

# Former head of the British Army General Patrick Sanders declares “realistic possibility” of war with Russia within five years

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Recently retired Chief of the General Staff (head of the British Army), General Sir Patrick Sanders, has declared that Britain must prepare for the “realistic possibility” of war with Russia within five years, and step up rearmament at a faster pace than that envisaged by the Labour government.

In an interview with the *Telegraph*, Sanders said, “If Russia stops fighting in Ukraine, you get to a position where within a matter of months they will have the capability to conduct a limited attack on a Nato member that we will be responsible for supporting, and that happens by 2030.”

Sanders was effectively stood down as British Army head by the Sunak Conservative government due to his too-public frustrations over the pace of rearmament. He called for a “citizen army” as crucial to a “whole-of-nation mobilisation” for war, which the crisis-ridden and collapsing Tory government felt unable to openly back given its explosive social implications.

Having been handed his post in June 2022, within a year it was reported that Sanders would be standing down in 2024. *Sky News* explained last summer that Sanders would be leaving “after an unusually short term, removing a key voice who has warned about the need to rebuild the UK's land forces after decades of cuts.”

*Telegraph* Defence Editor Danielle Sheridan notes that it was her newspaper that “previously revealed that while still serving, Gen Sir Patrick... was blocked from giving a speech where he would warn that the nation would be called up to fight in the event of a war with Russia, because the Army is too small.”

Sanders’ parting shot was a June 6, 2024 interview in the *Times*, which leads a field of newspapers demanding a stepping up of confrontation with Russia and huge increases in military spending to pay for it. He told the paper: “warfare on this scale [World War Two]... there is every prospect, if you look at the pattern of history, that it could happen again.” The *Times’* Defence Editor Larisa Brown was blunter still: “Britain should be better prepared for a war so large that it could kill tens of millions of people, the outgoing head of the army has said.”

Sanders had previously warned in a speech to the Royal United Services Institute’s (RUSI)’s Land Warfare Conference, “The British Army must be prepared to engage in warfare at its most violent.”

Russia, he told the *Telegraph*, remained the greatest threat to Britain’s national interests: “I don’t know what more signals we need for us to realise that if we don’t act now and we don’t act in the next five years to increase our resilience ... I don’t know what more is needed.”

Sanders used the interview to insist that Britain was well behind in preparing for military conflict.

He gave as a counter-example “countries that are very alive to the threat—Estonia, Poland, the Nordics—governments there take a really proactive, serious approach to making sure the population realise that they could be attacked at almost any time.

“And so they give them a set of instructions on how to prepare for the consequences of that—loss of power, loss of fuel, storing food, they encourage them to have their own defensive bunkers, whether that’s in cellars

or civil defence—they encourage people to volunteer for civil defence roles to protect key bits of infrastructure.”

Sanders “cited Finland as an example the UK should consider,” the *Telegraph* reports, with the general telling the paper, “Finland has bomb shelters for 4.5 million people. It can survive as a government and as a society under direct missile and air attacks from Russia. We don’t have that.”

His main concern is military manpower.

“Now the first place you go to are the reserves, but the reserves are also too small. Thirty thousand reserves still only takes you to an army of 100,000. I joined an Army in the Cold War that was about 140,000 regulars, and on top of that, a much larger reserve.”

The government’s Strategic Defence Review published in June—which envisages a slight increase in regular army troop numbers to just 73,000—“didn’t touch on this at all”.

While supporting Starmer signing up to NATO’s new membership requirement of spending 5 percent of GDP on the military, he complained, “My concern is not that we will get to 5 per cent and the 3.5 per cent of military, it’s by when and at the moment the increase in the defence budget between now and 2027 is pretty marginal.”

For years, the most predatory sections of the ruling elite have insisted in the pages of the *Times* and *Telegraph* that the post-war era “peace dividend” on which welfare state policies could be financed is over. This position is now normalised within the bourgeois media, summed up by an op-ed column by *Financial Times* writer Janan Ganesh earlier this year titled, “Europe must trim its welfare state to build a warfare state”.

The *Telegraph* notes that Sanders “added that as the Cold War ended, the West was lured into a false sense of security and that the ‘peace dividend’ had made Britain vulnerable.” Sanders warned, “We now need to wake up and realise that that world has gone”.

Sanders latest intervention reveals the fear in ruling circles over growing opposition to war in a population not prepared to see millions killed in the future wars of British imperialism.

He states, “The world has become as dangerous, if not more dangerous, than it was in the Cold War and so I always worry about the layers of security we have, but I worry more about our resilience”.

Politicians had to “make sure the civilian population understands that these are no longer things that happen elsewhere, they could happen in the UK,” referring to “strikes” and “loss of power, loss of fuel”.

Sanders knows that the working class will be ordered to make sacrifices long in advance of such events, in the form of savage social spending and wage cuts.

This means a massive crackdown on democratic rights. To justify such a crackdown, he claimed Iran’s position as a “malign player in the [Middle East] region” targeted by British imperialism meant it would operate through proxies “to attack British interests in the UK”.

Using this claim, Sanders endorsed the proscription of the direct action protest group Palestine Action, alleging, “it’s entirely possible that there will have been some direct or covert sponsorship of groups like that.”

Similar lying accusations could be levelled at other protests groups, smeared as “proxies” of Russia or China. The *World Socialist Web Site* pointed to the significance of a sinister campaign, led by Rupert Murdoch’s *Times*, *Sun*, and *Daily Mail* in the early days of the 2022-23 strike wave, denouncing striking rail workers as “Putin’s stooges”.

Sanders’s comments take place within the context of the mad rush to rearmament by the main imperialist powers, with Russia and China in the firing line. His *Telegraph* interview was published just days before widespread media discussion of right-wing German historian Sönke Neitzel’s statement “Perhaps this is the last summer of peace.”

The intervention by Sanders also coincided with the call on Sunday by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier for the reintroduction of conscription.



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