

STARMER SHOULD GET REAL ABOUT DEFENCE

In a world where Europe can no longer rely on America for defence and Russian aggression continues in Ukraine, George Cunningham says radical change is needed to thinking about UK defence

Nobody has any doubt now that the world is going through profound changes. The threat level for Europe is rising. The NATO Alliance is not as strong or credible as it was. The UK and its European allies need to rearm to better deter aggression.

At the NATO summit in The Hague this June, and after much pressure from the United States, member countries (with some pushback from Spain, Belgium and Slovakia) reluctantly agreed to increase their expenditure on defence from a target of a minimum of 2% to 5% of GDP, made up of 3.5% of GDP for core military expenditure plus 1.5% on security-related matters, like infrastructure projects and cybersecurity, by 2035 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm.

Yet the clock is ticking much faster. A 10-year deadline is a sure bet that most countries will continue to kick the defence can down the road, hoping the responsibility for most of the heavy lifting will not lie within the timeframe of their current governments.

However, with Russia's war machine running at full tilt, the reality is we have more like two-to-three years to get our act together.

Putin is hardly going to hang around until we are fully rearmed in 2035 (if countries even carry through their pledges). Despite having suffered one million casualties during its latest war, the Russian army has increased its size to 1.32m active military personnel, and spends 7.05% of GDP on the military <https://www.statista.com/topics/9957/armed-forces-of-russia/#topicOverview>. A new formation of Russian troops is suspected to be in the making either for a last push in Ukraine and/or for deployment elsewhere.

We must keep Ukraine well supplied and supported, to keep it in the fight, regardless of what the US does, to protect the whole of Europe.

RUSSIAN BLITZ

Suffering a Russian blitz on its main cities, and gradual loss of territory without much hope of regaining it, Ukraine is on the ropes. Ukraine supports a ceasefire on the current line of contact. But Putin has persuaded Trump that he should have a peace agreement and pocket more territory. The war may soon come to a pause. With such a high level of mobilisation and hard-bitten experienced soldiers available, will Russia then try for more elsewhere?

NATO sighed a breath of relief earlier this year when US air force General Alexis G. Grynke

was appointed Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). Europe proclaimed it to be a sign of the US's continued commitment to NATO.

In reality, it is not surprising that the US continued to be in charge of NATO militarily. As in the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, the

US commands and Europe follows. Having the US as NATO's supreme commander reinforces the inability of NATO to go to war if the US wishes to block it from doing so.

The US' commitment to NATO will undergo a further test this September, given the US concerns about China's threat to its interests in the Indo-Pacific.

The US Global Force Posture Review is expected as a minimum to reduce the 20,000 US troops sent by former President Joe Biden to Europe in 2022 because of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. That would still leave around 70-90,000 US troops in Europe, if cuts were to go no further. However, talk of a drawdown of up to 30% in Europe is possible.

And then of course it's crucial that any US drawdown is undertaken in an orderly, coordinated, measured pace (the experience of the over-hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan does not exude much confidence). Europe on its own lacks the ability to take on Russian



ground-based air defences from the air, cannot resupply ammunition speedily, does not have enough tanker aircraft, and lacks sufficient command and control and satellite capabilities. As the Royal United Services Institute recently warned: "In the event of a clash with China in the Indo-Pacific that removes the capacity for large-scale US military reinforcement and support elsewhere, Europe will be left vulnerable to concurrent military aggression by Russia." <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/europe-must-urgently-prepare-deter-russia-without-large-scale-us-support>

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DOUBTFUL COMMITMENT

It used to be a given that NATO allies would band together in times of crisis. Yet the US's current doubtful commitment may well give second thoughts to other allies. Could the UK even find itself alone?

In a recent simulation exercise, called The Wargame <https://www.globalplayer.com/podcasts/42Kt8P/> former UK ministers, military chiefs and other experts tried to defend the UK from Russian attack. It showed how unprepared the UK is - and that NATO allies might not come to its rescue. The US positioned itself as an equal-handed mediator between the UK and Russia, actually working towards dissuading the UK from responding militarily to Russian attacks, even when it struck our civilian population.

Everyone knows we collected a handsome peace dividend after the end of the Cold War. Not only have our military capabilities shrunk but in many cases the process of upgrading and procuring replacements for our equipment has been incompetently managed.

Just some examples: we have built two aircraft carriers without having enough Royal Naval vessels to protect them from attack in high intensity warfare. We cannot just rely on allies to protect them. If an aircraft carrier were to be sunk, over one thousand British lives could be lost; half of the Royal Navy's small total of 16 destroyers and frigates are not operational; the last two Trident missile tests (in 2016 and 2024) failed. Can we even depend on our nuclear deterrent (or US technology; our virtual lack of air missile defence on the UK mainland means we cannot protect civilian lives in particular. Russia's relentless and ruthless daily missile and drone attacks on Ukraine's cities shows the devastation that a modern-day blitz can do; more are leaving than joining our armed forces because of dilapidated accommodation, poor morale and low pay.

Irrespective of reality, worryingly both Starmer and Healey are in denial of the truth, talking up the UK's leadership in the security and defence, without the means to achieve it. Just some examples follow.

There is a persistent belief in the centrality of NATO and that the US can be persuaded to help Europe militarily against Russia, when all signs are to the contrary.

