

French army chief demands large defence budget increases

Anthony Torres
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Last week, the chief of staff of the French armed forces, General Pierre de Villiers, called for raising French defence spending to 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), instead of the 1.77 percent currently planned for 2017. This would require the state to spend €8 billion more each year on the military.

In a column published by the financial daily *Les Echos*, de Villiers dismissed the Socialist Party (PS) government's defence budget increases planned for the 2013-2019 period as insufficient, declaring: "From now on, for the armed services, this effort must lead to a gradual increase of the defence budget to meet the target of 2 percent of GDP before the end of the next [president's] five-year term."

De Villiers added that this is an "international engagement that France has made, as well as its international partners," that "cannot be either reduced or postponed."

To justify the multibillion-euro defence spending increase, de Villiers claimed that after the terror attacks of January and November 2015, France is plunged into a war on terror with no end in sight. He wrote, "The break represented by the years 2015 and 2016 was a change of historical eras. It is the 'end of the easy times.' Peace no longer is automatic; it must be conquered; we must get out of the trap whose two jaws are complacency and despair."

This call for a massive rearmament of French imperialism is based on political lies. The attacks that hit France in 2015, and Belgium and Germany this year, were committed by the same Islamist networks that the NATO powers have mobilised in their imperialist proxy wars, first in Libya and then in Syria. It is these wars, and the 2014 NATO-backed coup in Ukraine led by far-right forces supported by Washington and Berlin against a pro-Russian Ukrainian

government, that drastically increased the danger of war between NATO and Russia.

The Islamist terrorists were all closely watched by the intelligence services, and benefited from their passive complicity to commit the attacks in France and across Europe. The ruling class then exploited these attacks, imposing a state of emergency intended not to halt terrorist networks, but to attack democratic rights and repress youth and workers, notably in France during protests against the PS' regressive labour law. This "war on terror" has served to legitimise attacks on Muslims and migrants, and to shift the political atmosphere far to the right.

By demanding a substantially faster rise in the French defence budget than that planned by the PS' military planning law for 2013-2019, de Villiers is preparing for a major escalation of the imperialist war drive. This would, in the future, involve conflicts directly between powerful and well-armed states.

According to de Villiers, "The return of state power cannot any more be denied. At the gates of Europe, in Asia, in the Near and Middle East, more and more states are acting on strategies that rely on the threat of force, or on confronting adversaries with faits accomplis. Everyone is rearming."

De Villiers' statements must constitute a warning for working people that preparations for major wars are highly advanced. In a context of deep economic and social crisis, future governments intend to defend their interests by armed force, both inside and outside of France's borders. The French army and bourgeoisie are preparing for vast wars, or even world wars, in the hopes of extracting the maximum profit for French imperialism.

The fallout from the 2008 economic crisis has vastly intensified interimperialist rivalries, and pushed US

imperialism to an ever more aggressive stance towards China and Russia to assert its strategic interests. The election of Trump, who is signalling a very aggressive policy towards China and has threatened to use nuclear weapons in Europe, should anyone cross the United States, points to the very high risk of nuclear conflict.

Trump's coming to power next month will not only intensify conflicts with China and Russia, but also exacerbate rivalries between the European imperialist powers, who twice already in the last century plunged the globe into world war. The European powers are all seeking to rearm—above all Germany, Europe's hegemonic power, which declared in 2014 the end of a policy of military restraint that it had pursued since the destruction of the Nazi regime.

In this context, the French army is seeking to boost military spending far more than President François Hollande's government, which implemented a highly militarist policy, already has.

Hollande responded to de Villiers by stressing that his government had already given over huge resources to the army. "The defence budget," he declared, "has already been raised throughout my term in office. Spending levels mandated by the military planning law were increased. That is the first time in the Fifth Republic [i.e., since 1958] that this law was revised to raise spending. We now have adequate resources for our current objectives, but we will have to make more efforts in the coming years."

De Villiers' intervention is motivated in large part by the May 2017 presidential elections, the campaign for which will begin in a few weeks. The army wants to set down its agenda for the candidates who all—from Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front or François Fillon of the right-wing Republicans, to the PS candidates and Left Front leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon—all have close ties to the army.

Frédéric Coste, an analyst for the Strategic Research Foundation (FRS), wrote: "The tempo [of de Villiers' announcement] is very well chosen. The period during which the army will be obliged to be reserved will soon begin and force the armed services' chief of staff to be far more discreet. And what he has to do is to lay out his relationship with all the presidential candidates. Indeed, given the debate that is starting and the depth of international threats, the different candidates will presumably be forced to take into account a double

imperative: exercising security responsibilities inside and outside the country, while maintaining a firm grip on public spending."

The state will attempt to fund increased military spending through even harsher attacks on the working class. As *Les Echos* reports, for the year 2018, the state will need to find "€2.2 billion more, as the halt to job cuts decided by François Hollande after the November 13 [2015] attacks will automatically lead to an overflow of spending."



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