A NEW PHASE IN THE BRITISH-RUSSIAN COMPETITION

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Introduction

The rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia marked the 19th century; in other words, the “great game” witnessed the struggle of the two empires to gain influence over Central and South Asia. These two countries, which constantly struggle with each other in the historical continuity, came together only due to the conjuncture created by the First and Second World Wars. Apart from these periods, it is seen that the rivalry and conflict between the London-Moscow line continues.

In the post-Cold War period and the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), China and Russia, acting in opposition to the hegemony of the United States of America (USA) in Eurasia, came to the fore as the main actors of the “second big game.” It is observed that England is to be included in the big new game in line with the goal of “Global Britain.”

The United Kingdom (UK) is trying to realize its goal of operating effectively in the Eurasian geography in the big new game through Poland and Ukraine through Eastern Europe. Due to the start of the Russia-Ukraine War on February 24, 2022, the relations between London and Moscow entered a new phase. Therefore, the policies of Russia and England bring the two countries to face to face again.

The Approach of the British Security Bureau towards Moscow Before the Russo-Ukrainian War

The approach of the British security bureaucracy towards Russia is an issue that needs to be emphasized. Because the threat perceived by this bureaucracy from Russia and its extent shape the policies that London follows to surround Moscow. Therefore, while forming the British Government's policy towards Russia; It is seen that the British security bureaucracy takes more initiative.

Britain had a tough stance against Moscow long before Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. On 23 January 2018, British Chief of Staff Sir Nicholas Carter described Russia as the biggest state-based threat to Britain since the Cold War and warned that hostilities could begin much earlier than London expected. Carter devoted almost all his forty-minute speech to the “threat” he said was posed by Russia.²

An incident that took place about a month after the British Chief of Staff’s statements led to further straining of relations on the London-Moscow line. On March 4, 2018, when Sergey Skripal, who provided secret secrets to British Foreign Intelligence Agency (MI6) while he was serving at the Russian Military Intelligence (GRU) in Salisbury, England, was exposed to Novichok poison after an incident in which GRU spies took part, causing London to react sharply.

After the incident, England expelled twenty-three diplomats working at the Russian Embassy in England; this number has reached sixty in the USA. In addition, a British citizen who met Novichok poison in June 2018 died.³

As can be seen, Russia's involvement in such an event on British soil, poisoning Skripal and causing the death of a British citizen, was perceived by London as a challenge to the sovereignty of England. Considering that other Western countries, especially the USA, have expelled Russian diplomats, it can be argued that London used the incident well to neutralize Moscow’s diplomatic missions in Europe.

On November 24, 2018, then-British Chief of Staff, Sir Mark Carleton-Smith warned that Russia indisputably poses a much greater threat to British security than terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and DEASH found. He further argued that wherever they found fragility and weakness, the Russians sought to take advantage of it.⁴

Sir Mark Carleton-Smith’s characterization of Russia as a greater threat than even a terrorist organization such as DAEl reveals the British security bureaucracy’s view of Russia. It is understood that the bureaucracy in question is deeply suspicious of Russia’s actions. In this context, looking at Smith’s words from the current conjuncture in the world, it can be claimed that the British General Staff has a more realistic approach towards Russia compared to

the military institutions of other Western and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member countries.

On 20 June 2019, the British Chief of Staff visited the Ukraine-Russia front line and stated that Russia was practising the war exercise prepared by Russia against the West in the east of Ukraine. Mark Carleton Smith, who also answered the questions of the British newspaper The Sun on the front line, emphasized that Russia supports classical warfare methods such as tank and artillery fire with assassination, propaganda, and cyber-attacks. found in its assessment. When asked if these shadow war tactics could be directed against Russia’s enemies, including Britain, he replied, “I think we should assume that. They don’t play by any rules index. There are no rules anymore and people must measure their own political and military tolerance.” he replied.

Smith’s visit is significant in many ways. In addition to humanitarian aid supplies, the UK maintains soldiers in the region and provides military training. From 2015 to 2019, 1,000 Ukrainian soldiers were trained by the British Army. Another reason Britain helped Ukraine was to learn the techniques developed by the Russians.

The fact that the British Chief of Staff became one of the focal points of the war is a strong response to Moscow. In addition, it can be said that the British General Staff was separated from other military institutions in the West and NATO with the said move. Because Smith is the Chief of Staff of the only major NATO member to go to the battle line.

Germany’s energy relations with Russia are quite good and it has made a geopolitical choice through the Nord Stream-2 Natural Gas Pipeline, French President Emmanuel Macron said that “NATO is brain dead”, and US President Donald Trump said that American soldiers were killed. In a conjuncture that he called back to the country, the move of the British General Staff makes the visit even more valuable. In other words, when there was no consensus on the Russian policies of the West and the great powers in NATO, Britain did not hesitate to confront Russia.

