

Military and security figures take opposing sides in UK referendum on European Union

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The campaign for a UK exit from the European Union (EU) has secured the backing of a dozen former senior military officers.

Under the framework of “Veterans for Britain,” this section of the military establishment portrays the EU as at best a rival and at worst a threat to the NATO military alliance and therefore to the security of the UK. One of the most significant figures politically is General Sir Michael Rose, a former director of special forces and a commander in Bosnia. His name was wrongly cited in a letter organised by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron of military figures supporting UK membership in the EU.

The pro-exit former senior military commanders include Major General Julian Thompson, Commander of Land Forces during the 1982 war with Argentina over control of the Falkland Islands/Malvinas; former deputy chief of the defence staff Sir Jeremy Blackham; and Lieutenant General Jonathon Riley, a former commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Their hostility towards the EU is overt.

General Rose told the BBC that sovereignty and defence were indivisible, and that EU policy had already seriously undermined Britain’s combat effectiveness. He said, “I believe that the UK’s contribution to European defence can manifestly be better made solely through NATO than by trying to spread our limited resources too thinly, in order to include European defence and security policy initiatives into the UK’s defence programme.”

A leaflet distributed by Veterans for Britain described leaving the EU as “the ONLY way to regain democratic control.” It insists, “Britain will be safer outside of the EU.”

Major General Thompson declares, “NATO is responsible for peace across Europe. NATO has been

the cornerstone of western security since WW2 and won the Cold War before the EU even existed. When it has tried to intervene in security matters, the EU has failed and NATO has rescued the situation, such as in the Balkans in the 1990s.”

Not only is the EU described as a military failure, but also as a security threat because it encompasses pro-Russian regimes: “MI5 & MI6 base their information on the Five Eyes agreement with USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The EU doesn’t help intelligence sharing; in fact, many members cannot be trusted due to their close relationship with Russia.”

Warning that the EU is “planning the creation of an EU Army,” he adds that this would mean that “the UK would lose control of its defence and its international standing would be diminished.”

Rear Admiral Roger Lane-Nott, the former NATO Commander Submarines Eastern Atlantic, adds, “It is NATO that has kept peace in Europe since 1948. Anything that weakens that alliance will diminish our security. EU attempts to set up its own operations, security structures and even armed forces take resources away from the organisation that really protects us. Germany is pushing for inexorable merger of defence, a result of the EU’s pursuit of ever closer union.”

Adding his voice to the anti-EU military lobby is Sir Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6, who describes the UK as “Europe’s leader in defence and security,” which “gives much more than it gets in return.”

On May 12, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the agenda of both sides in the June 23 referendum campaign “has been shown to be dictated by the growth of national antagonisms and the resulting danger of military conflict.”

Veterans for Britain is a political response to the efforts of the Remain campaign, headed by Cameron, to portray a “leave” vote as a threat to national security, above all to NATO and its ability to mount a campaign against Russia in Europe. Not only did Cameron describe EU membership as essential to combating a “newly belligerent Russia,” but he marshalled US President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, 13 former US defence and foreign affairs chiefs, five ex-NATO secretaries-general and the former heads of Britain’s MI5 and MI6 Jonathan Evans and Sir John Sawers to the same purpose.

Britain Stronger in Europe, the official Remain campaign, issued an immediate reply to Veterans for Britain under the headline, “Veterans and Military and Security experts line up to show overwhelming support for Britain remaining in Europe.”

Its own “roll call” cites the backing of “fifteen senior military veterans and security chiefs,” including the former First Sea Lord, four former chiefs of the defence staff and senior figures in the American military in Europe.

Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General is quoted as insisting, “A strong UK at the heart of Europe is good for NATO. It’s good for our security. And a fragmented Europe is bad for security, bad for NATO.”

Along with fellow former chiefs of the defence staff, General Sir David Richards and General Sir Mike Jackson, Lord Stirrup states, “The UK’s national security is inextricably linked to the security of the rest of the continent... [The UK must] not just ask what Europe can do for us, but what we can do with Europe, out of sheer hard nosed self interest.”

US General David Petraeus, the former CIA chief, states, “There is no question in my mind that a ‘Brexit’ would deal a significant blow to the EU’s strength and resilience at exactly the moment when the West is under attack from multiple directions.”

Others cited include Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the former NATO secretary general; Sir David Omand, former head of the UK’s intelligence agency GCHQ; Sir Hugh Orde, former President of Association of Chief Police Officers; Rob Wainwright, director of Europol; and Evans of MI5. The latter states that UK membership in the EU “underpins the overall stability of Europe, especially for newer entrants from the former Soviet bloc, in the face of external threats.”

In backing the Remain campaign in defence of the EU, the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn and the Trades Union Congress are lining up behind British imperialism’s alliance with Washington in furtherance of NATO’s war preparations against Russia and China. But the Veterans for Britain initiative is a devastating rebuttal of the claims by the pseudo-left and Stalinist groups organised in the Left Leave campaign that their position somehow articulates opposition to the NATO alliance and British, US and European imperialism.

The real forces dominating the Leave campaign—the Tory right, the UK Independence Party and the gang of warmongers and spooks gathered in Veterans for Britain—do so in order to advance a pro-business, xenophobic and militarist agenda. The efforts of the Socialist Workers Party, Counterfire, Communist Party of Britain and the Socialist Party are directed at all times towards minimising the growing dangers of war arising from the inter-imperialist antagonisms they seek to exploit in the name of “breaking up the EU.” In doing so they are guilty of a political crime against the working class.



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