

Starmer visits Gulf states amid fracturing “special relationship” with US

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The US/Israeli war on Iran has provoked an escalating crisis for all the European powers, none more so than the Starmer government in Britain.

Foreign policy precepts that have determined the actions of UK governments for decades are being torn apart—centred on the worsening breakdown of the “special relationship” with the United States.

Starmer in opposition promised a “reset” with the major European powers, after Britain’s fractious and economically catastrophic exit from the European Union—as demanded not just by dominant sections of British capital but also by the Biden administration, which wanted a restoration of the UK’s role as a reliable voice for Washington within the bloc.

But by the time Labour came to office, Donald Trump occupied the White House, forcing Starmer to try to agree a vital pro-Brexit trade deal with a US government that was openly hostile to the EU.

A trade deal was eventually reached, but entirely on Trump’s terms—with Britain hit a little less hard by tariffs than other European powers.

The second major bone of contention was military spending, with Starmer posturing, ever more unsuccessfully, as the European power most receptive to Trump’s demands for 5 percent of GDP spending by NATO powers.

The Iran war has brought US-UK and US-European tensions to fever pitch, with Trump repeatedly berating Starmer and other European leaders for placing face-saving restrictions on US flights and for not sending ships to the Strait of Hormuz. Starmer was “no Winston Churchill”, Trump declared, and the Royal Navy’s warships were “toys”, fronted by “two old broken-down aircraft carriers”.

Within hours of Trump announcing a ceasefire in the US war against Iran, Starmer announced a visit to the Middle East “to meet leaders of countries who have been in the front line and will set out his full support for the newly agreed ceasefire”. Talks would centre “on ensuring the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz remains permanent, with the United Kingdom continuing to lead international efforts.”

Once again, however, Starmer’s diplomatic visit unravelled spectacularly.

Little of substance emerged from talks with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Moreover, despite the ceasefire, back home Starmer’s inability to send more than a single destroyer to the region (HMS Dragon to the UK base in Cyprus) has infuriated the most hawkish sections of the ruling class, who are generally concerned that everything possible be done to fix Britain’s relations with the US.

Labour’s plan to increase military spending beyond 3 percent of GDP only sometime during the next parliament has been denounced for leaving Britain “defenceless” in a time of what should be a unified war between the “West” and its enemies: Russia, China and Iran.

The chorus became deafening Thursday, with a *Telegraph* front page exclusive, “Putin mocks Starmer in Channel,” reporting: “Vladimir Putin has openly defied Sir Keir Starmer’s threat to seize sanctioned Russian vessels by sending a warship to escort them through the Channel.”

The *Telegraph* observed “Putin’s flotilla cruising past the south coast while RFA Tideforce, a Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker, trailed in their wake.” Two 600ft tankers, *Universal* and *Enigma*, were protected on their journey “past the south coast” by a 3,620-tonne warship, the *Admiral Grigorovich*.

Starmer had given “special forces the authority to capture the armada of rusted ships illegally ferrying oil to support Russia’s war in Ukraine, saying he would hit the shadow fleet ‘even harder’ if they sailed through British waters,” the newspaper complained. “However, Britain is yet to seize a single Russian vessel... dozens of Russian vessels are believed to have passed through the Channel since Sir Keir’s threat.”

In the same vein, the *Financial Times* wrote, “The Iran war has brutally exposed Britain’s lack of military readiness and shortage of defence assets, with its navy unable to immediately deploy an advanced warship even after a UK air base on Cyprus was targeted by drones.”

The *Times* added, “Defence readiness, the essential

provision to put infrastructure and industry on a war footing, has barely begun.”

Starmer’s Middle East trip became a feeding frenzy for his critics, who complained that he was seeking to project an image of British influence and strength that bore no relationship to the military reality. Among the facts pointed out were that there is not a single Royal Navy combat vessel within reach of the Gulf states being visited, with HMS Dragon taken to port for essential maintenance. The *i* Paper headlined a report, “Royal Navy in ‘doom loop’ with too few ships working too hard.”

Labour has fared no better with the more pro-European voices within ruling circles, who, having been silent for weeks, made the belated complaint that Starmer’s attempt to placate Trump has damaged the essential and clearly opposed interests of British imperialism.

None of these complaints were directed against Trump’s threat to obliterate Iran and its civilisation, but rather his temporary retreat from this threat for highlighting underlying US weakness with its knock-on effect for the UK and Europe.

Patrick Wintour, diplomatic editor of the *Guardian*, wrote: “Trump needlessly started a war at the urging of Israel, refused to listen to those experts urging caution, devised a strategy built on a misapprehension of Iran, sparked a ruinous regional conflict, caused the death of thousands of civilians, unhinged the world economy, strengthened, for now, the repressive instincts of the Iranian and Russian governments, left America more discredited and isolated...”

His colleague Peter Beaumont complained that, following the ceasefire, “Across the globe friends and foes will draw their own conclusions. China and Russia will have noted the limits of US power and that, despite the jaw-jaw, the US did not commit ground troops to its chaotically conducted campaign.

“The damage wrought by Trump to a weakened Nato will also have been well-noted, even as European countries have moved to distance themselves from Washington.”

To counter criticisms of UK military preparedness, Defence Secretary John Healey called a press conference Thursday, where he stated that UK armed forces had been monitoring three Russian submarines he accused of mounting a “covert” operation above cables and pipelines in the North Atlantic, lasting longer than a month. He was forced to acknowledge that there was “no evidence” of any damage to UK infrastructure in the Atlantic.

Prior to concluding his Middle East trip on Friday, Starmer gave vent to his own frustration when interviewed in Bahrain by ITV journalist Robert Peston, complaining of being “fed up with the fact that families across the country see their bills go up and down on energy, businesses’ bills

go up and down on energy, because of the actions of Putin or Trump across the world.”

His regret over this momentary outburst was clear. With the fate of British imperialism tied to the US war machine by a million threads, including its nuclear capability, Starmer told Peston that his desire to reopen the Strait of Hormuz had necessitated a call with Trump on “the practical plan that’s going to be needed to get navigation through the strait”.

When asked about Trump’s threat to pull the US out of NATO, Starmer made an appeal for a continued alliance: “It is in America’s interests. It’s in European interests” that “the single most effective military alliance the world has ever known” is preserved, he said, adding that he had been making the case for Europeans to do more, as Trump has demanded, “for the best part of two years”.

The Starmer government’s dilemma is that of British imperialism as a whole: whether to continue efforts to restore the relations with US imperialism on which it has relied for decades, placating Trump to keep NATO alive, or whether to shift more decisively towards the creation of an at least semi-independent economic and military block with Germany, France and others to counter the “America First” anti-European agenda now dominating Washington.

Both demand a massive escalation in military spending, austerity cuts of unprecedented savagery, and an ever-deeper turn to authoritarian rule. Amid the continued drive by all the imperialist powers to redivide the world between them, both routes lead to bloody wars internationally and class war at home.

The only progressive alternative is through the systematic political and industrial mobilisation of the working class against all factions of the imperialist ruling class, in Britain and internationally, in a socialist, anti-war movement.



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