

UK Starmer government under mounting pressure to massively increase military spending

Robert Stevens
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The Labour government is preparing to install a retired general to head the UK's armed forces. This comes amid frenzied demands in ruling circles that, with the imminent inauguration of Donald Trump as US President, his demand for a vast increase in military spending among NATO powers be immediately implemented.

The *Times* revealed last week that “Informed sources said options under consideration included bringing back a recently retired military chief, such as General Sir Patrick Sanders, 58, who was head of the army, or General Sir Nick Carter, 65, the chief of the defence staff until 2021.”

Current Armed Forces head Admiral Sir Tony Radakin is set to leave his Chief of the Defence Staff post in the autumn. In a pointed expression of growing discontent among the military top brass over current military spending, the *Times* reported, “Admiral Sir Ben Key, the head of the navy, has told colleagues he is not intending to apply. He believes he ‘can’t fix the navy’ amid a lack of resources and is expected to resign in the summer.”

The candidacy of one of the favourites for the post, four-star general Sir Gwyn Jenkins, is stalled. This is due to concerns—amid an ongoing inquiry into war crimes committed by British troops—over what Jenkins knew, as a commanding officer of the Special Boat Service, about alleged summary executions by British special forces in Afghanistan.

However, a decision to bring back Sanders or Carter would not simply be down to a lack of suitable candidates available, but one bound up with the view in the ruling class that in an era of “great power competition” military spending must be upped to levels last seen at the height of the Cold War.

Backing both the genocide in Gaza by Israel and the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, Labour came to office pledging to set a “pathway” to raising military spending to 2.5 percent of GDP from its current 2.3 percent.

Labour announced that this would take place with the

completion of a defence review this spring, being headed by former Labour defence minister and former NATO head Lord Robertson.

But this takes place as the 2.5 percent aim—factored in by Chancellor Rachel Reeves to her budget last October—has been blown out of the water by Trump's demand last month that NATO members push military spending up to at least 5 percent of GDP.

The *Financial Times* reported December 20 that the “US president-elect's closest foreign policy aides shared his intentions in discussions with senior European officials this month”. According to one of the FT's sources, “they understood that Trump would settle for 3.5 per cent, and that he was planning to explicitly link higher defence spending and the offer of more favourable trading terms with the US.” Successive governments in Britain have failed to reach a trade deal with the US since the UK's exit from the European Union in 2016.

Sanders and Carter are both fanatical anti-Russia hawks, who have previously demanded huge increases in resources for the military.

So fierce was Sanders' intervention, as a serving general, in opposition to Army spending cuts, as well as calls for a form of conscription, that his term as Chief of the General Staff (head of the British Army) was cut short by Rishi Sunak's Conservative government. He stood down in June 2024 after serving just two years.

Shortly after taking up the post, Sanders said in June 2022—just a few months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine—that the current generation must prepare “to fight in Europe once again” and “There is now a burning imperative to forge an Army capable of fighting alongside our allies and defeating Russia in battle.” A land war in Europe was now a reality and “The British Army must be prepared to engage in warfare at its most violent.”

Carter, the other contender to take over as Armed Forces chief, previously held the post from 2018-21. In January

2018, Carter made a major speech at the Royal United Services Institute, the premier defence and security think tank, in which he declared, “The parallels with 1914 are stark. Our generation has become used to wars of choice since the end of the Cold War—but we may not have a choice about conflict with Russia... I think we need to prepare ourselves to fight the war we might have to fight”.

He even cited favourably what “what the Germans did very well in 1940”, arguing the British Army needed “to be able to deploy overland by road and by rail. And our Strike concept seeks to project land capability over distances of up to some 2,000 km.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted, “The ‘old fashioned lessons’ to which Carter refers were bound up with the preparation by Nazi Germany for Operation Barbarossa—the 1941 war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, recognised as the most brutal military campaign history has ever seen.”

Sunak’s Tory government was unable to sign off on the huge increases in military spending necessary to make this possible—while facing down a strike wave involving several million workers demanding an end to austerity—but all bets are now off.

Every week now sees another intervention to demand an end to the “peace dividend” which followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War.

The latest intervention was organised by the *Sunday Times* earlier this month, which reported, “Nato will urge Sir Keir Starmer to significantly increase spending on air and missile defence as a *Sunday Times* investigation reveals Britain is increasingly vulnerable to ballistic missile attacks.”

The newspaper cited “a draft of the Nato blueprint, called the Capability Target 2025,” which states there is a “growing risk to Britain and its military assets overseas, as China, Russia and Iran rapidly develop ballistic missiles that can cross continents at many times the speed of sound.”

An upgrade in missile defence was imperative as “Senior defence sources are warning the UK ‘is in peril now’ and that within 15 years, a ballistic missile ‘will be able to hit Britain from anywhere in the world’,” reported the *Times*.

Replete with graphics showing the missile capability of Russia, China and Iran, the report points to the scale of rearmament that the Labour government must contend with: “The UK is spending only 1.6 per cent of GDP on ‘conventional defence’, when commitments like the nuclear deterrent are excluded, according to sources.”

The piece concludes with a “shopping list” including at least 12 warships “equipped with advanced new air defence systems”. The cost for these alone is vast: “Internal estimates suggest each vessel will cost at least £1 billion.”

Trump is set to use the “Nato summit in June to demand

that members spend 5 per cent of their GDP on defence”, but the fact is that the “UK spends less than half that, and while Starmer has pledged to hit 2.5 per cent, no timeline has been set”. The paper warns, “the question is whether ministers can afford to prevaricate any longer.”

An accompanying editorial drilled down on the message, arguing that, “While riding on the coat-tails of America, we have been spending half what we spent on defence in the 1980s, as a share of GDP, and a third of what we spent in the 1950s.” It concluded, “Governments can always find something else to spend money on and have done so,” but now “Spending more is not a choice. It is a necessity.”

At the same time, former Labour leader Lord Neil Kinnock told Times Radio, “I will probably lose friends over this... I don’t think that 2.5 per cent of GDP will be enough... Three, four per cent of GDP is a realistic objective. Now I don’t expect any minister to announce that that’s the objective, but that’s where we’ve got to go because our security is imperilled.”

What is demanded by Trump and openly aired by Kinnock would mean emptying the Treasury into the Ministry of Defence. Britain’s current military spend is around £53 billion annually, but 5 percent of a GDP of £2.54 trillion is £127 billion. In this scenario, welfare state spending must be ended.

With Starmer’s Labour already committed—and the finance markets openly threatening the fall of his government if not—to imposing more brutal spending cuts going forward than were previously outlined, the ramped-up militarisation of Britain will contribute to an eruption of class conflict between a despised government and the working class.



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