

The battle for Avdiivka:

President Trump & Prime Minister May stumble
over their first national security Litmus tests

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by Mohammad Zahoor

On 29th January, less than one day after his first phone conversation with Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin put the newly inaugurated president's soft-spoken words on the future of Russian-American affairs to the test.

This test has been uttered in a rain of shelling and an upsurge in fighting of an intensity not seen since the battle of Debaltsave. In five days more than 5000 artillery shells were fired. This escalation is twenty times higher than the average monthly figure of shelling by the Russian-backed separatists. More than ten casualties in such a short time is also well above the norm, but more dramatically, the attack in Avdiivka has triggered a humanitarian crisis the like of which Ukraine has not endured since the peak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2015. More than 17000 people are now without water, electricity or heating, in a Ukrainian winter temperatures hovering below -20° Celsius. Bread queues and even evacuations have had to be organised under the direst circumstances, reminiscent of the desperate scenes in Aleppo. These are tragedies that we do not associate with Europe. The escalation is so fast and severe that President Poroshenko was forced to break off his national state visit to Germany, Ukraine's most important (and reliable ally).

How have the leaders of the US and the UK reacted? The answer is with almost complete Silence.

With President Trump having taken office less than two weeks ago, it has become very clear that the international community has entered uncharted waters. Increasingly it looks as though the world order is broken. Now nativist, protectionist voices are in the ascendency and Eastern European nations are alarmed and baffled that their most fundamental security concerns are barely acknowledged by the new US government. They look for some small comfort in the fact Trump is scaling back his anti-NATO rhetoric.

Ukraine is not that fortunate. Still fighting Europe's 'Forgotten War' with the Russian-backed separatists, Ukrainians view the double shock of Trump and Brexit with consternation and rapidly growing concern. Ukraine's best hopes for a satisfactory peace with Russia rested on a united Europe at its western borders and the United States as a strong guarantor. Now Ukraine is being confronted with the reality that the two Western nations who gave it significant and specific security assurances are currently treating this pledge as an inconvenient chore. As they turn inward to focus on their domestic reinvention they offer little more than symbolic support.

President Trump, in particular, undermines previous assurances voiced by the American congress when he speaks of 'partnership' with Russia over Syria, Iran and

Ukraine. However, as yet we have no idea what the word 'partnership' means in the Ukrainian context. While his own prospective cabinet members and some of his presidential staff acknowledge the threat coming from Russia under a Putin presidency, none of this seems to matter to the new American president. It does not seem that Ukrainian affairs have even appeared on his radar. Moreover, since his election, there has been no communication whatsoever between the Ukrainian government and the Trump White House.

Since the Brexit, referendum Britain has been completely mesmerised by the decision to leave the EU. Brexit haunts every conversation in Britain. The country is seeking to reinvent itself and has only two years to do so. One of the main (if not the only) trump cards Theresa May thinks she can play is that of defence. Britain remains the most powerful military power in Western Europe and this power is likely to feature in the negotiations with the EU. The argument runs that Britain will continue to provide the bulwark of European defence commitment if the EU agrees to a favourable deal with regard to market access etc. Unlike America, Britain cannot afford to keep up its introspection for long. Unlike Trump, Theresa May cannot afford to utter isolationist sentiments. Britain needs friends and it needs to show that it has a role in the world. We were shown a glimpse of this recently. Theresa May was the first international leader to visit Trump. She then flew straight to Turkey to meet President Erdogan. Two strong men in two days.

Britain's relationship with Russia remains poisonous. But in her latest foreign visits Theresa May has shown she favours dialogue with controversial figures. She did hold fast to the continuing sanctions against Russia, and doing so within earshot of Trump she might have done some good. That being said, as the May administration tries to prepare the United Kingdom for the most dramatic restructuring since the Second World War, little time will be left to address Ukrainian affairs unless the military conflict escalates beyond the Donbass. Britain's Ukrainian engagement will remain reactive and the battle of Adviiikva shows us how weak these reflexes are.

Even five days after beginning of the most intense fighting in the Donbass, neither the British nor the American head of state managed a personal statement on the matter; something that Chancellor Merkel did four days ago. Our over-exuberant Tweeter-in-Chief who finds time to comment on even the most fatuous of subjects has nothing to say on one of the most sensitive matters that has haunted him since the beginning of his campaign. Even in the face of the most blatant Russian human rights violations he cannot bring himself to acknowledge the new reality. Among Russia-experts all over the world full panic broke out on January 31st, when the State Department issued an irritatingly toned down statement on the latest ceasefire plans. Nowhere was Russia even mentioned, let alone condemned.

It took three days before someone in the Trump administration, realising how unacceptable this position was, gave a stronger response on the situation on

Adliivka via Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the UN. Haley is the most remote US foreign policy communicator in relation to the White House. To make matters even more surreal, there has been confirmation that Haley did not receive any briefings from the White House. Much to the relief of the international intelligence community, Haley fully condemned Russia's role in the conflict and called out the Putin administration to actively contribute to the de-escalation of the military conflict in the Donbass.

On the British side, the government took four days to issue a thirty second statement via Boris Johnson. That is simply too little, too late. British leadership in international affairs must not be reduced to a soundbite. Britain shows again and again that it is not able to handle global affairs properly in parallel to Brexit, especially when it seems to be willing to sacrifice British principles over trade deals; as displayed by May's hand holding and cosying up to Trump on her state visit to the US.

Russian officials accuse Ukraine of having activated the military conflict to keep Ukrainian affairs in the international agenda. Ironically, it probably will be these kinds of escalations that will make President Trump & Prime Minister May understand that they will have to take a more firm stand against Russia, independently of commercial or domestic considerations.

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