

UK announces sanctions on Russian banks and oligarchs, as armed forces prepare anti-Russian provocations

Robert Stevens
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Britain has stepped up its warmongering against Russia, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson announcing sanctions against five banks and three oligarchs close to President Putin.

Johnson's statement was heralded by cabinet minister Sajid Javid declaring that Putin's decision to recognise the separatist republics of Donetsk and Lugansk constituted an invasion. He told *Sky News*, "We have seen that he has recognised these breakaway eastern regions in Ukraine and from the reports we can already tell that he has sent in tanks and troops... From that you can conclude that the invasion of Ukraine has begun."

Johnson announced sanctions against Rossiya, IS Bank, General Bank, Promsvyazbank and the Black Sea Bank, along with Gennady Timchenko, Boris Rotenberg, and Igor Rotenberg. "This the first tranche, the first barrage of what we are prepared to do and we hold further sanctions at readiness to be deployed."

Such is the war fever in ruling circles in the general rush to position Britain as the attack dog of US imperialism against Russia that Johnson was met with a hostile barrage from MPs from all parties who denounced the sanctions as hopelessly inadequate. The most hawkish MPs in his own Conservative Party, with close connections to the military, were vociferous in their anti-Russian demands. Even before the debate in parliament Tom Tugendhat, Conservative chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, told the BBC, "I'd like to see this go much further, much faster. As my former boss, the chief of the defence staff, Gen Lord Richards, put it: clout, don't dribble."

Even so, the opposition Labour Party outdid any Tory in bloodcurdling rhetoric. Party leader Sir Keir Starmer said, "a threshold has already been breached" as Ukraine "has been invaded in a war of aggression... if we do not respond with the full set of sanctions now Putin will once again take away the message that the benefits of aggression outweigh the costs".

Labour would work with Johnson and NATO allies "to ensure that more sanctions are introduced". He demanded, "Russia should be excluded from financial mechanisms like Swift and we should ban trading in Russian sovereign debt" and that "Russia Today should be prevented from broadcasting its propaganda around the world".

Labour MP Chris Bryant's pro-imperialist credentials include refusing to serve in 2015 as shadow defence minister under former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn as he could not get a commitment that he would authorise a nuclear attack on Russia. Yesterday he called for the sanctioning of Russian owner of London-based Chelsea Football Club, Roman Abramovich. "Everybody in this house will work closely with the government to deliver far more effective and secure sanctions if the prime minister asks but they have to be now. We have to close the dirty Russian money down."

Another Labour MP, Liam Byrne, declared, "We are here today because our strategy of deterrence has failed... The risk is that today's slap on the wrist will not deter anything further. It's been 2014 since we proposed sanctions for economic crimes, apart from the Magnitsky sanctions. The sanctions against the oligarchs have been on the American list since 2018... The prime minister has got to recognise that pulling our punches does not work with President Putin. We need to punch harder and if we're not prepared to send bombers we should at least take on the bankers."

Such was the anti-Russian fervour from the Labourites that Johnson felt able to declare his opposition to "casual Russophobia"!

Johnson defended his militarist agenda by encouraging and taking his own swipes at Germany, France and other European Union member states he described as taking a back seat in opposing Russia. "I do think it's been right for us to be out in front in offering military assistance, defensive military assistance to the Ukrainians."

Stung by criticism, a statement by Foreign Secretary Liz Truss announced following Johnson's speech, "The UK will also sanction those members of the Russian Duma and Federation Council who voted to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk in flagrant violation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty." She added, "And we are prepared to go much further if Russia does not pull back from the brink. We will curtail the ability of the Russian state and Russian companies to raise funds in our markets, prohibit a range of high-tech exports, and further isolate Russian banks from the

global economy.”

Britain is being dragged by the Tories and Labour into the vortex of a military conflict with Russia. Cited in the *Financial Times*, Tom Keatinge, of the Royal United Services Institute think-tank, declared bluntly, “All the talk on sanctions so far has meant to be a deterrent and we have turned up to a gunfight with a peashooter.”

Such statements are meant to ensure that there is no let-up in Britain’s military escalation in Eastern Europe and Ukraine. Britain’s preparations for war were accelerated Monday at the conclusion of a belligerent summit of the defence ministers making up the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) of Northern European countries. The ministers declared after meeting at Belvoir Castle, England that they were “united in our condemnation of that unjustified act, the build-up of Russian forces on the border with Ukraine, and further incursion in the Donbas region.

“We strongly support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and reiterate the right of all sovereign nations to choose their own path, their own security arrangements and their own alliances, free from external aggression and coercion, as a fundamental principle of the European security order.”

After Britain declared just days ago that Russia planned to invade Ukraine from Belarus, where Moscow has just conducted joint military training exercises, the JEF statement said, “We condemn the instrumentalization of migration flows and other hybrid activity towards Latvia, Lithuania and Poland by the Belarussian regime.”

The JEF was established in 2014 at NATO’s summit in Wales at the initiative of Prime Minister David Cameron’s Tory government and the United States/NATO. It comprises ten “High North, North Atlantic and Baltic Sea” nations: the UK, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. The countries involved share over 2,300 km of borders with Russia. Included in its military forces are personnel and equipment from the UK’s Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army and Royal Air Force. Becoming fully operational in 2018, JEF command and control is located at the Standing Joint Force Headquarters in Northwood, England.

The importance of the JEF for US and British imperialism as a Europe-faced military force operating outside the orbit of the European Union was summed up by the Washington think tank, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). It noted last October, “The integration of the JEF Baltic Protector maritime task force into the U.S.-led BALTOPS 2019 exercise—an annual NATO-led exercise running since 1972—shows the potential utility of JEF in a nutshell: independent and flexible, but NATO-capable and scalable. As one Royal Navy commodore puts it, the JEF is a ‘force of friends, filling a hole in the security architecture of northern Europe between a national force and a NATO force.’”

General David Richards, hailed Tuesday by the warmonger

Tugendhat, played a major role in establishing the JEF. He echoed the CSIS in a 2012 speech saying of the then proposed force, “With the capability to ‘punch’ hard and not be a logistical or tactical drag on a coalition, we will be especially welcomed by our friends and feared by our enemies.”

The defence ministers’ statement emphasised, “The JEF is designed from first principles to be complementary to NATO’s Deterrence and Defence posture.” That the JEF also includes two non-NATO members, Finland and Sweden, blows out of the water the lies of the US and its allies that the incorporation of Ukraine into NATO is a distant prospect, which Moscow is exaggerating in order to excuse its own aggression. The JEF’s military architecture already exists for Ukraine to be fully integrated into anti-Russia operations well before it is granted NATO membership.

As an “agile, capable, and ready force”, the JEF statement announced it “today agreed to undertake a series of integrated military activities across our part of northern Europe—at sea, on land and in the air.” What are planned are a series of provocative actions on Russia’s doorstep. The JEF concluded, “For example, we will shortly conduct an exercise demonstrating JEF nations’ freedom of movement in the Baltic Sea.”

The JEF defence ministers meeting followed a gathering the previous week of the armed forces chiefs of staff of the JEF nations in Lulea, Sweden. A UK Ministry of Defence statement following the meeting read, “A busy schedule of activity over the coming months and years will see the JEF operating across its core areas of the North Atlantic, High North and Baltic Sea Region, with a particular focus on the upcoming command and control Exercise Joint Protector later in 2022, followed by the Live Exercise JEF Warrior in 2023.”



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