiment, coupled with "social dislocation and poverty," has facilitated the growth of ISIS. All such arguments, he writes, "miss the point"—which is that the West is engaged in a war to defend civilisation.

He writes: "Isis attacked civilians irrespective of their position on Islam or imperialist war; it attacked, specifically, symbols of a secular, liberal lifestyle. It did these things because that is what it is fighting: the west, its people, their values and their lifestyle."

Defence of a Western "lifestyle" is a goal that is close to Mason's heart and one clearly of more concern than the hundreds of thousands of casualties and the devastation of whole countries resulting from imperialism's predatory wars.

Mason cannot point to any actual example of how the military adventures of the US and UK have produced anything other than a social, economic and political nightmare. So he offers up instead the vision he has for a post-conflict Syria. His is nothing less than an argument for permanent occupation of the Middle East, with "Isis-held territory being reoccupied by armies that, this time, can withstand the suicide bombings, truck bombs and kidnappings that a defeated Isis would unleash."

"To achieve this," he adds, "you would need to unleash surveillance, policing and military action on a scale that could only be acceptable to western electorates if carried out with a restraint and accountability not shown in Afghanistan and Iraq."

Concluding, Mason invokes a theme beloved of the neo-conservative advocates of a "clash of civilisations"—a false comparison between today and the 1930s, but with the imperialist powers cast as opponents of "Islamic fascism," rather than their being international military aggressors and colonial bandits.

He notes that when Washington and London advanced a democratic alternative to fascism, "the British and American populations were persuaded to endure total war in the fight against Nazism." The same propaganda offensive, he implies, is required to get the population to accept the "war on terror" today.

It was in the same spirit that, on September 20, Mason posed a series of "questions" that must be answered "before bombing Isis or Assad"—all of which were a thinly disguised argument for doing so. Once again, he identifies the central question as the need to overcome resistance and

opposition to war within the population that “might provoke an Iraq-style protest movement.”

He complains that allowing this to dictate policy “for a major and historic military power” results in a “situation close to paralysis.” To overcome this, Britain must recognise that it is unable any longer to proceed through “the two alliance systems” of which it is a part, but which have now broken down. “China and Russia prevent the UN security council from endorsing lawful military intervention to stop the massacre” in Syria, he complains, while “the US has lost its appetite for full-scale military intervention.”

Nevertheless, “a decision is coming,” he declares. “Britain, as a permanent member of the UN security council, has not only the right, but the duty to uphold international law, by force if necessary.”

To counter domestic opposition, while providing a legal veneer for war, he urges the Cameron government and the pro-war faction of Labour to cite “an overwhelming humanitarian need” and to insist that “there is no alternative; and that the action is proportionate.”

Military action against ISIS is not Mason’s primary concern. Rather, his support for war in Syria, initially targeting ISIS but with the stated goal of regime-change against Assad, is of a piece with his overarching support for imperialist warmongering against Russia and China.

On February 20 of last year, Mason wrote on his Channel Four blog: “How the west slipped into powerlessness.” The civil wars in Ukraine and Syria and even the reassertion of the power of the Egyptian military are identified not as the product of imperialist machinations—support for the Maidan Square coup by rightist forces in Ukraine and the encouragement of an Islamist oppositional movement against the regime of Bashar al-Assad—but as consequences of “the special Obamacare of non-intervention.”

He writes: “When the USA decided, last summer, it could not sell military intervention in Syria—either to its parliaments, its people or its military—it sent a signal to every dictator, torturer and autocrat in the world that only diplomats, at the time, truly understood.”

In Ukraine and Syria, he states, “the basic issue is Russian influence,” supplemented by a new alliance with China. Their combined “regional and global influence has succeeded in preventing any effective action against the mass slaughter in Syria” and “bolstered the position of General Sisi” in Egypt. The US “is backing down, pragmatically, wherever its soft power is trumped by the hard power of a China-Russia diplomatic alliance.”

“What’s surprising is how quickly the west has slipped into powerlessness and how easily populations have accepted it,” he complains.

Not so Mason, who sounds the tocsin for revolt against such acquiescence. Just weeks later, on March 20, 2014, he wrote on the same blog warning of Russian expansionism in Ukraine and Syria, facilitated by the fact that the West “in August 2013 gave a major signal to Vladimir Putin that it would not intervene in Syria” or anywhere else.

Mason is again identifying as the problem to be overcome the fact that President Obama, faced with public opposition in the US, UK and internationally, and with divisions in the military, did a U-turn on military action in Syria. He writes, “Implicitly, from that moment on, the idea of America as a superpower enforcing international law was over.”

The West is not the true villain of the piece, he insists. “If we attribute that failure to the west—Nato, the UN, the EU—it is because Putin’s diplomacy is transparently based on force and injustice.”

“The epoch-making nature of this crisis lies,” he states, “in the west’s response. Few in the west beyond Poland will have the appetite for a military confrontation with Russia.”

Meanwhile, “China has played the role of sleeping partner” to Russia, generally working to “limit and disrupt the west’s political and economic power.” He continues: “If an economic proxy war breaks out between the

EU, USA and Russia, and China backs the latter, then you can kiss globalisation goodbye.”

Mason wants an end to all such retreats. In June 24, he wrote on his blog of “a world without framework”—complaining again of how “majority public opinion in all three western democracies among the permanent members of the security council [the US, UK and France] are against further military intervention.”