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5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
At this point, it would not be wrong to say that the state with which Ukraine has the most special relations is England. Because, in addition to providing military aid to Ukraine, Britain tried to increase the motivation of the Ukrainian soldiers through senior visits to the front line. In this context, the British security bureaucracy plays a key role in determining London's policy towards Moscow. For London, Kyiv is an important gateway to its involvement in the big new game.

The evaluations of the MI6 towards Russia should also be emphasized. On April 25, 2021, when Russia made a military build-up in Ukraine, MI6 President Richard Moore emphasized that despite all the concerns, Russia was a declining power economically and demographically.8

The fact that Russian President Vladimir Putin personally responded to Moore’s Novichok poisoning in Salisbury and to the words that Moscow is a declining power is important in terms of showing his discomfort on the subject. Putin replied to Moore as follows:9

“[Moore] is new to this role, gaining some experience, and then likely to revisit his assessments of whether Russia is a declining power. Then why bother and worry, just live your life and don’t try to ruin Russian-British relations any further.”

Considering Russia’s failure in Ukraine in the current conjuncture, it would not be wrong to say that British Intelligence is the Western intelligence that best evaluates Moscow’s capacity. In addition, Putin’s words seem to be underestimating the Head of British Intelligence. Because the war has led to the fact that the assumption that Russia is a military superpower is wrong and that it lags far behind the West in the conventional sense.

In June 2021, at a time when tensions between Russia and Ukraine were increasing, the British Navy sent the warship HMS Defender to the Black Sea to support Ukraine. Russia fired a warning shot at the warship moored near Crimea, accusing Britain of provocation.10

This incident on the Moscow-London line is important in many ways. First, the British Navy was the only major country navy that came to the Black Sea to intimidate Russia. Because, in April 2021, when Russia increased its pressure against Ukraine, the USA gave up its decision to send two warships to the Black Sea.11 In this respect, the USA; while it did not dare to confront Russia, England was able to afford it. Therefore, before the Russia-Ukraine War, it would not be wrong to say that England was the state that followed the most determined and consistent policy among the Western and NATO alliance countries in support of Ukraine. In this context, it is understood that the British security

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bureaucracy followed a more assertive policy towards Moscow compared to the USA and other major NATO countries.

On November 15, 2021, Carter warned, before Russia even began its invasion of Ukraine, that war with Russia was a greater risk than ever since the Cold War. He also claimed that Belarus is pushing migrants to the EU border to destabilize the region and that this is Russia’s trick.12

As it can be understood, the British security bureaucracy thinks that Russia is trying to increase its influence in Eastern Europe, especially through Belarus, and thus aims to put pressure on Poland, which is the center of anti-Russian opposition in the region.

In fact, it can be said that the British security bureaucracy was the institution that made the most accurate determinations regarding Russia’s ambitions in Ukraine and Eastern Europe before the Russia-Ukraine War. In this context, the bureaucracy in question both read the conjuncture much better than its other Western counterparts and provided more concrete support to Ukraine.

**Britain’s Geopolitical Objectives in the Russo-Ukrainian War**

Before the start of the Russia-Ukraine War on February 17, 2022; A tripartite cooperation alliance was established with the agreement signed between London, Warsaw, and Kyiv. In the joint statement made by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the countries, it was stated that this alliance will demonstrate its commitment to further strengthen the strategic cooperation between the three nations on top priority issues to support Ukraine.13

**Image 2: Trilateral alliance of Ukraine, England and Poland dated 17 February 2022**


The agreement in question is very important for Britain in terms of encircling Russia. Poland borders...
Ukraine and is in a key position in the provision of military logistics and humanitarian aid. It is also the state that pioneered anti-Russian activities in Eastern Europe. In this context, it can be understood more clearly why the UK signed such an agreement. The initiative in question should be considered as part of the strategy of getting involved in the “big new game” in line with the “Global Britain” target for London.

Another reason why England attaches special importance to Poland is that the “Suwalki Corridor” is located within the borders of Poland. The information below is important as it reflects the importance of the corridor:14

“The Suwalki Corridor, consisting of approximately 100 kilometres of rugged and mountainous terrain between Russia’s isolated outer region Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus, is located between the borders of NATO members Poland and Lithuania.”

The corridor in question is very important for the security of the Baltics, as it separates Russia’s ally Belarus and Kaliningrad. Also, Suwalki Corridor; is the only way to reach the Baltic countries from Poland and Central Europe by road and rail.15 Therefore, it is of great importance to defending this corridor behind the great support of England to Poland. In addition, the fact that British soldiers are deployed close to the region shows that a possible Russian attack is taken very seriously.

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15 Ibid.

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Image 3: Suwalki Corridor, Troop Distribution of Countries in the Region (As of 2018)

Image 4: Suwalki Corridor


After Russia’s invasion operation against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, one of the states that showed the biggest reaction was England. It has been seen that London, in a way, pioneered the sanctions, especially against Moscow.

