

Towards “Global NATO”: Britain’s Bumbling Foreign Policy Over Taiwan and Ukraine

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‘Global Nato’. Help Taiwan ‘defend itself’. Recover the ‘whole’ of Ukraine. Promote ‘the free world’ – UK foreign policy under Liz Truss has become a series of empty slogans from a declining power desperate to remain a major one.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, foreign secretary Liz Truss has given at [least three speeches](#) saying the UK must enable Taiwan to “defend itself” against possible Chinese aggression.

Clearly, China and the island of 24 million Taiwanese lying 100 miles off its shore, is very much on the minds of British officials as they aid Ukraine’s military efforts against Moscow.

Maybe it’s China, the world’s coming superpower, they’re really wanting to deter in their determination to be seen to stop Russia.

Last November, in his first ever public speech, MI6 chief Richard Moore [said](#): “Beijing’s growing military strength and the [Communist] Party’s desire to resolve the Taiwan issue, by force if necessary ... pose a serious challenge to global stability and peace”.

But how far would or could the UK really go to “defend” Taiwan? The UK’s Attorney General, Suella Braverman, [implies](#) the UK will help it counter “hostile cyber activity” by China.

But a military threat is of a different order. The UK doesn’t recognise Taiwan as a state. Just 13 countries recognise Taiwan as a sovereign country for fear of upsetting relations with Beijing and its “One China” policy.

Like most countries, Whitehall has no formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan and has no [plans](#) to recognise it. The Foreign Office [says](#) it has an “unofficial relationship, based on dynamic commercial, educational and cultural ties”.

The UK also has no formal defence ties with Taiwan. When asked over the years if the UK

would consider lending military support to it, UK governments have [repeated](#) the position that UK policy backs a peaceful resolution between China and Taiwan.

‘Global Nato’

Truss’s bullish statements about defending Taiwan are as vacuous as those coming from Washington.

US President Biden [warned](#) in Tokyo last month that if China invaded Taiwan, the US would intervene militarily. This was an apparent departure from Washington’s traditional policy of “strategic ambiguity” and implicit recognition of Beijing’s policy towards the island.

His intervention was welcomed in Taiwan until the State Department quickly insisted that Biden’s unscripted comment in answer to a journalist’s question did not signify any change in US policy.

But when Liz Truss [spoke](#) in April about Taiwan being able to “defend itself” she invoked a new concept – a “Global Nato”.

“By that”, Truss said, “I don’t mean extending the membership to those from other regions. I mean that Nato must have a global outlook, ready to tackle global threats”. She could only have meant China.

The UK has been keen to display its military power to the Chinese. Last September, the UK sent a warship that was part of the Royal Navy’s aircraft carrier strike group, HMS Richmond, through the Taiwan strait for the first time since 2008.

In response, China [accused](#) Britain of having “evil intentions”.

The British government had already seized the opportunity presented by increased Chinese naval activity in the South China Sea to justify the £7.6 billion spent on building two aircraft carriers – the largest ships ever commissioned by the Royal Navy.

It sent one of them, HMS Queen Elizabeth, to the Pacific. Yet the UK’s aircraft carrier, like all large warships, is extremely vulnerable to attack, especially from Chinese [missiles](#).

A provocative naval show of force in the Pacific may make UK officials feel important. It may also make Beijing think again about the timing and nature of any attack on Taiwan, but in the end would surely make no difference to China’s commitment to achieve its objectives.

Ukraine

It’s not only on Taiwan but also on Ukraine that comments by Truss and other British ministers are empty rhetoric, counter-productive, and also dangerous.

To ingratiate themselves with Washington, take a sideswipe at the EU, and as a diversion from domestic crises, Boris Johnson and his foreign and defence secretaries are keen to be at the forefront of giving military support to Ukraine. They’ve been plying Ukraine with missiles and organising international arms shipments to Kyiv.

But while Ukraine needs arms to defend itself, it also needs progress towards implementing a peace agreement. Britain’s demand that Russia must withdraw from the whole of Ukraine

- which by implication includes Crimea - slams the door on any peace settlement.

Even some former British military chiefs [recognise](#) Putin is never going to allow Ukraine to regain Crimea, which historically was part of Russia until a Soviet president gifted it to Ukraine in 1954.

An obvious outcome might be that the Donbas region remain in Ukraine but its people enjoy a wide degree of devolved power - something that might have been attainable before the invasion.

Then there are Truss's seemingly endless comments about her foreign policy promoting the "free world", "freedom and democracy" and "network of liberty".

The claims are ludicrous as the UK deepens relations with the tyrannical Gulf states and, as *Declassified* has shown, [backs](#) most of the world's repressive regimes.

Arms market

Taiwan has the advantage for Whitehall of being a burgeoning market for UK arms exports. These have taken off in the last five years: since 2017, Britain has [sold](#) £338m worth of military equipment to the island.

Perhaps the UK's military-industrial complex, backed by officials, is more hopeful than fearful of increasing Chinese belligerency.

The US is also increasing its supplies of arms to Taiwan, albeit not on the scale it has to Ukraine following Russia's invasion. Yet western arms are unlikely to deter President Xi if he decided to attack Taiwan.

Taiwan's military chiefs are following the war in Ukraine extremely [closely](#), learning lessons. So, too, is Beijing.

The Taiwanese have seen how ambushes by small groups of militia and drones can destroy large military formations. Beijing has seen how vulnerable a ground invasion can be, with clear implications for amphibious operations.

The message is that an attack on Taiwan would require coordinated airborne and amphibious forces, accompanied by precise bombing.

Nato members, including the US, have so far shown they are unwilling to provoke Moscow into an even wider military conflict, and the US is likely not willing to intervene directly in a conflict with a nuclear power.

In any war over Taiwan, western warships would have to engage directly with the Chinese navy to prevent the island from being cut off and blockaded by China.

Sanctions

Europe is suffering an energy crisis partly because of sanctions imposed on Russian oil and gas and there are already cracks in the EU's response to Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Sanctions take a long time and need to be well targeted to be effective.

Sanctions against China would have a much greater impact on the west's economy given the importance of China in the market for rare earth products, electronics and consumer goods and more generally, global finance and investments.

A conflict involving Taiwan could have a devastating impact on the world's supply of [microchips](#).

Rather than bellicose belligerency, the UK Foreign Office should begin to understand what it can really achieve on the international stage, and who and what it can deter. It should give up its grandstanding claims and match policy to its rhetoric.

It should stop telling others to promote peace when it's plainly more interested in war, and stop pretending it's supporting human rights when it's backing those repressing them.

What the public needs is for the West and the East to cooperate and confront such impending crises as climate change. What it doesn't need is for pretentious great powers to strut the world stage bereft of real policies.

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Featured image: HMS Richmond fires a missile on exercise in the Atlantic. (Photo: US Navy)

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