

Ukraine: Wag the Poodle - Johnson, Biden and great powers bullying each other at the expense of weaker countries

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The 1997 film “Wag the Dog” depicted an attempt to shift attention away from a sex scandal involving an American president by staging a Hollywood-style war in Albania. The premonitory character that the film acquired shortly after its release – when Bill Clinton got tangled up in the sex scandal involving Monica Lewinsky and engaged in various military adventures culminating in the 1999 Kosovo war – made it an inevitable reference for any instance of a political leader suspected of staging a big event for the sake of distracting public opinion from problems embarrassing him or her (a recent fictional “her” is President Orlean in *Don't Look Up*).

It is hard not to think of the 1997 film when contemplating the fact that the two Western leaders who are displaying the harshest attitude towards Moscow in the present confrontation about Ukraine are Joe Biden and Boris Johnson, who both are embroiled in embarrassing situations at home. Biden started seriously ruining his reputation with his spectacular failure in organising the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. He lost any remaining credit by proving impotent in the face of his own party's right-wingers who blocked his considerably watered-down economic projects. Johnson reached the nadir of his prime ministership with the “partygate” scandal, after a series of embarrassing woes, all stemming from an obvious difficulty in sticking to principles and the sober truth.

Both are championing the tough stance in confronting Moscow. Washington's and London's heavy insistence on the imminence of Russian aggression sounds almost like wishing that the prophecy may prove self-fulfilling. Moscow easily mocks their statements as “hysterical”. Their military gesticulations are pitiful when compared to the concentration of Russian forces around Ukraine. And their very exaggeration of the imminence of invasion gives the Ukrainians the feeling that these stances are hot air and that both capitals have resolved to abandon them since they are pledging not to get militarily involved in the conflict and moreover are calling on their nationals to leave Ukraine to avoid any risk of being forced to intervene.

Joe Biden probably believes that, after failing to inspire comparisons with Roosevelt in pushing through an ersatz of New Deal, he could make up for this by managing an ersatz world war situation. Boris Johnson, whose hero is Winston Churchill, probably dreams of delivering to the British people something as dramatic as the “blood, toil, tears and sweat” speech, after his first Covid-related attempt at this exercise has now turned into embarrassment.

As for Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, who is poised to replace Johnson in case “partygate” ends up forcing him to throw in the towel, her hero is Margaret Thatcher, whose military feat was the Falklands war. Her performance at the Kremlin was pathetic: she had strictly nothing to offer, and her threats were contemptuously dismissed by her Russian counterpart. Most importantly, however, the trip included for Liz Truss “a visit to Red Square clad in a fur hat despite the unseasonably warm weather in an apparent attempt to channel images of Margaret Thatcher on a Moscow tour”, as

noted by the *Financial Times* correspondents [1].

By such ostentatious behaviour, Boris Johnson's government is trying its best to confirm the "special relationship" with the Big American Brother that was so dear to Tony Blair. And like the latter with regard to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, it turns its back on its European peers, France and Germany, to act as trailer to Washington's lorry, with greater leeway now that the UK has left the EU.

The calculation is even more short-sighted this time than it was in 2003. The US is much less respected today than it was twenty years ago – not least due to the catastrophic failure of the two wars it conducted in Afghanistan and Iraq over that period. And Paris and Berlin are perfectly wise in showing some understanding for Moscow's security concerns, which are certainly not extravagant when compared to Washington's or their own.

If tragedies are doomed to repeat as farces, the Westminster's elite's attitude today is indeed a farcical reproduction of that of 2003. Then the Conservatives supported Tony Blair's war. Today, Blair's heir, Keir Starmer, supports the Conservative government's gesticulations and tries to outbid everybody in swearing allegiance to Nato. The new Cold Warriors' pretence to defend Ukraine's sovereignty by insisting on keeping the door open to her to join Nato is pure casuistry.

Moscow's demand is not addressed to Ukraine but to the Alliance. It is not forbidding Ukraine to apply for Nato membership; it is demanding that the Alliance itself acknowledges that it has reached the limit of its eastward expansion. In 1962, Washington did not forbid Cuba – part of whose territory the United States still occupies, by the way – from inviting Moscow to deploy missiles on the island. It demanded from Moscow that they be removed. Great powers bullying each other at the expense of weaker countries, reduced to bargaining chips: that's the ugly reality of our global jungle.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.ft.com/content/3a1d520d-228a-426a-b234-92b2229afca3>