

Johnson government to double UK troop presence in Eastern Europe, threatens sanctions against Russia

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The UK is preparing to double its existing troop presence in Eastern Europe to reinforce US-NATO military provocations against Russia.

Britain has indicated it will deploy 1,200 troops to Estonia and Poland this week, including paratroopers and Royal Marine mountain and arctic warfare specialists. They will be equipped with Apache helicopter gunships and Deep Fire missile systems, as well as electronic warfare and cyber units from the Royal Signals and the Royal Marines' specialist Y Squadron.

There are already more than 100 troops providing training in Ukraine, in the most frontline role in the escalating war danger on Russia's border. But Britain's main concentration is in Estonia, where it already has 900 troops in a battle group established in 2017 following the installation of a pro-US regime in Ukraine. The Enhanced Forward Presence also includes multinational battle groups in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

A Type 45 destroyer and an offshore patrol vessel will be stationed in the Black Sea and an additional RAF squadron will be deployed to Cyprus to patrol Bulgarian and Romanian airspace. The Prince of Wales aircraft carrier has been placed on standby. A Light Cavalry Squadron of around 150 people is already deployed to Poland.

The plans were the focus of repeated bellicose statements by Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his key ministers over the weekend. Johnson told reporters he was sending a "clear message to the Kremlin" that Russia must not choose "a path of bloodshed and destruction" by invading Ukraine. The UK was demonstrating that it was "able to support our NATO

allies on land, at sea and in the air" and would "stand with our NATO allies in the face of Russian hostility."

Earlier last week he threatened that an invasion of Ukraine would be "painful, bloody and violent" and many Russian soldiers "won't come home."

Johnson was to speak by phone to President Vladimir Putin Monday night, with his spokeswoman boasting, "The prime minister has been deeply engaged on this issue throughout and was one of the first world leaders to raise concerns about Russian hostilities in a speech at Mansion House in November, along with Nord Stream 2." He had, moreover, "a close personal relationship" with Ukrainian President Zelensky and had spoken to US President Joe Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and others about this issue "on numerous occasions."

The call with Putin fell through because Johnson was required in Parliament following the arrival of the inquiry report into "partygate."

Johnson's relentless self-promotion is part of his effort to counter the crisis over "partygate" by placing himself at the forefront of the US campaign of provocations and a raft of right-wing domestic measures—above all the ending of pandemic restrictions. He is to visit Ukraine today.

His appeal is to a Tory Party united in support of warmongering over Ukraine, with Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and Defence Secretary Ben Wallace set to go to Moscow for talks after Truss wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph*, "Moscow's campaign against Ukraine and fellow democracies is undermining the very foundation of European security. And so, it is vital we face down the clear and present threat posed by Russia."

Also in the *Telegraph*, Armed Forces Minister James

Heappey warned that Putin “could be days away from giving the order to invade.”

Tobias Ellwood, chair of the Commons defence select committee, described Russia-Ukraine tensions as “our Cuban missile crisis moment, and we must not blink”.

The UK is also threatening sanctions targeting those close to Putin, with Truss identifying “any company of interest to the Kremlin and the regime in Russia’ as “Putin’s oligarchs.” This pledge, made amid similar threats from the US, follows weeks of complaints by Washington that no economic measures against Russia would be effective while London remains a global centre for its investors.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov promised “retaliatory measures” if Russian companies are targeted, saying the statement from London was “very worrying” and “demonstrates a fair amount of unpredictability on the part of London and is a cause for serious concern for international financial structures.”

Washington was seemingly less convinced of the UK’s intentions than Moscow, with a US State Department source telling *The Times*, “The fear is that Russian money is so entrenched in London now that the opportunity to use it as leverage against Putin could be lost.”

The UK’s other service to Washington is the waging of a campaign pillorying Germany for a lack of resolve in dealing firmly with Russia. Treasury minister Simon Clarke encapsulated the Johnson government’s message of how much more reliable an ally London was for the US, telling Sky News, “Brexit Britain is one of the foremost opponents of the actions of the Putin regime... If you look at the EU, it is countries like Germany that are dragging their feet in the response to this crisis. We are the ones tightening this sanctions regime, making sure we support our Nato allies and standing up to Putin in a way that is, frankly, leading the continent rather than following it.”

This mixture of anti-German and anti-Russian rhetoric finds expression across the media political spectrum, with the *Guardian/Observer* writing Sunday regarding the German Chancellor’s Social Democrats, “No party in the Bundestag has used Germany’s historic crimes as a cover for expanding ties with Russia as much as Scholz’s...” and the *Spectator* declaring that “If Germany has come out of its dugout

at all, it’s playing the wrong game... Berlin needs to step up to the mark. At the moment it is letting the side down.”

Nowhere does the Tory drumbeat for war find a more enthusiastic echo than in the Labour Party. Even as its MPs proclaim their outrage over drinks parties at Number 10, they jostle for position as warmongers in chief. Many of their attacks on Johnson over “partygate” have centred on its impact on his leadership in the campaign against Russia. “We need to see leadership from this prime minister and frankly at the moment his priority’s saving his own skin,” complained Stephen Morgan MP.

In an interview last month with Politico, following his visit to Kyiv, Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey said it was an “embarrassment” that “with Europe facing the most serious security crisis since the Cold War, Britain has a non-functioning prime minister.” Johnson was “ducking and diving to try to deal with the mess that he’s created around Downing Street parties” and was “incapable of playing the statesman role and offering the British leadership that’s required.”

Last week, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer grandstanded over his insistence that Johnson make the “tough decisions” on sanctions, “cutting Russian access to the international financial system” and stopping the illicit money “laundromat” in the City of London. This was only days after he took to the pages of the *Telegraph* January 21, to demand that the UK “stand firm against Russian aggression.”

He wrote, “I must commend the work of the Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace, on this matter. He has worked hard to bring people together, written with moral clarity on the nature of Russian aggression and ensured that the UK continues to support Ukraine’s ability to defend itself through military aid.”



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