

Canada joins Washington in charging Russia with complicity in “war crimes”

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Canada’s Liberal government, having given its “full support” to last week’s illegal US missile strikes on Syria, is now providing strong backing to the Trump administration’s moves to escalate military conflict in the Middle East and pursue confrontation with Russia—a course that could rapidly lead to a clash between the world’s two biggest nuclear powers.

Since Monday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland have joined Trump officials in insisting that there can be no end to the war in Syria until President Bashar al-Assad’s regime is replaced by one more pliant to Western interests and have called for new measures targeting Russia unless it abandons its longstanding Syrian ally.

Speaking Monday, Trudeau called for the Assad regime to be “held to account” for the April 4 chemical weapons attack in the village of Khan Cheikhoun. Just hours before US cruise missiles struck the Syrian air base at Shayrat Syrain, Trudeau was insisting that the events in Khan Cheikhoun required international investigation. But since the US staged its illegal attack, Trudeau has joined Trump and other Western leaders in proclaiming Damascus guilty of a “war crime” without providing a shred of evidence, and all the while suppressing the fact that Syrian opposition groups, including the al-Qaida-affiliated al-Nusra Front, possess and have used chemical weapons.

In his Monday remarks, Trudeau also lashed out against Russia. “I think Russia needs to be aware, made aware of its responsibility in the bloody actions last week by the Assad regime,” said Canada’s prime minister. He then went on to echo calls from Britain’s Conservative government and the Trump administration for Russia to be punished for its support for Assad, saying that Canada was “open to working” with its “friends, allies, and partners’ allies to send clear messages through sanctions and other means to Russia.”

Foreign Minister Freeland has been no less belligerent. She urged the G7 foreign ministers who met in Lucca, Italy, this Monday and Tuesday to back US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in delivering Moscow an ultimatum, saying that “Russia needs to know that he arrives” in Moscow with the G7’s “support.”

“Russia needs to decide,” declared Freeland Tuesday, “whether it wants to double down on its support for this murderous regime that is committing war crimes or whether it wants to say: ‘We do not want to be associated with this’.”

Freeland has a well-deserved reputation as an anti-Russia hawk. Her appointment as Foreign Minister last January—even as the Trudeau government was otherwise going to great lengths to demonstrate its eagerness to work closely with the Trump administration—underscored the Liberals’ strong support for the push-back from the US military-intelligence apparatus and the Democratic Party to Trump’s plans to seek a temporary accommodation with Moscow, so as to focus on confrontation with China.

For months, the US media, the Democratic Party, and a section of the Republicans led by Senator John McCain have supported this push-back through a neo-McCarthyite campaign, revolving around utterly unsubstantiated claims that Trump is a sap of Russian President Vladimir Putin and that Russia intervened in the US election to torpedo Hillary Clinton’s campaign.

The Canadian media and political establishment have been fully on board with this campaign, which has now subsided because its primary objective, pressing Trump to continue and intensify the US military-strategic offensive against Russia, appears to have succeeded.

Canada has been at the forefront of US-led provocations against Russia since the Western-orchestrated coup in Ukraine in February 2014, which brought a pro-Western, far-right government to power in Kiev. The Conservative

government sent 200 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) troops to Ukraine to train the country's army and national guard, and deployed fighter jets, ships and soldiers to eastern Europe and the Baltic states as part of NATO's aggressive military encirclement of Russia.

This policy has been continued under Trudeau and his Liberals. Canadian troops will soon deploy to Latvia, where they will lead one of NATO's four new "forward" battalions deployed on Russia's borders in Poland and the Baltic states. Last month, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan announced a two-year extension of the CAF's Ukraine mission, which, according to Trudeau, is training Ukrainian forces to "liberate" eastern Ukraine from pro-Russian separatists.

The Canadian ruling elite is firmly opposed to any accommodation with Russia, which it views as a major economic and geopolitical rival. Canada's energy sector has long hoped to challenge Russian dominance of the European oil and gas markets. The military-intelligence establishment, meanwhile, is stridently opposed to any strengthening of Moscow's presence in the Arctic, where Ottawa and Moscow have competing territorial claims, or in the oil-rich Middle East.

In 2016, the Liberal government expanded Ottawa's involvement in the Mideast war in Iraq. Canadian Special Forces, which initially were training Kurdish militia, are now active providing frontline advice and assistance to these forces as they join in the battle for Mosul, a brutal onslaught that has claimed thousands of civilian lives. The Liberals extended the Iraq mission at the end of March for a further three months and pledged to present a long-term plan for the presence of Canadian forces in Iraq—and now possibly Syria—by June.

The implications of Trudeau's embrace of the Trump administration's war drive were made even clearer by the fact that he issued his attack on supposed Russian complicity in war-crimes during a trip to France to commemorate the centenary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. In April 1917, more than 10,000 Canadian soldiers were killed or wounded in the process of capturing a strategically insignificant position from the Germans on the Western Front. Nonetheless, the battle has been mythologized by the nationalist right as the moment Canada emerged as an "independent nation." Over the last two decades in particular, right-wing Conservatives like former Prime Minister Stephen Harper have used Vimy to rebrand Canada as a "warrior nation" committed to aggressive military interventions, putting paid to the myth—which they viewed as an encumbrance—that the

CAF has a "peacekeeping" vocation.

In his remarks at a commemoration ceremony Sunday, Trudeau essentially adopted this right-wing, militarist narrative, declaring that those who fought at Vimy "made their country in its beginnings" and helped to shape Canada as a "democratic" nation committed to "peace."

He also took up a theme addressed by Harper in a 2014 speech marking the centenary of the outbreak of World War One by noting that Canadian war "sacrifices"—including the slaughter of teenage soldiers—had ensured its emergence as an imperialist power. Trudeau stated that the fighting at Vimy and on the Western Front ensured that Canada had an independent seat at the negotiations of the Treaty of Versailles—i.e., a place at the table where the imperialist victors divvied up the spoils of war.

Like last week's US military strikes, the Liberal government's provocative anti-Syrian and anti-Russian statements have been almost universally supported by the media and political establishment, although the Conservatives continue to criticize the Liberals for being "weak."

The NDP, Canada's social democrats, failed to condemn the unilateral and illegal US air strike on the al-Shayrat air base, claiming that it was unclear where this act of war would lead. Predictably, it has fully accepted the US claims that the chemical weapons attack was mounted by Assad, declaring in an April 7 statement that he "must be held accountable for these crimes." Needless to say, the NDP statement made no mention of the ruinous, illegal wars that the US, with Canada's support, has waged across the Middle East during the past quarter-century.



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