

## UK generals intervene to oppose Brexit

Robert Stevens  
27 February 2016

Senior military figures made an extraordinary intervention this week to demand that the UK remains a member of the European Union.

The call came just days after Prime Minister David Cameron announced that a referendum on British membership of the EU would go ahead June 23.

The 13 officials include four former heads of the armed forces, as well as two former heads of the army and two of the navy. Also signing was General Sir Richard Shirreff, the former Deputy NATO Commander.

The signatories boast, “[W]e have led the Royal Navy, Army, and Royal Air Force, or held other senior positions in the military. We have served around the world and in almost every conflict in which Britain has been engaged since the Second World War.”

The commanders have served in France, Aden, Malaysia, East Africa, Falklands, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Iraq, the Caribbean, Germany and Cyprus.

Their letter states, “We are particularly concerned with one central question: will Britain be safer inside the EU or outside it?”

The 13 state bluntly that their main concern is that a Brexit (British exit) from the EU would jeopardise the United States-led NATO alliance and its agenda of militarism and war, especially directed against Russia.

The letter reads, “Nato, of course, is and will remain the most important alliance for maintaining Britain’s national security, particularly when we need complex military capabilities. But the other, increasingly important pillar of our security is the EU.”

“Europe is facing a series of grave security challenges, from instability in the Middle East and the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, to *resurgent Russian nationalism and aggression.*” The 13 continue, “Britain will have to confront these challenges whether it is inside or outside the EU. But

within the EU, we are stronger.”

EU membership was critical when the UK “helped to force the Iranians to the negotiating table through EU-wide sanctions, *or made sure that Vladimir Putin would pay a price for his aggression in Ukraine.*” [Emphasis added]

The letter concludes, as the “Prime Minister himself has said, the EU today is a tool through which Britain can get things done in the world. Britain’s role in the EU strengthens the security we enjoy as part of NATO, adds to our capability and flexibility when it comes to defence co-operation and allows us to project greater power internationally.

“In a dangerous world, it helps us to safeguard our people, our prosperity and our way of life. We therefore believe strongly that it is in our national interest to remain an EU member.”

Following up on the letter, Lord Dannatt, a former Head of the British Army, told Rupert Murdoch’s *Sky News*, “I think if you look around the world at resurgent Russia and what Mr [Russian President Vladimir] Putin is trying to do... this is not a time for Europe to start to fragment, for countries to decide for their own reasons to leave the European Union—and that in itself runs the risk of unpicking NATO, which has been that very successful defensive alliance which the defence of this country has rested on since the end of the Second World War.”

These statements are a testament to the role of the EU as a body that serves the militarist agenda of the main European powers.

The US has quadrupled its budget for forces in Europe to \$3.4 billion, with half of this to be spent on “heavy brigade” armour and artillery in Western Europe. Earlier this month the British government announced it was sending five warships and 530 naval personnel to join NATO’s maritime arm which will be located in the Baltics, the North Atlantic, the North Sea

and the Mediterranean. In a threat aimed at Russia, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said, “2016 will see a particular focus on the Baltic region with our ships sent there as part of the Maritime Group...”

The military intervention was organized by the Conservative government of Prime Minister David Cameron, to reinforce the Remain campaign for the June 23 referendum. One of the signatories, General Sir Michael Rose, a former commander of the SAS Special Forces brigade, later made clear that there is also support for a Brexit within the military based upon a different estimation of the risks and benefits of tying the UK into Europe.

Rose complained that his name had been added to the letter even though he was not supportive. He had “doubts about the wisdom of using military officers for a political campaign” and put on record his disagreement with those calling for the UK to remain in the EU. “Sovereignty and security are intrinsically linked and in recent years we’ve seen the EU erode our sovereignty,” said Rose. The government was later forced to apologise to Rose for including his name.

Both the Remain and Leave campaigns are based on a militarist agenda, but the Leave campaign is particularly opposed to the ongoing discussions on the formation of a European Army, fearing this would undermine British imperialism’s strategic position, above all its alliance with Washington, as France and Germany emerge as more assertive military powers.

Last week, Leave supporter and former Tory defence secretary, Liam Fox, said, “The day after we were to leave the European Union, Britain still has a permanent seat on the [United Nations] Security Council, and we’re still in NATO. We’re still the world’s fifth biggest defence budget, we’ve still got a ‘special relationship’ with the US, we’re still in the G7, we’re still in the G20, we’re at the centre of the Commonwealth...”

The intervention of the military officers in the EU referendum in defence of the UK “national interest” follows on from statements of opposition to Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn for his professed stance against using nuclear weapons. Just eight days after Corbyn’s election in September last year, an unnamed “serving British general” told the *Sunday Times* that if Corbyn came to power, “There would be mass resignations at all levels and you would face the very

real prospect of an event which would effectively be a mutiny.”

On November 8, Britain’s current head of the armed forces, General Sir Nicholas Houghton, in a clear breach of constitutional principles, made an extraordinary public declaration that Corbyn’s refusal to authorise a nuclear strike “would worry me if that thought was translated into power.”

Washington is strongly opposed to an EU withdrawal and has also intervened directly on questions of UK military policy against Corbyn. Earlier this month, US Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter said to the BBC that Britain retaining the Trident nuclear missile system was vital, as it plays an important part of the “structure of NATO,” and helps the UK “continue to play that outsized role on the global stage that it does because of its moral standing and its historical standing.”

“It’s important that the military power matches that standing and so we’re very supportive of it,” he added.

The US “want to have the [Trident] program for our own purposes,” he explained, emphasising that “We have independent authorities to fire” the weapons.

The highly public move by the highest-ranking military personnel onto the political scene has ominous implications for democratic rights. It is testament to the decomposed nature of “British democracy” that both the Remain and Leave campaigns hail so monotonously.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**