

UK general calls for hike in military budget and cuts in social spending

Steve James
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The March 1 edition of the *Times* devoted its front page to a headline demand: “Spend more on armed forces or risk defeat, military chief warns.”

General Sir Gordon Messenger, vice chief of the defence staff, became “the first senior military figure in a generation to explicitly call for more funding,” it reported.

Speaking to Defence Editor Deborah Haynes, General Messenger—who has served in the former Yugoslavia and Iraq and was head of the British Army’s Task Force to Afghanistan’s Helmand province—insisted that an increase in arms spending beyond the current 2 percent of GDP is “a necessity and a duty to the nation.”

Messenger holds the second most senior position in the British armed forces and is a strong candidate to succeed the current chief of defence staff, Sir Stuart Peach. The final decision on the appointment lies with Prime Minister Theresa May. His comments would undoubtedly have been cleared and approved by both the government and the intelligence apparatus.

Agreeing that increased defence spending would entail cuts elsewhere as “there are all sorts of pressures on the public purse,” he insisted, “we should be making the case for a bigger defence budget in order to respond to those types of threats that are changing all the time. ...”

Messenger said, “I am not suggesting that we are about to descend into world war any moment now, but I do think there are activities going on that need to be countered.”

Making clear the target of increased spending, he said, “You also need to project forward 10 or 15 years and I don’t necessarily select Russia out from others in this, but we need to be ready for a deterioration in the international arena. And we need to recognise what that

confrontation might look like, what capabilities we might have to develop in order to be a player in that confrontation and plan accordingly.”

While mapping out preparations for future wars, Messenger insisted that more defence spending was required immediately for wars that are imminent. He revealed that the British military are preparing scenarios to participate in a US-led assault on North Korea, stating that this was “a global security issue.”

Writing in the *Times* March 1, Messenger outlined a sweeping description of the forces British imperialism was preparing to confront: “There are state and non-state actors that are prepared to view what we describe as the rule-based international order in a very different way and do things that we believe are outside international norms and international law.”

He viewed the “next big fight,” most likely against nuclear-armed Russia, as winnable.

“Russia has invested in certain capabilities...but there are still plenty of places where we can overmatch them and when you include the multiplying effect of doing so in a NATO force with 29 nations each bringing their own niche areas of strategic advantage I think that is quite a compelling story.”

Messenger’s demands were reinforced in an op-ed piece in the same edition of the *Times*. This was written by Lord Richards of Herstmonceux, former chief of the defence staff, and Michael Clarke, a former director of the influential Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) military think tank. They called for a “strategic surge after Brexit” to face “challenges in foreign and defence policies that we would have faced in the next decade even had we not voted to leave the EU.”

A new “grand strategy” was needed because the current situation was “not unlike the choice we faced in 1940,” when, in the early years of World War II,

Britain was forced to evacuate its army from France. Today, they stated, to avoid national isolation “caught between disinterested, pre-occupied Europeans and Trumpist Americans,” a “shift of national resources to make best use of the instruments of global influence at our disposal” was required.

Richards and Clarke outlined a crisis-ridden international situation: “China is going global while the US is thinking about going home. Europe faces a perfect storm from Russian bellicosity in the east, migration crises in the south and political extremism bubbling above and below the democratic surface.”

They worried about NATO’s future and the status of British imperialism globally: “Turkey has effectively defected from the alliance to join Russia and Iran in trying to remake the Middle East. In short, Britain’s international neighbourhood is a mess, and we will have to navigate it from outside the EU, while still trying to be a European second-rank power.”

Richards and Clarke complained that “spending on defence, security, diplomacy, intelligence, international aid and R&D comes to £62 billion a year, less than 10 percent of government spending.” This, they demanded, should be increased, even though “some of the trade-offs against social policy, health or education might be severe if spending were increased on defence and intelligence.”

“Would this be justified?” they asked, concluding, “Yes, at least for the coming decade.”

The *Times* agreed with this agenda of social immiseration in pursuit of war, weighing in against the “pernicious idea that defence spending is a mere footnote to the chunky health and welfare budgets.”

Its editorial, “Defence of the Realm—Government has a duty to invest more in the nation’s protection,” called for stepped-up state surveillance—“not just bigger tanks but preparation for a campaign that interrupts an enemy’s access to battle winning data and scoops up information from social media.”

It closed with the ominous statement, “The UK may meet the NATO defence spending target of 2 percent of GDP, but the government should understand that this sum barely covers the existing needs of the armed forces, let alone their expanding requirements as they adapt to a new combination of threats. It is a primary task of the state to protect citizens from peril, and to prevent war by preparing for it.”

With their intervention, Messenger, Richards, Clarke and the *Times* have made clear the brutal cost involved in “preparing for it.” What is being demanded is that the population accept the gutting of spending on health care, education, housing, welfare and pensions to pay for a massive rearmament programme and the handing over of hundreds of billions to the already vast military-intelligence complex.

For the *Times* and the highest echelons of the military, spending £160 billion on pensions, more than £100 billion a year on the National Health Service, £59 billion on welfare, £40 billion on public education and over £20 billion on the housing benefit subsidy—at the expense of military spending—is “pernicious.” Instead, “severe” cuts to these budgets must be imposed as “a necessity and a duty to the nation.”

An assault on the conditions of the working class on an almost unimaginable scale is being mooted. Such a social counterrevolution would make even the massive austerity imposed over the last decade pale in comparison.

The warning by Richards and Clarke of “political extremism bubbling above and below the democratic surface” is a tacit recognition that the build-up of acute political and social tensions would escalate to the point of civil war in the event of such an assault.

The British military had already made clear that it is prepared to go to any lengths to impose its war-mongering agenda when an unnamed senior serving general told the *Sunday Times*, in September 2015, that in the event of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn becoming prime minister there would be “the very real prospect” of “a mutiny”—with elements within the military prepared to use “whatever means possible, fair or foul” to remove him.



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