This “debacle” has been made worse by “America’s sudden swing from armed intervention in the Middle East to multi-lateralism and disengagement.”

He states: “For some people, merely to point this out is to risk being confused with advocating a return to the Bush-Blair strategy. Let me be clear, I am not. But a world where the democracies on the security council no longer care about upholding international law and human rights, even if only as a fig leaf for their own self-interest, is a very different one to the one we know.”

Mason makes a more extensive comparison with the 1930s to cast US and British imperialism as bastions of a global democratic order and chastising them for failing in their responsibilities. The situation today echoes how “Germany and Japan, under fascism and military dictatorship” benefited from US non-intervention—first of all, in the “Spanish civil war, where the democracies agreed not to intervene, guaranteeing the defeat of the democratic side and mass murder of non-combatants on a scale considered inhuman then, but which Assad has already surpassed.”

But all is not lost. “Sometime around the mid-to-late 1930s, people in the west woke up to the fact that only they, themselves, could stop their own countries being engulfed by fascism, war and genocide. By then the only tools at their disposal were mobilisation, sanctions and war.”

Mason wants a similar popular mobilisation to meet the “danger we face” today “of an unprecedented breakdown of the global strategic order … The question is no longer what Blair did, or what Obama should do, but what are we all going to do.”

It should be noted that Mason’s other foray into international relations, in April 2015 in the *Guardian*, makes clear just how far he wants the West to go in its conflict with Russia.

He argues that Russian aggression and expansionism mean that the UK’s Trident nuclear missile system “in its current form” is outmoded, given that it “was designed to deliver ‘minimum deterrence’—that is, using as little force as possible to threaten Russia with ‘unacceptable loss.’”

He continues: “The unpalatable truth—for those who believe in nuclear deterrence—may be that four new submarines are not enough. All the things touted as alternatives to the current Trident system—cruise missiles, free-fall bombs and static silos—might be needed on top of it.”

Mason is portrayed, and portrays himself, as a “man of the left.” Much of his reputation rests on his membership in the group Workers Power in the 1980s, a splinter from the Socialist Workers Party. He has moved steadily to the right since then, along with the rest of the pseudo-left political milieu out of which he emerged.

But he retains from his state capitalist origins his anti-communist axis. This no longer masquerades as anti-Stalinism or seeks to dress itself in phrases culled from Leon Trotsky. Nor does it hide behind support for Workers Power’s appeals for a “Fifth International,” designed to mask its bitter opposition to the Trotskyist movement—the International Committee of the Fourth International—and its own policy of burying itself in the Labour Party. (After a brief flirtation with Left Unity, Workers Power has urged all socialists to return to the Labour Party, now that Jeremy Corbyn is leader.)

Mason, at some point, concluded that it no longer served his own interests either to maintain membership in the Workers Power group or utilise socialist phraseology to proclaim a belief in a political project he no

longer even pretended to believe in. In this regard, it is significant that he cites the present political “rot” having begun “sometime between 1991 and 2003.”

The year 1991 was when the Soviet Union was officially liquidated by the Stalinist bureaucracy as it restored capitalist property relations and transformed itself into a criminal bourgeois oligarchy.

Mason, like so many others from his milieu, concluded that there was now no challenge possible to the new “uni-polar” world led by US imperialism—and certainly not one based upon the working class. He was significant only in the degree of his success in pursuing a career that cashed in on his flimsy “left” credentials.

He worked from 1995 to 2001 for Reed Business Information before launching *E-Business Review*, which advertised itself as “targeted at those building and running e-business projects,” and boasted of speaking “in the clear, business-focused terms required by the cross-departmental teams tasked with making UK firms’ e-business dreams a reality.”

In addition, he wrote for the right-wing *Daily Express* and *Mail on Sunday*. He served a stint on BBC Two’s “Newsnight” before moving to rival Channel Four.

His writing career has become ever more explicitly targeted at opposing Marxism and socialist revolution, traversing from 2007’s *Live Working or Die Fighting: How the Working Class Went Global*, through 2012’s *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*, which lauded petty-bourgeois protest in support of the super-rich giving the top 20 percent a greater share of societal wealth, to this year’s *Postcapitalism: A Guide to our Future*, which takes as its central argument the claim that Marxism has been refuted because it “got it wrong about the working class” as a revolutionary force and because it “underestimated capitalism’s ability to adapt.”

None of this has proved to be problematic for Mason in maintaining warm relations with his former comrades in Workers Power, the SWP and similar groups, who treat his vocal opposition to Marxism and social revolution as if it were a minor personality quirk.

Not one pseudo-left publication has been so impolite as to refer to Mason’s naked warmongering as they invite him onto their platforms to promote his latest book. Many privately agree with his public statements. After all, their public position on Yugoslavia, Libya, Ukraine and Syria was to fully support the forces assembled and encouraged by the imperialist powers, to portray them as “revolutionaries,” and to insist that they had the absolute right to seek weapons and support from Washington, London and Paris. Others no doubt combine grudging admiration and envy for his ability to secure a six-figure salary by serving as a propagandist for the bourgeoisie.

Despite the best efforts of the pseudo-left to apologise for Mason, however, his writings brand him as a bitter enemy of the working class and a political reactionary of the worst sort.



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