

US defense secretary demands UK hike military spending

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US Defense Secretary James Mattis has added fuel to the crisis of Theresa May's government with a letter to his UK counterpart, Gavin Williamson, stating that Britain's status as a leading military power "is at risk of erosion."

The letter, leaked by Williamson, states that the US is veering towards France as a more reliable military partner than the UK. "As global actors, France and the US have concluded that now is the time to significantly increase our investment in defense. Other allies are following suit," he wrote, adding, "It is in the best interest of both our nations for the UK to remain the US partner of choice."

Mattis' letter is the most high-profile intervention into British politics since then US President Barack Obama appeared during the Brexit referendum campaign in 2016 to threaten that, in the event of a leave vote, the UK would "go to the back of the queue" in terms of a trade deal with the US.

President Donald Trump has demanded NATO allies increase their military spending substantially. Britain already spends the 2 percent minimum of GDP, but at this stage May has not committed to a substantial increase. France spends 1.7 percent of GDP on defence. However, President Emmanuel Macron has committed to 2 percent and above, with billions of euros to be spent on a vast rearmament strategy up to 2025.

Mattis' letter could not have been blunter in demanding the UK increase defence spending or face the effective end of the much vaunted "special relationship" between the two countries.

He wrote, "I am concerned that your ability to continue to provide this critical military foundation for diplomatic success is at risk of erosion, while together we face a world awash with change."

Britain remains the US partner of choice, but "the UK

will need to invest and maintain robust military capability."

"It is not for me to tell you how to prioritize your domestic spending priorities, but I hope the UK will soon be able to share with us a clear and fully funded forward defence blueprint that will allow me to plan our own future engagement with you from a position of strength and confidence.

"A global nation like the UK, with interests and commitments around the world, will require a level of defence spending beyond what we would expect from allies with only regional interests. Absent a vibrant military arm, world peace and stability would be at further risk."

Sent on June 12, it was leaked to the *Sun*, the sister daily of the London *Times*, both owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch. Over the last year, the *Times* has been the mouthpiece of demands by the most hawkish sections of the British military for a stepping up of the confrontation with Russia and a vast increase in military spending.

In March, the *Times* interviewed General Sir Gordon Messenger, vice chief of the defence staff, and other senior military figures, who demanded more funding to prevent military defeats in future conflicts.

The *Guardian* noted the coordinated leaking of the letter, stating it "was sent to Williamson on 12 June, three days after a visit by Mattis to London. Williamson would be unlikely to have leaked it without first seeking approval from his American counterpart."

The letter was timed to coincide with the completion of a review of UK military spending by MPs on the House of Commons Defence Committee. Published on June 26, it is titled "Indispensable allies: US, NATO and UK Defence relations."

Its aim is to reinforce the insistence of the Defence

Committee that military spending must rise by 50 percent—an additional £20 billion per year—to protect Britain’s position within NATO. It states, “In advance of the NATO summit in July, the Defence Committee publishes a report which concludes that only if its Armed Forces are properly resourced can the UK retain its influence in NATO and in Washington.”

The Conservative chairman of the Defence Committee, Julian Lewis, said, “Defence spending is an area where a strong message needs to be sent to our allies and adversaries alike. The Government has consistently talked about increasing the UK’s commitment to NATO after our departure from the European Union. An increased commitment, in the face of new and intensified threats, means that further investment is essential. Where percentage of GDP for Defence is concerned, our mantra must be: ‘We need 3 to keep us free.’”

The report cited Mattis, pointing out that he was referring to Britain when he said recently that one of America’s allies had cut capacity “to the point where it could no longer speak with strength.”

Further pressure was exerted on May by NATO head Jan Stoltenberg, who said in a speech in London on June 21 that the UK could play a central role in NATO because it has “full spectrum” capabilities and spends 2 percent of GDP on defence. He added, “I expect the UK to continue and to maintain that role. To maintain that role, you need to spend and invest in defence.”

This followed May asking Williamson to produce a report defining the UK’s military status, after she refused to state that Britain would remain a “tier one” military power—a term denoting a nation has a full range of military capabilities, including nuclear arms. Asked in Parliament by Tory MP Johnny Mercer if Britain would remain a tier one military status, May didn’t use the term, replying, “There is no question that the government will do what it needs to do to ensure that we are a leading military power.”

This week, Williamson and General Sir Nick Carter, chief of the defence staff, were scheduled to meet May to demand an immediate increase of at least £2.5 billion for military spending. This comes after Carter’s predecessor, Lord Houghton, who retired as chief of defence staff in 2016, complained that pledges of more National Health Service funding were good for winning votes but not for defending “Britain’s standing in the

world.” He demanded a ramping up of military funding, as the UK must “make a decision” as to “what country we aspire to be.”

The *Sunday Times* reported that May faces a revolt from Tory MPs over defence spending, with “About 50 MPs ... pressing Downing Street to give more money to the military and 10 have signalled a willingness to vote against the budget unless May backs down, a move that could topple the government.”

To further these demands, “Defence chiefs and ministers are planning to drum up the support of the royal family to persuade Theresa May to give more money to the armed forces.” The newspaper reported, “A senior figure in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) said serving and retired generals and admirals will reach out to the senior royals, including Prince Harry, who served in Afghanistan.”

The newspaper cited a MoD source who “said failure to fund the armed forces would leave May ‘an international laughing stock’ and contribute to the collapse of the NATO alliance.”

Mattis’ intervention comes ahead of next week’s NATO summit in Brussels.

Trump has repeatedly threatened moves against NATO members, including Britain, who do not increase their military budgets. The *Sunday Times* cited a “senior government source” who said, “If [Trump] doesn’t think NATO countries are doing enough, don’t be surprised if he starts talking about pulling the plug.”

From the summit, Trump will arrive in the UK for a three-day visit on July 13.



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