Britain joins US imperialism's anti-China provocations

Robert Stevens
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Britain is standing squarely behind US imperialism's naked aggression against China, threatening to drag the population into a catastrophic war.

Pursuing an anti-China foreign policy has been one of the central themes of the Conservative leadership contest to replace Boris Johnson, with candidates Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak competing over who is the most hawkish.

Sunak opened his campaign with a press release declaring that China and the Chinese Communist Party "represent the largest threat to Britain and the world's security and prosperity this century." Truss responded that it was her Foreign Office and not Sunak's Treasury that had taken "the toughest stance" against China.

During last week's debate, Sunak castigated Truss for previously saying that Britain was entering a "golden era" in its relationship with China. Truss disowned her statement, saying, "I think that was almost a decade ago."

It was six years ago, and it was the policy of David Cameron's Tory government. Despite warnings from the US, Britain became a founding member of Beijing's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, hoping to position itself as a key player in China's access to European markets. A series of high-level meetings culminated in the 2015 state visit of President Xi to Britain, hosted by the queen.

The shift in policy was breakneck, with the government seeking to replace its role as a key US intermediary within the European Union, jettisoned by Brexit in 2016, with an even more slavish support for US imperialism. Washington's price for a close partnership and the promise of a trade deal included an immediate halt to Britain's orientation to China—its main global competitor.

In a piece published in *The Atlantic* Tuesday, "Why Britain Changed Its China Stance", author Tom McTague commented that from "2020 onward… Britain transformed itself from China's best partner in Europe to its harshest critic, sweeping away decades of foreign-policy consensus in the most drastic such shift in the Western world."

He noted, "to look at British foreign policy now is to see almost a complete overlap with the US, whether on the Iranian nuclear deal, climate change, the importance of spending more on defense, NATO, the threat posed by Russia, or—now—China."

Britain's close involvement in US war plans against China was highlighted this week by the provocative visit to Taiwan staged by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. With China's military on high alert, the *Guardian* reported that a delegation from the UK's House of Commons foreign affairs select committee would make the same trip in November or early December. The committee is headed by Tory MP and former army lieutenant colonelTom Tugendhat, expected to be handed a top position in a Truss cabinet.

Behind the diplomatic provocations are extensive military preparations. By March 2021, the government's Ministry of Defence (MoD) had published its Integrated Review of foreign and defence policy and a further strategy document, "Defence in a Competitive Age", directly targeting both Russia and China.

In May that year, at the behest of NATO, the UK launched its largest Carrier Strike Group since the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war, centred on the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier. It played a critical role in inflaming tensions with Russia in the Black Sea before doing the same against Beijing in the South China Sea in September 2021. HMS Richmond, a Type 23 frigate warship deployed with the carrier strike group, sailed through the Taiwan Strait—the first time a UK frigate had done so in more than a decade.

That same month, the United States, Britain and Australia announced the formation of the AUKUS anti-China military pact, focussed on the deployment of nuclear-powered submarines.

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The Taiwan Strait provocation was authorised by head of the Royal Navy Admiral Sir Tony Radakin on the same day he was interviewed by Johnson for the position of Head of the Armed Forces. It was announced soon after that Radakin would be appointed Chief of the Defence Staff, a post he took up in November 2021.

Within the top ranks of the military, the drumbeat for war with China is relentless. Last month, the new head of the Royal Navy Admiral Sir Ben Key told the Council on Geostrategy, "Focusing solely on the Russian bear risks missing the tiger". He warned, "The risk of focusing solely on Russia is that you miss the long-term strategic challenge posed by China."

Key's speech came 10 days after US Republican Representative Steve Chabot, a ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Asia-Pacific Subcommittee, intervened in the pages of the *Telegraph* to insist that America's allies in Europe, particularly the British, "step up" the arming of Taiwan.

This is now the de facto policy of the UK government, despite Britain having no formal diplomatic ties with Taipei due to its abiding by the historic "One China" policy. In her role as foreign secretary, Truss gave a speech in April rejecting "the false choice between Euro-Atlantic security and Indo-Pacific security" and calling for "a global NATO."

She continued, "We need to pre-empt threats in the Indo-Pacific, working with our allies like Japan and Australia to ensure the Pacific is protected. And we must ensure that democracies like Taiwan are able to defend themselves. All of this will require resources. We are correcting a generation of underinvestment."

Given Britain has already sold £338 million worth of military equipment to Taiwan since 2017, Truss is writing a massive cheque to be picked up by the working class through pay and spending cuts.

The foreign secretary told the House of Commons Select Committee on June 29 that Britain and its NATO allies would seek to improve on the script used for their proxy war against Russia in Ukraine: "We should have been supplying defensive weapons into Ukraine earlier. We need to learn that lesson for Taiwan. Every piece of equipment we have sent takes months of training, so the sooner we do it the better."

The bellicose threats and provocations of British imperialism against nuclear armed China could not be more reckless or deluded. Dominic Nicholls, the *Telegraph*'s defence and security correspondent, noted on Radakin's appointment, "Since 2014, China has launched more submarines, warships, principal amphibious vessels and auxiliaries than the total number of ships currently serving in the navies of the UK, Germany, India, Spain and Taiwan, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

"In terms of tonnage, China is launching the equivalent of the entire Royal Navy every four years."

Beijing warned in the *Global Times* after HMS Queen Elizabeth's deployment that it would not hesitate to make an example out of Britain, "to execute one as a warning to a hundred".

On Tuesday, after the UK Foreign Select Committee trip to Taiwan was revealed, Chinese ambassador Zheng Zeguang told British MPs in a press conference that the UK should not "dance to the tune of the United States". Vowing that if any MP set foot in Taiwan there would be "severe consequences", he warned, "those who play with fire will get burnt."

Such is the crisis wracking British imperialism in a period of severe decline—its dependence on the US and desperate effort to redirect unprecedented social tensions outward to a foreign foe—that it is set on forcing a confrontation.

The danger of a catastrophic conflict can only be averted by taking power out of the hands of the maniacs in parliament. Responding to the fall of Johnson and the Tory leadership contest, the Socialist Equality Party has demanded an immediate general election to "expose the Tory-Labour conspiracy to drag Britain into World War III", "rouse opposition to the war policies of the government and to agitate for mass action by the working class to defeat the savage assault on living standards and democratic rights."

In the emerging struggles of the working class, the fight against war must be made a central issue, based on a socialist programme for the unification of the working class across the globe in a struggle against its war-mad governments.

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