

Canada appoints anti-Russia hawk as foreign minister

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The headline announcement in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's recent cabinet shuffle, which was principally aimed at engaging with the incoming Trump administration in Washington, was the appointment of Chrystia Freeland as Canada's Foreign Minister.

A former financial journalist and New York-based Thomson Reuters executive, Freeland has been Trudeau's International Trade Minister since his Liberals' returned to power in November 2015. Along with close ties to the global financial elite, Freeland, who is of Ukrainian descent, is well known for her intimate connections to, and advocacy for, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress and other right-wing, ultra-nationalist Ukrainian-Canadian groups. In 2014, she travelled to Kiev to hail the US-orchestrated, fascist-led coup, which overthrew Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's pro-Russian elected president, after he had refused to sign an association agreement with the European Union.

Freeland's appointment is a clear indication that the Liberal government has no intention of joining US President-elect Donald Trump should he seek an accommodation with Moscow. Outside of Poland and the Baltic states, Canada has been Washington's staunchest ally in its military-strategic offensive against Russia.

Canada enthusiastically supported NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and the Baltic States in violation of the pledges given Moscow at the end of the Cold War. Under Harper's Conservatives and now Trudeau's Liberals, Ottawa has been among the biggest backers of Ukraine's ultra-nationalist government and has played a leading role in NATO's escalating military deployments on Russia's borders, sending battleships to the Black Sea and planes to Eastern Europe.

The Trudeau government has continued the Harper government's deployment of 200 Canadian Armed Forces' personnel to western Ukraine to train Ukrainian Army and National Guard troops, and in a show of political support for the far-right regime in Kiev has entered into a free trade agreement with it.

As for Freeland, so conspicuous has been her role in supporting Ukraine's pro-Western government that she has been banned from travelling to Russia since 2014 under a blacklist the Kremlin drew up in retaliation for the sanctions Ottawa imposed on Russia, in conjunction with the US and other western powers.

Ukraine's state-run Ukrinform website responded to Freeland's appointment as foreign minister with an article titled "Our woman in the Canadian government." In praising Freeland's appointment,

both the Ukrainian and Latvian ambassadors urged her to advocate on their behalf when she visits Washington for Trump's inauguration.

Under a commitment given to NATO last summer, Canada is deploying 450 troops to Latvia and leading a battalion that is to be permanently stationed there—one of four 1,000-strong "forward deployed" units to be stationed in Poland and the three Baltic states so as to threaten Russia.

Canada is also moving aggressively to expand its military presence in the Arctic, where it and Russia have competing claims to the resource-rich seabed. Last year, the Canadian military expanded its Arctic base at Resolute Bay so it could house a larger number of soldiers all year round. As NATO's conflict with Moscow has escalated since 2014, the corporate media and the military-security establishment have become ever more strident in their calls for Canada to counter potential Russian "aggression" in the Arctic by procuring new planes, icebreakers, and radar systems.

The appointment of the anti-Russia hawk Freeland takes on even greater significance under conditions where the US intelligence agencies, with the support of the Democratic Party and much of the traditional Republican Party establishment, is mounting a furious anti-Russia campaign. Without providing a shred of evidence they have asserted that Russia, under the personal direction of President Vladimir Putin, surreptitiously intervened in the US elections to derail Hillary Clinton's presidential bid.

This neo-McCarthyite smear is part of a bitter internecine conflict convulsing the US ruling elite over whether to prioritize Russia or, as Trump argues, China for economic and military confrontation.

Canada's elite is fully on-board with the propaganda campaign to cast Russia and Putin as the gravest threat to the "liberal democratic order." In the last three months of 2016, Canada's media churned out article after article hypocritically denouncing Russia for war crimes in Aleppo, while whitewashing the slaughter of civilians being carried out by the US and its allies in Mosul and, even more significantly, the role US wars of aggression have played in blowing up the Middle East.

The Canadian media has promoted the charges of Russian "interference" in the US elections as proven fact, asserted Russia is intent on similarly subverting coming European elections, and chastised Trump for suggesting that the claims of the CIA and NSA should be taken as anything but the gospel truth.

Perhaps the most provocative media comment to date came from *Maclean's Magazine*, which led Tuesday with an article entitled "Is Donald Trump a Russian agent?" "Trump," declared *Maclean's*, "is the most slavishly pro-Russian Western leader since the end of the Second World War ... Throughout the campaign, even when it was to his political disadvantage, he never wavered from praising Putin and defending his policies, including the bombing campaign in Syria and the invasion of Ukraine."