It can be said that England found the opportunity that it could not find when it was a member of the EU, thanks to the Russia-Ukraine War. While London is a member of the blog; it could not get Brussels to follow a harsh policy against Moscow. Especially France and Germany hesitated to follow a policy that confronted Russia before the war started. Therefore, if Britain was to leave the EU with the Brexit process, it would not be possible to follow a hawkish policy as it would have to follow a softer policy towards Russia. Every member state has a veto right in the EU’s decision-making mechanism. In this context, Brexit strengthened London’s hand in shaping its policy towards Moscow before the Russia-Ukraine War.

With all this, it can be argued that Britain’s main goal in Europe is to prevent German-Russian rapprochement. As a matter of fact, Britain, which could not achieve this within the EU, did so during the Russia-Ukraine War. Because England played a very important role in isolating Russia from the West.

As can be seen from the table above, the UK is the country that provides the most military aid to Ukraine among European countries. Then comes Poland. This indicator makes the relations on the London and Warsaw route even more special. From this, it can be understood why England attaches so much importance to Poland. The threat it perceived from Russia was effective in Poland’s being the third country that provided the most military aid to Ukraine. All these are also important in terms of showing that the partnership between England, Poland and Ukraine is based on solid foundations.

It would not be wrong to say that the state with which Russia’s relations were most strained after the invasion of Ukraine was England. England goes further and follows a policy that tries to play with Russia’s nerve endings.

On 27 June 2022, British Chief of Staff Sir Patrick Sanders said that Ukraine is their 1937 moment and that Britain must be ready to “fight and win” to fend off the threat from Russia, saying, “We are not at war; but we must act quickly so that we do not get dragged into war due to the inability to control regional expansion.” has commented.17

On June 29, 2022, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said, “If Putin was a woman, he would not have invaded Ukraine.”18 On June 30, 2022, British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace described Russian President Vladimir Putin as “a

Image 5: List of Countries Providing the Most Military Aid to Ukraine between January 24 and August 3, 2022


lunatic with short stature syndrome.” 19

As can be seen, the UK has made some attempts to limit Moscow's influence in the world, as well as avoiding the use of diplomatic language in its relations with Russia. One of the most concrete examples of this is experienced in the Balkan geography.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced on 30 June 2022 that the UK would send military experts to Bosnia and Herzegovina to counter Russian influence, “strengthen the NATO Mission, promote stability and security”. In addition, Johnson said the following words.20

“We cannot allow the Western Balkans to become another playground for Putin's dangerous pursuits. By fanning the flames of separatism and sectarianism, Russia seeks to reverse the gains made in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past three decades.”

England, by sending military experts to Bosnia and Herzegovina, is trying to narrow Russia's sphere of influence in the Balkans. In addition, it can be said that by approaching the border of Serbia, the traditional ally of Russia, England may develop policies to surround this country in the future.

It is seen that Moscow is quite disturbed by this move of London and Berlin's sending European Union Peacekeeping Force Mission (EUFOR) soldiers to Sarajevo. Because on 17 August 2022, the Russian Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina accused the West of preparing the ground for the NATO-ization of Bosnia.21

Therefore, London is deeply concerned about the possibility of Russia being able to activate frozen conflict zones. For this reason, it is seen that England is making preliminary efforts against the instability moves that Russia may create in the Balkans. It can be predicted that the UK may want to establish similar cooperation with Poland in Eastern Europe with Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Balkans.

Conclusion

Historically XIX. and XX. It is seen that the rivalry between England and Russia, which goes back centuries and is the first representative of the big game, continues today. England is in an effort to be included in the big new game, especially through Russia. To realize its policy, London attaches great importance to the partnerships it has developed through Kyiv and Warsaw.

Especially after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, London played a leading role in isolating and surrounding Moscow. It turns out that the evaluations made by the General Staff and MI6, which constitute the security bureaucracy in England, about Russia are the most accurate determinations. This situation led England to be one of the two states that benefited most from the war in question.

Britain, whose main goal in Europe is to prevent German-Russian rapprochement, was not successful in its policy when it was an EU member, but with the start of the war on February 24, 2022, it has made significant progress in achieving what it wants in this regard.

With the War in Ukraine, there is a process in which the EU and Russia consume each other's energies and the UK, and the USA gain profit. In this context, London's policy is “rather than Ukraine winning; it can be said that Russia loses.”
AUTHOR

Cemal Ege Özkan graduated from Ankara University, Faculty of Language, History and Geography, Department of History in 2019. He received his master’s degree in 2022 with his thesis titled “Selim Rauf Sarper and His Activities in Turkish Political Life”, which he prepared at the Turkish Revolution History Institute, Atatürk’s Principles and Revolution History Department of the same university. He is currently continuing his doctorate education at the same institute. Özkan, who was a graduate fellow of the Turkish Historical Society between 2020-2021, has a good command of English.