

UK Armed forces head demands “sacrifice for our nation” amid calls for military spending surge

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17 December 2025

Senior military figures and other sections of the British ruling class are mounting an organised campaign to force Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s Labour government to move more rapidly and spend far more on the military than Labour has publicly committed.

The campaign moved into overdrive Monday with the lecture given by the Chief of Defence staff Sir Richard Knighton to the Royal United Services Institute (Rusi)—the premier security and military think-tank.

Knighton advanced Russia as an existential threat which needed a “whole of nation response” to combat. He agreed with his French counterpart, “my good friend” General Fabien Mandon, who declared last month that the French people must be prepared “to sacrifice their children” in a war against Russia.

Knighton argued, “First, it means more people being ready to fight for their country. Fabien Mandon was right.” This meant, “Sons and daughters. Colleagues. Veterans. ...will all have a role to play. To build. To serve. And if necessary, to fight. And more families will know what sacrifice for our nation means.”

Knighton’s call for sacrifice to the nation was made less than a week after the necessity for a continent-wide rearmament for preparation for war with Russia was demanded by NATO head Mark Rutte.

In a speech in Germany, Rutte said the NATO powers “had to shift to a wartime mindset”, giving the First and Second World Wars as a model. Europe’s citizens “must be prepared for the scale of war our grandparents or great-grandparents endured. Imagine it, a conflict reaching every home, every workplace, destruction, mass mobilisation, millions displaced, widespread suffering and extreme losses.”

Less than 48 hours before 50,000 National Health Service (NHS) resident doctors were to strike for better pay and secure jobs, Knighton warned that “deterrence is also about our resilience to these threats, it’s about how we harness all our national power, from universities, to industry, the rail network to the NHS. It’s about our defence and resilience being a higher national priority for all of us. An ‘all-in’ mentality.”

He was publicly supportive of the Starmer government’s decision to increase military spending from 2.5 percent of GDP on defence by 2027 and commitment to spend 5 percent of GDP on defence and security by 2035, which he praised as “the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the Cold War.” But his message was that this was still nowhere near enough when “Germany expects to spend 3.5 percent of GDP on Defence by 2029. Poland is already at 4.2 percent. And we have seen just in the past few weeks France and Germany return to a form of national service.”

The previous week during a panel discussion at the Royal Navy’s flagship event—the International Sea Power Conference—a “senior military commander” said off the record, as reported by the *Financial Times*, “When I hear senior political leaders, heads of state and government, commit to spend 3.5 percent of GDP by 2035, I want to see it programmed... If we do commit, let’s bloody commit.”

There has been a flood of commentary stating that years of post-Cold War cuts mean the armed forces lack numbers, munitions and the industrial surge capacity to sustain prolonged high-intensity warfare.

The BBC weighed in with a piece by security correspondent Frank Gardner asking, “How long

Britain could really fight for if war broke out tomorrow?” He wrote that while, “On paper, the British Army numbers around 74,000... Rusi’s Ed Arnold points out that once you subtract medically non-deployable soldiers, defence attaches around the world and others not part of formed units, then its actual deployable strength is only 54,000. That is less than the average number of casualties Russia takes in two months in Ukraine.”

Gardner cited Rusi specialist Hamish Mundell, who commented, “There remains little evidence that the UK has a plan to fight a war lasting more than a few weeks... Medical capacity is limited. Reserve regeneration pipelines are slow.”

“The British plan for mass casualty outcomes appears to be based on not taking casualties,” he continued, but modern day warfare “demands a second and even third echelon; personnel, platforms and logistics chains that can absorb losses and continue the fight.”

This week Armed Forces Minister Al Carns said that “societies, industries and economies win wars” and that the government is “rapidly developing” plans to ready the entire country for the outbreak of war.” Speaking from a Royal Air Force base, he announced, “There’s a whole load of work going on now between us [Ministry of Defence], the Cabinet Office, and the whole of society approach, and what conflict means, and what everybody’s role in society means if we were to go to war and the build up to war.”

Such talk only fuels criticism of the Starmer government from the most hawkish elements of the ruling class, however, who complain that ministers still balk at allocating the vast upsurge in military spending required.

Airing its concerns last week in “UK military figures urge Keir Starmer to commit to higher defence spending” the *Financial Times* complained, “Chancellor Rachel Reeves’ Budget last month mapped out government spending plans to 2030-31, but there was no reference to how defence spending might increase after hitting 2.5 per cent in 2027.”

It drew attention to the Office for Budget Responsibility’s assessment “that increasing defence spending to 3.5 percent of GDP by 2035 would cost an additional £32bn a year, well above the extra taxes Reeves already raised in her Budget.” The newspaper cited a “senior military commander” who said, “It was

disappointing not to see anything at all in the recent Budget.”

George Robertson, a former NATO secretary-general, just six months after co-authoring the government's Strategic Defence Review, told *LBC Radio* that the “pressure needs to be on the chancellor” as “she signed up to the Strategic Defence Review... the money will have to be made available in some way.”

The ruling elite in Britain, as internationally, knows that it cannot impose its agenda of militarism, war and austerity without a frontal assault on workers’ jobs, wages, conditions and social services built up over decades. To this end, the Starmer government, complicit in Israel’s genocide in Gaza, has clamped down on the right to protest, including arresting almost 3,000 people who have opposed the banning of the Palestine Action group.

Another speech Monday confirmed an agenda for even greater repression. Hours before Knighton spoke, Blaise Metreweli, the new Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), gave her first public speech in the job.

She denounced an “aggressive, expansionist, and revisionist” Russia, saying that as the UK faces a new “age of uncertainty”, “We are now operating in a space between peace and war.” The “front line is everywhere,” she continued. “Online, on our streets, in our supply chains, in the minds and on the screens of our citizens.”

In plain English, all who oppose war and the corporations reaping billions in war profiteering will be monitored and targeted for repression.



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