

Retiring British general urges preparations for war with Russia

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In a letter leaked to the *Financial Times* last week, retiring General Sir Richard Barrons makes clear that the British military must prepare for a major war.

Writing to Defence Minister Michael Fallon, Barrons delivered a shopping list of military and intelligence hardware, capabilities and personnel necessary to prosecute an extended air, land and sea confrontation against heavily armed state opponents, particularly Russia.

Barrons recently retired as head of the Joint Force Command, the unit set up by the British government in 2012 to integrate procurement, planning, international coordination and political intelligence for all three armed forces. His comments undoubtedly reflect the thinking of the top echelons of the British armed forces and are unusually frank in laying out the nature of the conflicts envisioned.

His remarks came in the midst of US-led NATO moves towards confrontation with Russia, German rearmament, European Union moves towards a European army, and confusion over the role to be played by Britain's large military during and after the UK's departure from the EU.

To offset the loss of political influence in the EU caused by Brexit, and to maintain its role as the most reliable bagman and enforcer for US imperialism, the British military intends to take a more leading role in new and terrible crimes.

Writing in June this year, Malcolm Chalmers of the military think tank, the Royal United Services Institute, noted that in the event of Brexit, Britain would "come under considerable pressure to retain, and perhaps even increase, its commitment to NATO collective defence in Europe."

Chalmers continued, "The UK might find that the extent of its commitment to European defence would

be one of its few bargaining chips as it entered a period of tough negotiations on the terms of its future economic engagement with its EU neighbours."

Barrons' letter is consistent with this strategic goal. Translated into military hardware, he envisages Britain playing a leading role in a NATO war with Russia that would involve massed tank battles and air warfare, including over Britain itself.

To prepare for this, a vast rearmament is necessary. Barrons complains, "UK air defence now consists of the ... Type 45 [destroyers], enough ground based air defence to protect roughly Whitehall [the site of government] only, and RAF fast jets."

He goes on to say that "neither the UK homeland nor a deployed force—let alone both concurrently—could be protected from a concerted Russian air effort."

As to why a "concerted Russian air effort" would be directed against Britain, neither Barron nor the FT article, by defence correspondent Sam Jones, makes any mention of the provocative role being played by UK forces as part of NATO's drive to isolate and encircle Russia. Nor do they mention the US and European backing for the 2014 fascist-led coup in Ukraine, which precipitated the Russian government's seizure of the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

In June, the British government announced that a battalion of 500 British soldiers will be deployed to the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This is part of NATO's trip wire in the region through which any Russian incursion could trigger full-scale war between NATO and Russia. Between April and August, four British and four Portuguese Typhoon fast jets were based at Amari airbase in Estonia, 160 miles from Russian territory.

Over the course of the deployment, the British Typhoons were scrambled 19 times against Russian

planes, many of which came from the highly militarised exclave of Kaliningrad, base of the Russian Baltic Sea fleet. French and German jets are now on rotation.

Kaliningrad, like Russia's Tartus Mediterranean base in Syria, and the Crimean peninsula, is strategically crucial to the Russian military and is particularly vulnerable. In the Soviet period, Kaliningrad, located between Poland and Lithuania, was far within Warsaw Pact territory.

Now the exclave, with a population of 430,000, is encircled on land and sea by NATO, with only a rail link across Lithuania to Russian soil. Particularly since Lithuania joined NATO, repeated Baltic war games, numerous provocations and scenarios have focused on Kaliningrad and the strategic conundrum it poses for US and European imperialist efforts to roll back and subordinate Russia to their interests.

This is the context of Barrons' furious complaint regarding the hardware available to the British Army. "The current army has grown used to operating from safe bases ... against opponents who do not manoeuvre at scale, have no protected mobility, no air defence, no substantial artillery, no electronic warfare capability nor—especially—an air force or recourse to conventional ballistic or cruise missiles."

In other words, the Russian military is a more problematic opponent than the Taliban militias in Afghanistan or the outdated and outnumbered conscript military mobilised in 2003 by Saddam Hussein's government in defence of Iraq.

The FT article enrolled military pundits to amplify Barrons' comments. Ben Barry of the International Institute of Strategic Studies complained that "it is not clear at all that the UK's conventional capability is being rebuilt nearly enough."

The British Army was outgunned by its Russian rivals, with two or three artillery battalions compared with one British artillery battalion. The article warned that upgraded British Challenger tanks were inferior to the new Russian Armata tank.

Justin Bronk of the Royal United Services Institute noted that Britain is buying 48 Lockheed F-35 fighter jets, primarily to be based on its two new aircraft carriers. But, according to Bronk, "on a long-term sustainable basis you might be able to deploy six of them ... at a high tempo for a short duration, you might be able to deploy 12."

Early warning planes were in equally short supply, according to Bronk, with Britain's six AWACS aircraft unable to "give you a 24 hour presence ... let alone the ability to field more than one at a time in two or more different theatres."

Neither, according to IHS Janes Navy International editor Lee Willett, does the British Navy have enough ships. Having the £4 billion spend on the aircraft carriers, the largest British warships ever built, there are not enough air defence destroyers to protect them. Likewise, despite the billions spent on them, the Type 45 air defence destroyers are unreliable.

Making clear that British military objectives should include China, the FT author considered it "unlikely the UK's two new aircraft carriers, which cost £2bn each, will ever be sent within 300km of the Chinese coast."

Complaining of a lack of pilots and trained personnel, Barrons wrote, "It is not necessary to shoot down all the UK's Joint Strike Fighters, only to know how to murder in their beds the 40 or so people who can fly them."

Behind the backs of the population, new and unimaginably terrible wars, including within Europe itself, are in advanced levels of preparation. Barrons' remarks were picked up and recycled by all the British press. To the extent any comment was made, it was entirely sympathetic. The BBC wheeled out a retired major general, Tim Cross, to insist Barrons was an "extremely capable operator" and his remarks were "speaking truth into power and it's a normal thing to be doing."



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