As significant as the article itself, was who it was written by—Scott Gilmore, none other than the husband of Catherine McKenna, who as Trudeau's Environment Minister regularly sits with Freeland in cabinet.

Anxious to deepen cooperation with US imperialism and prevent Canada from being hit hard by Trump's America First protectionist program, Trudeau and his ministers have carefully avoided directly criticizing Trump in public.

But Trudeau has repeatedly shown that he endorses the media's virulently anti-Russia campaign and, by extension, the push by the US intelligence agencies and much of the US political establishment for Washington to ratchet up tensions with Moscow.

When a reporter suggested Freeland's appointment might antagonize Russia, Trudeau curtly dismissed the objection and, when Moscow signaled it would remove the sanctions against Freeland if Ottawa lifted those targeting a Russian, his government rejected any such quid pro quo, declaring it would not reward "aggression."

Responding to Trump's declaration earlier this week that NATO was "obsolete," Trudeau reaffirmed Ottawa's commitment to the US-led war alliance. "We will continue to be a reliable partner, not just to the United States, but to all of our allies as we move forward."

Bob Nault, the Liberal Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, amplified Trudeau's NATO endorsement, saying that if the US reduces its contribution to the alliance, "That means other countries like ours will have to step up to the plate."

The conflict now raging in Washington has ominous implications for working people the world over, with the rival factions arguing not whether the US should pursue aggression, but over which nuclear-armed rival to target first. While the Obama administration and the dominant factions within the intelligence apparatus favour escalating threatening military deployments against Russia, in both Eastern Europe and the Middle East, Trump and his allies view thwarting China's rise as the first priority. This policy is no less incendiary, with Trump's threats to abandon Washington's "One China" policy by developing ties with Taiwan and force Beijing to accept US domination over the South China Sea containing the seeds of a military conflict between two nuclear-armed powers that could quickly escalate into world war.

The turn Trump is trying to make in US foreign policy cuts across the ambitions and interests of the Canadian bourgeoisie and not just because it views Russia as a major rival in the Arctic and the world's energy markets and because it deems NATO critical to asserting its predatory imperialist interests in Europe and the Middle East. Canada's ruling elite is anxious to expand trade and investment ties with China to offset the impact of extended slow

growth in the US and Europe.

While Harper placed limits on investments by Chinese state firms in strategic sectors of the economy, the Liberals and large sections of their Conservative rivals now support Canada's participation in the Beijing-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and enhanced trade ties with China.

On Tuesday, the *Globe and Mail* reported that free trade talks between Ottawa and Beijing will commence next month. As a goodwill gesture to China, Trudeau, as part of last week's cabinet shuffle, appointed veteran cabinet minister John McCallum as ambassador to Beijing, making China along with the US, Britain, and France the only countries where a political appointee serves as Canada's diplomatic representative.

Trudeau's "pivot to China" is fraught with difficulties under conditions where the incoming US administration has made clear that it is eager to confront China and dismisses Obama's policy of transferring the bulk of US military power to the Asia-Pacific region and forging a NATO-style anti-China alliance as "weak." Trump can be expected to demand Canada support his confrontational stance, possibly as part of a deal for preserving Canada's privileged access to the US market. And, as the *Globe and Mail* suggested in an article last Saturday, this could well include pushing for Canadian ships to join US patrols in the South China Sea. In 2013, the Harper government signed a secret joint agreement with the US military on joint operations in the Asian Pacific, the details of which remain under wraps.

A January 13 editorial in the *Globe*, the traditional mouthpiece of Canada's financial elite, is illustrative of the Canadian bourgeoisie's alignment with the faction of the US establishment calling for confrontation with Moscow to be prioritized over Beijing. The *Globe* editorial took exception to the vow Rex Tillerson, Trump's nominee for Secretary of State, made that the US will prevent China from accessing the islands it claims and currently controls in the South China Sea. This, warned the *Globe*, "would amount to a blockade—an act of war. That would literally start the Trump administration with a bang."

The *Globe* then went on to criticize Tillerson for calling China's actions in the South China Sea "akin to Russia's taking of Crimea," arguing that the latter constituted a much greater threat to the US-led imperialist world order.



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