

State of Play



PM Rishi Sunak

by **Ralph Berry**

The interminable Russo-Ukrainian war has reached the stage that Kipling called 'the old, stale front that we cannot shake.' The relationships within the main players are however in the process of decisive change. I now call the scores of the main four.

US: Biden has made a gross error in admitting cluster bombs as allowed to Ukraine, on the pretext that they need it to make up for shell shortage. The Ukrainians have apparently been firing off more explosive rounds than their suppliers can keep up with. But cluster bombs have been banned by 123 countries including Britain, signatories to the Budapest Memorandum of 1994. It is not even clear that the cluster bombs would add greatly to the Ukraine battle effort, but they are certain to take a toll of civilians. The cluster bomb decision does not look like a decent respect for the opinions of mankind.

Today I have witnessed on TV Rishi Sunak giving Biden a gentle reprimand on the sunlit lawns of Downing Street. This is new, as an event and in its implications.

UKRAINE: Their position is significantly weakening. The talked-up offensive is officially 'disappointing', which means that it is failing against the well-ordered Russian defences. Zelensky's only answer is to demand more and better military aid, a never-ending series. He has been told that the US favours his entry into NATO—after the war is ended. So it's No, then. Nor will Polish pilots be given access to the high-grade planes that America owns.

NATO countries are evidently tiring of their support for a country that delivers no successes save for the court in the most corrupt country in Europe, save only one—Russia.

RUSSIA: Russia never got big through being lovable. If they can weather the WAGNER storm, as seems likely, they will continue the business of grinding down Ukraine and forcing them to give up their ridiculous demand for total victory. They have the resources and the will.

BRITAIN: Under Boris Johnson, Britain went va banque on Ukraine, and it has remained the nation's top priority issue. It is tied to a person and a policy over which they have little or no control. That system looks increasingly fragile as the problems crowd in on Rishi Sunak. When Sunak feels that he has to detach himself from US policy it is not a happy sign, and the US veto over the appointment of a British head of NATO stings. The favoured candidate is Ursula Von der Leyen who would test the limits of satire. As Churchill said, 'everything is on the move at the same time.'