

Starmer's agreement to send UK troops to Ukraine fuels demands for urgent military expansion

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The crowing by British Prime Minister Keir Starmer at the agreement signed Tuesday with France to send British and French soldiers to Ukraine after a ceasefire with Russia has rapidly subsided. For the ruling class, it has only underscored the questions: how many, how soon, and how will this be paid for?

The *Times* has led demands in ruling circles during the Ukraine war for a rapid reprioritisation of spending away from social welfare to re-armament, enabling Britain to fight a prolonged, high-intensity war.

It responded to the Anglo-French-Ukrainian deal with a barrage of articles within 24 hours, led by longtime columnist Edward Lucas, a “consultant specialising in European and transatlantic security”. He is a known British imperialist asset, part of an organised cluster of anti-Russia mouthpieces.

The first paragraph of Lucas’ op-Ed, “Empty words on Ukraine spell doom for Nato,” got down to brass tacks: “We are promising forces we do not have, to enforce a ceasefire that does not exist, under a plan that has yet to be drawn up, endorsed by a superpower that is no longer our ally, to deter an adversary that has far greater willpower than we do. Apart from that, Britain’s defences are in great shape.”

With “at best 25,000 combat-capable troops” and already “struggling to keep even 1,000 of them deployed as a tripwire in Estonia,” the well-connected Lucas observes, and lacking “air defences”, “munitions and spare parts stockpiles” and other “enablers”, the UK is realistically incapable of acting as an independent military force.

The situation is now perilous because “Under Trump, the US has become a predator not an ally. Pressuring Denmark over Greenland is the death knell for Nato: for hawks in the White House, shedding European allies and associated entanglements is a bonus not a minus. Without the US brains in planning and intelligence, muscle (stockpiles and enablers), and the political will to fight, Nato is an empty shell”.

Starmer claimed US security guarantees had been agreed for a British-French “peacekeeping” force in Ukraine, but an initial draft statement including a “US commitment to support the force in case of attack”, as well as “intelligence and logistics” support was watered down to “a proposed US-led ceasefire monitoring and verification mechanism”. The US did not sign the final document.

Zelensky was left bitterly lamenting, asked if European countries would defend Ukraine, “as long as we don’t have such security guarantees—legally binding, supported by parliaments, supported by the United States Congress—this question cannot be answered.”

The head of foreign affairs in the Ukrainian parliament Oleksandr Merezhko commented simply “As of now, Trump isn’t offering anything concrete and serious”.

US commitments are vital to the British proposal—designed largely to spike a deal being struck by Washington and Moscow over the heads of the Europeans—under conditions in which, again, as reported by the *Times*, “Britain and France’s combined peacekeeping force would be limited to 15,000 after army chiefs warned that personnel numbers were too low to send more.”

The paper added that, according to two military sources, “the assumption is that fewer than 7,500 British soldiers will be deployed... although that figure is also expected to be a struggle for the UK”.

As a separate *Times* editorial, “Labour must get serious about increasing defence spending,” pointed out: “To be anywhere near credible in the deterrence role, Britain would have to deploy a brigade, preferably an armoured one, for an extended period, quite possibly a decade. That would mean rotating troops in and out of theatre, placing an enormous strain on an army that is now at its smallest since the late 18th century.

“Britain’s land force is short of everything: personnel, modern armoured vehicles, artillery and air defence. Its manpower and ammunition stocks would be exhausted in a

few weeks of intense fighting.”

The same is true of all of Europe’s armed forces. In Lucas’s words, “none is currently capable of deterring either Russia or the US... We have spent 35 years paring back our defences.” The same point was made in a recent *Economist* article asking, “if Europe could take on Russia without American help,” and which answered, “Without greatly improved capabilities, it must hope for a short war.”

Given the green light by the media campaign, multiple military top brass came forward to press the case for more resources for the armed forces.

Their demands come during a delay in Labour publishing its Defence Investment Plan (DIP)—supposed to have been released by the end of last year. The DIP is to lay out how government spending will back its strategic defence review published last June—which Starmer said was critical to “moving to warfighting readiness as the central purpose of our armed forces.”

Starmer and Defence Secretary John Healey have faced a hostile clamour on the basis that, despite such talk, Labour is still only committed to military spending of 2.5 percent of GDP by 2027, with an “ambition” to spend 3 percent in the next parliament (after 2029). A raft of commentary compares this unfavourably with Germany who have laid out plans for a vast military rearmament not seen since Hitler laid waste to Europe.

The most hawkish elements demand the government immediately start coughing up staggering sums to reach NATO’s new target of 5 percent of GDP spent on the military. The *Financial Times* reported last month that the best part of a trillion pounds (£800 billion) of new funding for defence projects and wider strategic infrastructure would need to be found by the Treasury by 2040 to fund the commitment.

Ramping up the pressure Friday, the *Times* revealed that in a meeting between Starmer and defence chiefs in December, the prime minister raised concerns about the “affordability” of the DIP—which has now been kicked down the road to “before March”. At the talks, also attended by Healey and Chancellor Rachel Reeves, Chief of the Defence Staff Sir Richard Knighton delivered a “dire financial assessment” showing a £28 billion shortfall in the military budget *between now and 2030*.

These demands are echoed across Parliament, by a political establishment which constitutes a single party of war.

Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey welcomed Starmer’s agreement—along with other European leaders—in defence of Denmark over Greenland, while asking Starmer, “but does he also agree that if Trump does attack Greenland, it will be the end of NATO? Given that frightening possibility, does

he accept that the UK needs to increase defence spending more quickly than currently planned and build new alliances with reliable nations?”

This summed up the crisis of British foreign policy, given that just minutes later—using UK bases—joint US-British forces seized the Russian-flagged oil tanker the *Marinera* in waters off Scotland.

On Friday, asked by Sky News, if he would guarantee that British troops or bases would not play a role in US military actions towards Greenland, Healey refused to answer.

Conservative Party leader of the opposition Kemi Badenoch responded by accusing Starmer of acting against the national interest by “prioritising welfare handouts over defence spending.” Adding “We need to spend more on defence... He did not answer the question about when we will get to 3 percent yet he knows up until 2031 how much he is going to be spending on welfare.”

The same point was made by Lucas, who concluded that Russian President Vladimir Putin was “willing to impose sacrifices on his people. We are not. He acts. We dither and pretend.”

Writing in the *Telegraph*, columnist Jeremy Warner said, “Whatever the wider geopolitical and economic consequences of Donald Trump’s latest escapade in Latin America, there is one thing it has highlighted closer to home—the urgent need to put a rocket under UK defence spending”. The only conclusion was that, “Welfare must take the brunt of the pain in efforts to boost defence spending.” It was time for the government to grasp the nettle as “A radical re-imagining of spending priorities is approaching at pace. The obvious target here has to be welfare—and particularly working-age benefits—where spending is plainly out of control.”

That Starmer has been reluctant to act on these demands shows his recognition that he leads an already hated Labour government which would meet fierce opposition to this class and imperialist war agenda. But the ruling class is increasingly adamant that he proceed anyway or be replaced by someone who will. The working class must act with even greater urgency to build a political movement against this threat.



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