

# Defence establishment complains of Britain's "irrelevance" in world affairs

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There is growing criticism of the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition, and Prime Minister David Cameron, from leading figures in Britain's defence establishment.

On February 1, the former head of the British general staff, Lord Dannatt, called for a "debate" on the deployment of British troops "on the ground" in Iraq and Syria, saying that the current strategy of reconnaissance flights and aerial bombings was unlikely to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIL or ISIS).

Dannatt's remarks were a response to the British government's decision to delay the dispatch of hundreds of British troops back to Iraq. According to *Jane's Defence Weekly*, the decision to mothball the plan was taken at a meeting of the UK's National Security Council in mid-December chaired by Cameron. The magazine reported "fears that UK troops could be killed or taken hostage in the run-up to the UK general election in May were behind the rejection of the plans."

More-forceful criticisms were made by former NATO deputy supreme commander Sir Richard Shirreff. He said a few days later about Ukraine, "This is the most serious crisis to have faced Europe, arguably, since the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. There is the threat of total war."

Shirreff complained that while German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande had been in talks with Russian president Vladimir Putin, it was "unfortunate" that the UK, "a major NATO member...a major EU member [and] member of the UN Security Council" had a prime minister that appeared "to be absent."

"Where is Britain? Where is Cameron? He is clearly a bit player," he added. "Nobody is taking any notice of

him. He is now a foreign policy irrelevance."

Such statements have been prominently highlighted in the press. The defence editor of the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph*, Con Coughlin, declared that Cameron's desire to be "laid-back" had become "so all-consuming that he has all but given up on the decidedly time-consuming business of providing clear and decisive leadership on the world stage."

Coughlin's tirade was taken up by the nominally liberal *Guardian*. Assistant editor Michael White opined on how "'Bit player' Britain risks being stuck on foreign policy sidelines."

White lamented to his readers, "...what remains of post-imperial British power projection is more marginal to any of these threatening events than at any time I can remember in my lifetime."

European Union (EU) officials, White declared, "complain that British diplomatic expertise and influence is shrinking—not only in Brussels but in far-off capitals where it once had clout."

What made things worse was that Labour leader Ed Miliband had "struck an even more low-key note on foreign policy than Cameron," so much so that "whoever wins on 7 May, it seems likely that, lacking either the will or capacity to intervene, the 'bit player' will remain in charge of foreign policy at No 10—and mostly stay indoors."

The crisis enveloping British foreign policy has also been commented on by the international media. Germany's *Deutsche Welle*, in an article, "Ukraine crisis: Are the British backing down?" contrasted Britain's previous role as a "major player on the foreign policy stage" with today. British foreign secretary Philip Hammond, the paper noted, was "unusually defensive" about Britain's role in the Ukraine crisis and the Franco-German peace initiative.

Britain's place in the world was also the subject of the House of Commons Defence Committee's latest report published February 5. It declared that the UK, with its expertise and resources, ought to play a "much larger role" in the fight against ISIS, yet it had been "strikingly modest."

The committee expressed its shock at the failure of military chiefs to provide a "clear and articulate" explanation of what was happening in Iraq and questioned whether Britain had any policy objectives or strategy in the country at all. It revealed that the UK had only conducted 6 percent of the air-strikes against ISIS, only three British military personnel were operating outside the Kurdish regions of Iraq (compared to 400 Australians, 280 Italians and 300 Spanish), and there was no one on the ground who understood "the tribes, or politics of Iraq, or a deep understanding of the Shia militia, who are doing much of the fighting."

The committee proposed further "strikingly modest" proposals—a few hundred personnel with a "modest" budget to help to train anti-ISIS forces to deal with roadside bombs (IEDs) and more "diplomatic and defence engagement" with the key powers in the region.

The diplomatic engagement emerged within days, with a visit by Prince Charles to the Middle East autocracies. The heir apparent expressed his bewilderment that young British Muslims were not persuaded by "British values" and the plight of Middle East Christians. He told a group of Iraqi refugees, "For what it's worth, you have nothing but my entire sympathy.... I cannot imagine a worse situation to be in and it won't be of any consolation but I have been praying every day for all of you."

The prince visited Saudi Arabia to mourn the death of King Abdullah. Flags at UK government buildings were lowered to half-mast, apparently at the request of Buckingham Palace.

Attacks from assorted military chiefs and defence hacks are a sign of the huge crisis confronting the British ruling elite. There are growing calls for Britain to leave the EU, jeopardising the "special relationship" with the US. The UK has always been the US cat's paw in Europe, and US president Barack Obama made it clear recently that it had to remain part of the EU. According to the Centre for European Policy Studies'

Michael Emerson, declining British influence could even jeopardise the "jewel in the crown of British foreign policy"—its United Nations Security Council permanent seat.

Above all, the government is confronted by the overwhelming opposition of the British public to further military adventures. This lies behind its historic defeat in a Commons vote in 2013, which sought approval to join a US-led campaign against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. When the government attempted to claw its way back from that defeat and solicited a huge cross-party parliamentary vote to join the US-led war against ISIS, its feeble measures only earned further derision.

Labour, too, has been seeking to claw back its militarist pedigree after accidentally precipitating the 2013 crisis vote. Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander, positioning Labour as a war-mongering critic of the Tories, declared, "Britain is a big beast in the European jungle. It makes up almost a sixth of the EU's population and economy, and around a fifth of its exports. Before David Cameron became prime minister, Britain was at the heart of EU decision-making. Yet when he leaves Downing Street in May, he will have presided over the most significant decline in British influence in Europe for a generation."

"Unlike David Cameron," he added, "Labour believes that the UK will stand taller in Washington, Beijing, Moscow and Delhi—when we stand firmly at the heart of the EU. The idea that our influence in world capitals would grow as our influence in Europe diminished is not just a Eurosceptic fantasy, but a post-imperial delusion."



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