Canada’s Liberal government hosts anti-Russia conference on Ukraine

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Earlier this month, Canada played host to the third Ukraine Reform Conference, a gathering aimed at furthering Kiev’s integration into an imperialist-led alliance against Russia. The three days of discussion in Toronto were led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government. The talks ranged from expanding military support to combat “Russian aggression” to the prospects for deepening Canada and Ukraine’s free trade ties.

The conference involved over 30 countries, including delegations from the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Japan and Ukraine, the formal co-host of the meeting. In an information release on the Canadian foreign ministry’s website, Global Affairs Canada, the organizers made no bones about the purpose of the event, which is already in its third year. They billed it as “affirming Ukraine’s sovereignty and security in the face of Russian aggression,” and showing “solidarity and support” as Kiev moves towards “joining the Euro-Atlantic community of values and principles.”

Trudeau also held talks with recently elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, after which he declared, “In the wake of Russian aggression and attempts to undermine Ukraine’s sovereignty, including the illegal annexation of Crimea, it’s all the more important for countries like Canada to stand alongside its partner. Russia’s actions are not only a threat to Ukraine but to international law.”

These remarks are absurd on their face. The truth is that US imperialism and its Canadian ally violate international law whenever it suits their global aims, including their military encirclement of and preparations for war against Russia.

Canada plays an important role in the US-led war drive against Russia, which, in addition to backing Kiev, has included the deployment of thousands of NATO troops to Poland and the Baltic republics along Russia’s western border. Canada currently has 250 troops deployed in Ukraine to train the armed forces to, in the words of Trudeau, “liberate” Ukrainian territory from Russian control. A Canadian military unit made up of some 450 soldiers also heads a NATO battalion stationed in Latvia.

Domestically, Trudeau is using the alleged threat posed by “Russian aggression” and “foreign interference” more generally to justify censorship of social media and other anti-democratic measures ahead of this fall’s federal elections. The vote will be held under conditions of growing opposition among workers and young people in Ontario and Quebec to right-wing austerity measures.

Together with the US and Germany, Canada was deeply implicated in the February 2014 fascist-led coup in Kiev that overthrew elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych after he refused to sign a cooperation agreement with the European Union. It was only in the wake of this Western-sponsored provocation that Russia annexed Crimea.

The Ukraine Reform Conference was held following the decision by the US Senate to provide a further $350 million in military aid to Kiev. The assistance is part of a bill allocating a record $750 billion for the Pentagon budget.

While the US has led the way in the anti-Russia military buildup in Eastern Europe, Kiev views Canada as a key international ally. In addition to its steadfast military and diplomatic support for Ukraine, which has included the imposition of sanctions against Russia, Canada concluded a free trade agreement with Kiev in 2016. Trudeau and Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland vowed at the Ukraine Reform Conference that negotiations on expanding the deal would be launched, although a date for the talks is yet to be set.

Freeland, who is one of Kiev’s staunchest supporters in the Trudeau government, provocatively announced that Canada would reject all Russian passports issued to

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residents of Crimea, which she described as “another form of Russian occupation.” She also unveiled a further $45 million in aid to Ukraine, including funds to support the training of police officers.

The Trudeau government’s anti-Russia stance, which is endorsed by the overwhelming majority of Canada’s ruling elite, is part of the resurgence of Canadian militarism. In alliance with US imperialism, its closest partner for over three-quarters of a century, Canada has participated in virtually every war of aggression led by Washington over the past two decades, from the bombardment of Serbia in 1999 to the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, the 2011 air war on Libya, and the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

As Zelensky met with Trudeau and Freeland in Toronto, Canadian, US and European warships and military personnel were gathering in the Black Sea for the 19th edition of Exercise Sea Breeze, which was launched in Odessa on July 1. Canadian participation in the exercise, which concluded yesterday, was led by the frigate HMCS Toronto. The exercise included training in maritime interdiction operations, air defence, amphibious warfare and anti-submarine warfare.

Perhaps revealing more than he intended, Zelensky told a press conference that Canada had agreed to sell his country armoured vehicles. Asked about the remark later the same day, Freeland refused to comment.

Canada has already funneled some $785 million in military, financial, development and political aid to Ukraine over the past five years. Underscoring the virtually unanimous backing within ruling circles for this anti-Russia course, the financial support has flowed uninterruptedly under both Liberal and Conservative Party governments.

Although Ottawa has officially refrained from selling weaponry to Ukraine, successive governments have offered explicit support to groups of voluntary donors, like Army SOS, who have supplied military equipment to Ukrainian forces fighting pro-Russian separatists in the country’s east.

Canada has one of the largest Ukrainian diasporas in the world, with some 1.3 million Canadians claiming Ukrainian dissent. A vocal and extremely influential minority of these are the descendants of fighters in the pro-Nazi Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists Bandera (OUN-B), who were brought to North America during the early stages of the Cold War through the intervention of the American and Canadian intelligence services.

During his first visit to Ukraine as Canadian prime minister, Trudeau was accompanied by Army SOS organizers, who boasted about supplying parts for rifles and military uniforms to volunteer battalions fighting in eastern Ukraine. Many of these units, like the notorious Azov Battalion, espouse far-right and fascistic politics.

Canada’s close collaboration with ultra-right forces in its foreign policy is not confined to Ukraine. In Venezuela, where the US has threatened an all-out military intervention to back the attempts of the right-wing opposition led by Juan Guaidó to overthrow President Nicolás Maduro, Canada is playing a crucial role in providing cover to Washington’s aggression through its leading position in the Lima group.

On June 29, Canada led the drafting of a Lima Group statement adopted on the sidelines of the G20 summit that denounced the Maduro regime as “illegitimate” and pledged to work with “all willing international partners towards a democratic and peaceful transition in Venezuela.”

The bogus reference to democracy and peace is for public consumption alone. When Guaidó and his right-wing allies launched an abortive military coup in late April, Canada and the rest of the Lima Group rushed to declare their support for the conspiratorial initiative. The group has worked hand-in-glove with Washington, including by offering US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other leading Trump administration officials a platform to deliver military threats to Caracas.

To secure and deepen its military-security partnership with Washington, the Trudeau government has also collaborated with the fascistic-minded President Trump on several key policy initiatives. These have included Trump’s crackdown on immigrants and refugees, which Canada has supported by sharing information with US authorities and deporting refugees en masse who have fled the US to Canada.

Additionally, the Trudeau government has endorsed Trump’s aggressive economic nationalism by agreeing to a renegotiated North America Free Trade Agreement that aims to consolidate a North American protectionist trade bloc to challenge China and all other economic and geopolitical rivals.

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