

US Army Chief of Staff urges increase in British military spending

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4 March 2015

In an exclusive interview with the *Telegraph*, General Raymond Odierno, US Army Chief of Staff, has expressed concern at the level of British military spending. “I would be lying to you if I did not say that I am very concerned about the GDP investment in the UK,” he said.

“In the past we would have a British army division working alongside an American division. Now it might be a British brigade inside an American division, or even a British battalion inside an American brigade.”

“It is about having a partner that has very close values and the same goals as we do,” he said, adding, “We all need to be able to invest and work together.”

Odierno was speaking to the *Telegraph*’s Con Coughlin during the “Future of War” conference in Washington. Held by the New America Foundation think tank, the programme claims to examine how “developments both in the technological drivers of warfare and the enemies we face have erased the boundaries between what we have traditionally regarded as ‘war’ and ‘peace’.”

According to Coughlin, “Ever since the Cold War ended more than two decades ago, America has never entertained any serious doubts about Britain’s ability to fulfil its commitment as a vital military ally when tackling threats to the Western alliance. Until now.”

Odierno’s comments demonstrated that cuts in the UK defence budget were eroding US “confidence in our commitment to global security,” Coughlin wrote.

Railing against the failure of the Conservative-led government to ring-fence defence spending from its austerity measures, Coughlin complained that this had “diminished” the UK’s military presence globally, jeopardising the transatlantic alliance.

“The big question is whether, with the general election approaching, the concerns raised by senior

American figures will persuade any of the main political parties to make defence a priority in their election manifestos,” he stated.

The *Telegraph* article is part of a concerted campaign to silence and intimidate widespread anti-war sentiment in the face of a significant expansion of militarism.

Last September’s NATO summit underscored how the civil war in Ukraine—provoked and manipulated by the US and the European Union—has been used to militarise Europe. It agreed to establish a 5,000-strong Rapid Reaction Force targeted at Russia and new NATO command posts in six eastern member states—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. In total, some 30,000 NATO troops are to be stationed on Russia’s borders.

The summit committed all 28 members to spend at least 2 percent of GDP on the military. Britain is one of just four countries that currently meet the NATO target. The government has insisted that this will be maintained, irrespective of its commitment to even harsher spending cuts. A Ministry of Defence statement highlighted the commitment to spend £163 billion on the military over the next decade, including “new strike fighters; more surveillance aircraft; hunter killer submarines; two aircraft carriers; and the most advanced armoured vehicles.”

The government has already pledged 1,000 troops for the NATO build-up on Russia’s borders, sent “military trainers” to Ukraine and refused to rule out supplying the right-wing Kiev regime with weapons. British troops took part in last week’s provocative parade of US military and armoured vehicles in Narva, Estonia, just 300 yards from the Russian border. Any incident, no matter how trivial, has the potential to produce a catastrophe.

With a general election on May 7, the Conservative

Party—like Labour and the Liberal Democrats—is reluctant to have any discussion on the implications of NATO and UK actions. Nor will any of the parties admit openly that while spending on schools, hospitals and other vital services is to be slashed even further after the election, military spending will not only be ring-fenced but increased.

The *Economist* opined, “The hangover from what are perceived to have been costly and unsuccessful campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan and a sour, introspective national mood, reflected in a Commons defeat for the government in August 2013 over action in Syria, has made the political establishment fearful of making the case for what the chief of the defence staff, General Sir Nick Houghton, in a speech before Christmas, described as ‘a grander role, a greater ambition, a place beyond the ordinary ... a nation which has values as well as interests, and which considers it has a leadership role in the world’.”

Odierno’s comments follow President Barack Obama’s reported warning to Prime Minister David Cameron over the level of British military spending in January. This theme was continued in a number of interviews with former leading NATO personnel, including former general secretaries Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

Their criticisms are now being employed and amplified by sections of the ruling elite to insist that the issue of defence spending must be “weaponised” in the election.

Of most significance is the ever more overt intervention of leading military personnel into this campaign.

Such are the tensions that, according to reports, last month Cameron barred General Houghton from delivering an intended speech. Houghton was due to address a Chatham House think tank conference titled, “Rising Powers and the Future of Defence Cooperation,” but Downing Street vetoed his appearance after reading an advanced copy of his speech, which was thought to criticise the government.

The cancellation was denounced by Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon, a former head of the Royal Air Force. In a letter to the *Times*, Graydon described it as “deeply regrettable.” Houghton “might have said that unless the UK commits itself to a *minimum* defence budget of 2 percent of GDP for the

future, our credibility in Europe... will be zero,” Graydon wrote (emphasis added).

Admiral Lord West of Spithead, former head of the Royal Navy, went further. Citing Lord Nelson, “I hate your pen and ink men; a fleet of British ships of war are the best negotiators in Europe,” West wrote in his letter to the *Times* that increased resources for the military were necessary to let “people like Putin and others [know] that we are serious about defence and hard power.”

Just days after Houghton’s cancelled appearance, General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, the most senior British military officer in NATO, addressed the Royal United Services Institute where he warned of “an era of constant competition with Russia” that must be taken into account fiscally. NATO’s build-up on Russia’s borders was necessary, he insisted, “in order to convince Russia, or any other state adversary, that any attack on one NATO member will inevitably lead them into a conflict with the whole alliance.”

On Saturday, Sir John Sawers, former chief of the Secret Intelligence Service MI6, told BBC Radio 4’s “Today” programme that Russia poses “a state-to-state threat” and that the UK must take steps to defend itself and its allies.

“What’s really important is that we’re able to fulfil all of our defence commitments and I think that that’s going to require a reversal in the trend in defence spending,” he said.

Also at the weekend, the former head of the Army, General Sir Peter Wall, called for the major parties to make manifesto commitments on defence spending. Speaking to BBC Radio 4’s “The World This Weekend,” Wall said, “We military folk would like to see manifesto commitments to levels of defence expenditure and it’s of concern to us that all parties would probably be content to have this conversation not happening at the moment.”



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