Before the recent NATO agreement, Labour committed itself in its UK Strategic Defence Review

to raise defence spending to only 2.5% of GDP by 2027-28 with an "ambition", according to Starmer, "to hit 3% in the next Parliament, subject to economic and fiscal conditions." In reality, he was - and still is - saying the heavy-lifting is for another government, "not mine".

After the NATO summit, Starmer said the UK would spend 4.1% of GDP on defence by 2027. How was

that figure reached? By labelling any old pre-planned UK infrastructure works as military (1.5%) to bump up the figure.

AFGHAN SYNDROME

As part of the Coalition of the Willing, the UK has committed itself to supplying "boots on the ground and planes in the air" to police a possible ceasefire in Ukraine. However, the UK's army is too stretched to do something new in Ukraine. Only one UK brigade can be deployed anywhere at short notice with few coalition partners willing to do much more (while the Ukrainian army is holding back Russia with 110 brigades). Is Healey suffering from the Afghan syndrome, by intending to deploy "ghost soldiers"?

When visiting our aircraft carrier on exercise in the Indo-Pacific in Darwin in July, Healey said: "The security of the Indo-Pacific is indivisible from the security of the Euro-Atlantic" and that "Australia and the UK are nations that will fight together". However, we do not have the wherewithal to continue pretending we are a global power. The priority for us with our limited resources must be the European theatre, especially if the US starts pulling out significantly from Europe.

Given budgetary restrictions until the magic formula is found to grow the UK economy again, we need to prioritise what can be done in the next two-to-three years to better deter aggression. Some thoughts:

- ☛ Speed up repairs to our laid-up Royal Navy frigates and destroyers.
- ☛ While continuing donations of munitions to the Ukrainian army, replenish our own ammunition stocks as urgently as possible.
- ☛ Set up a joint UK-Ukraine training system so that we help Ukraine train more troops while benefiting from their expertise in modern warfare
- ☛ Form a reserve battalion of newly-recruited Generation Z drone operators, while ensuring full integration of drone warfare training and defence across our armed forces.
- ☛ Appoint the long-awaited new UK national armaments director and encourage UK-European-Ukrainian industry partnership to produce drones and other cutting edge battlefield technology inexpensively in a timely way.
- ☛ Put our main British army effort into making the Joint Expeditionary Force a serious deterrent to Russian aggression in the Baltic states. Do

not deplete UK military resources from there to Ukraine.

- ☛ Ensure the production of Typhoon Eurofighters is not closed down in the UK by giving more orders to continue bolstering the size of the Royal Air Force rather than relying on more US built F-35s.
- ☛ Starting weaning the UK off its reliance on US military equipment.
- ☛ And not forgetting the importance of robust diplomacy to try to avoid war, in close coordination with our European partners.

And in the medium term, in addition to the recommendations of the UK's Strategic Defence Review https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad?dm_i=1W52,8Y96P,A3XLHH,11CSJR,1 we should consider repositioning a British armoured brigade in Poland, working with Polish/Coalition of the Willing troops, to establish how best to fight modern warfare, with a strong training input from Ukraine.

We should also encourage Ukrainian military participation in future Coalitions of the Willing, outside countries bordering Russia and hold individuals and companies to account if they are responsible for negligence in the performance of defence contracts.

The entry level costs of an iron dome-like air defence system covering the whole of the UK has been estimated at around £25bn. The country should be made aware of this and the government should hold a debate with civil society about what should be done.

We need a strong relationship with the US but on a different basis. Not today's subordinate client basis, but a basis of mutual respect built on our regaining UK/Europe's former strength and ability to act independently in its own defence.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte told the European Parliament bluntly in January: "Spending more on defence means spending less on other priorities."

The inexorable growth of sovereign debt is straining all western economies. In the UK, 50 years ago, approximately one-third of government spending was on health, education and welfare. Today that figure is 75%.

The idea of establishing a Rearmament Bank is being



floated to raise additional private capital for defence. The UK is also aiming to pay in to join the EU's new Security Action for Europe (SAFE), fund which will offer €150bn in low-interest loans to support joint procurement efforts.

However, the responsible way would be to combine this with finding ways to raise more income or reduce government expenditure, investing more in defence.

We need to assist the Labour government both in growing the economy (and join the EU's Customs Union) as well as not automatically opposing all their attempts at raising more income or cost-cutting.

Ed Davey (pictured with Helen Maguire MP at a NATO base in Estonia) has been right to call on the prime minister to hold talks to establish a consensus across the political divide on how to further increase defence spending.

The gravity of the situation requires the prime minister to address the nation to lay out the challenges and consequences.

George Cunningham is an elected member of the Federal International Relations Committee and on the executive of Lib Dems Friends of the Armed Forces and Lib Dems Overseas

**Note: 20 September 20:15 at
Bournemouth Centre, Branksoem Suite.
Lib Dem Friends of Armed Forces and Lib
Dem Friends of Ukraine
Modern Warfare: lessons from
Ukraine's war against
Russia's aggression**

**Speaker: General Valerii Zaluzhnyi,
Commander-in-Chief of Ukraine's
armed forces 2021-2024, now
Ukraine's Ambassador to the UK.**

**With Lib Dem Defence spokesperson
Helen Maguire MP**

