

Defence Minister Fallon declares UK ready for war with Russia

Robert Stevens
3 November 2016

Speaking to Parliament's Defence Committee, Conservative Defence Minister Michael Fallon declared that the UK's armed forces would be prepared for a military conflict with Russia as soon as 2018.

Fallon was giving evidence to the committee as part of its review into how the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review affects the Army. His statement was prompted by an observation by Conservative Defence Committee member James Gray, who noted that in a book published earlier this year retired British general Sir Richard Shirreff had predicted a possible war with Russia in 2017. Shirreff was NATO's deputy supreme allied commander in Europe between 2011 and 2014.

Gray also pointed to a letter published by Shirreff in Monday's *Times* in which he warned that the military encirclement of Russia had to proceed more rapidly. "Last week's defence ministers' meeting in Brussels heard further announcements of the make-up of the forward presence [in the Baltic States and eastern Poland], but the reality is that there will be nothing on the ground until the late spring, nearly a year after the announcement was made," Shirreff wrote. "What matters now is putting in place, as rapidly as possible, a defensive capability that can fight, and therefore deter, any Russian adventurism; a task for one of the many NATO Rapid Deployment Corps?"

While replying that Shirreff's book was "very good", Fallon replied, "I don't agree that war with Russia is likely next year. I think that is too extreme."

Fallon added, "We have seen much greater Russian aggression this year, and in previous years, in terms of long-range aviation, in terms of submarine activity, and the carrier task group that sailed through our waters, the role of Russia in Syria, and elsewhere. But I don't think that presages an open conflict next year."

Having cautioned against Shirreff's scenario of

imminent war, however, Fallon then stated that the UK armed forces would soon be fully prepared to participate in a military conflict with Russia. Pressed if the UK would be ready for war with Russia in 2018, or 2019, Fallon replied, "Yes, we would be ready to increase the tempo in that kind of situation, which I don't immediately foresee."

He added, "And, of course, we will not be doing this on our own. We will be doing this as an active member of Nato, and presumably in some kind of Nato scenario."

Earlier, Fallon stressed that Britain's armed forces were central to the ongoing NATO encirclement of Russia. Asked about "the realistic prospects in a crisis of being able to deploy a division to a front-line NATO state," he replied that the UK was already "deploying to the eastern border of NATO. The RAF [Royal Air Force] have been there three summers running. We are putting troops in Estonia next year and we are putting troops in Poland and we are deploying the RAF to Romania."

Giving more details on the deployment of 800 troops to Estonia, Fallon said, "The whole point of forward deployment to Estonia is to arrange... an earlier tripwire so the force there doesn't have to wait for tension to escalate. The force will be there from next spring in any event, in all three of the Baltic states."

Fallon warned, "It's partly reassurance, but it's also deterrence — to make it very clear to any potential aggressor that NATO is ready to respond."

On the day of the Defence Minister's testimony, the *Guardian* ran an interview with Andrew Parker, the head of Britain's domestic spying agency, MI5. The interview was the first given to a newspaper by a serving spy chief.

Parker said that Russia "is using its whole range of

state organs and powers to push its foreign policy abroad in increasingly aggressive ways — involving propaganda, espionage, subversion and cyber-attacks. Russia is at work across Europe and in the UK today. It is MI5's job to get in the way of that."

He added, "Russia increasingly seems to define itself by opposition to the west and seems to act accordingly... You can see that on the ground with Russia's activities in Ukraine and Syria. But there is high-volume activity out of sight with the cyber threat. Russia has been a covert threat for decades. What's different these days is that there are more and more methods available."

The UK government, armed forces and spy agencies are constantly stepping up anti-Russian rhetoric, so much so that Fallon felt it necessary to deny that war would take place next year! The reckless and dangerous calculation appears to be that either the government of Vladimir Putin will retreat in the face of the threats made by the NATO alliance, or it will be deposed by internal forces ready to accept subordination to the US, and its right to exploit the strategic resources and markets of the Russian Federation and even its territorial carve up — the ultimate aim of Washington.

But an entirely opposed scenario is increasingly possible where the unprecedented military build-up on its borders provokes retaliatory action by Moscow.

The fact that Fallon, Parker and Shirreff speak in such belligerent terms about a possible war with Russia points to the existential crisis now facing British imperialism in the aftermath of June's referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU). The vote reflected sharpening national tensions within Europe, amid the overall crisis of capitalism globally—forcing the UK to stake its claim to continuing relevance for the US based upon its readiness to engage in NATO's anti-Russian operations and to oppose plans for an EU army led by Germany.

Parker chose the *Guardian* to make his statements because the newspaper has long-served as propagandist in chief in justifying the unprecedented NATO build-up on Russian's western border. However, its columnist Mary Dejevsky felt it necessary to make a cautionary statement warning that anti-Russian propaganda and warmongering does not enjoy popular support. On Tuesday, in a column, "Why is MI5 making such a fuss about Russia?", she noted "that it is starting to become

harder to demonise Russia now," advising her employers, "[L]ook at the 'below the line' comments on what Parker had to say and there is a current of dissent that cannot come exclusively from so-called Kremlin 'trolls'. You hear something similar in phone-ins on Russian topics, where the voice of a sceptical public comes across loud and strong."

What Dejevsky is acknowledging is the deep-felt anti-war sentiment within the British population, who have opposed Britain's criminal involvement in imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries over the last three decades. However, this opposition to war is unable to find any political expression—above all thanks to the Labour Party, under its so-called "anti-war leader", Jeremy Corbyn.

Since his election, Corbyn has made one retreat after another in the face of the warmongers within his party, so much so that his most recently appointed Shadow Defence Secretary, Nia Griffith, told *Sky News* last week, "We are one of the four battalions out there now in Eastern Europe and it's important we make clear in the Labour Party we are seriously committed to NATO and the NATO preparation... It is very important that we make it clear to the Russians that we have that capability and we are prepared to use it."

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