

Britain prepares to send battle tanks to Ukraine as war against Russia escalates

Robert Stevens
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The UK is considering shipping Challenger 2 battle tanks to Ukraine as part of a major escalation in NATO's war against Russia.

Following talks at London's Lancaster House last Friday with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said that sending tanks "may well be part" of the UK's future support for Ukraine.

The talks were held the same day Germany announced that it will send Ukraine armoured vehicles and a Patriot missile system. The US Biden administration has committed to sending dozens of Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles as part of a further tranche of military aid.

Asked by a reporter if the UK would respond by upgrading its military support, Cleverly said, "We will continue to speak with the Ukrainians about what they need for the next phase of their self-defence and we will continue working with our international partners about ensuring that we provide that. Tanks might well be part of that."

Britain is the second largest supplier of military aid to Ukraine, after the US, having already sent £2.3 billion in military hardware. This includes 200 armoured vehicles—with six Stormer vehicles fitted with Starstreak launchers—along with hundreds of missiles and maritime Brimstone missiles. The Sunak government is committed to matching or increasing its military assistance to Ukraine this year.

France agreed last week to deliver AMX-10 RC light tanks to the Ukrainian military. But Britain sending battle tanks into the Ukraine war would be a major step further and provocation against Moscow. While it is an aging vehicle, the Challenger 2 tank—used by British soldiers in military operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Iraq—has had several upgrades since the 1990s and is considered one of the most reliable tanks available. The Tory government decided to upgrade 148 of its Challengers (two thirds of the total fleet of 227) only two years ago, while the Challenger 3 is still in development in a joint venture with Germany.

Further details emerged this week of the UK's plans in a piece written by Deborah Haynes, the security and defence

editor of Sky News. Haynes has intimate connections with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and intelligence agencies. She wrote Monday, "Discussions have been taking place 'for a few weeks' about delivering a number of the British Army's Challenger 2 main battle tank...."

"One source suggested Britain might offer around 10 Challenger 2 tanks, enough to equip a squadron." The "source said this in itself would not be a 'game changer' but it would still be hugely significant because the move would breach a barrier that has so far prevented allies from offering up Western tanks to Ukraine for fear of being seen as overly escalatory by Russia."

Haynes cited a Ukrainian source who said if the UK sent Challenger tanks, "It will be a good precedent to demonstrate [to] others - to Germany first of all, with their Leopards... and Abrams from the United States".

"Ukraine", the article noted, "has long requested the mass-produced, German-made Leopard II tanks, used by several European allies, including Germany, Poland, Finland, the Netherlands and Spain.

"Warsaw and Helsinki have already signalled a willingness to supply their Leopard tanks to Kyiv" but were unable to supply these to Ukraine as it "requires approval from Berlin because Germany holds the export licence."

Sky and other news sources said that a decision on supplying Challenger and/or other tanks could be made as soon as January 20 at the US-led "Ramstein" contact group of defence ministers, comprising the 50 nations flooding Ukraine with ever more advanced, lethal weaponry.

The Sunak government is currently reviewing its overall defence budget, including the military aid it hands over to Kiev. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak insisted on a pre-Christmas visit to UK troops in Estonia—which along with Poland is the base for 1,000 troops deployed by London as part of the anti-Russian Operation Cabrit—that there would be no let-up in military support for Ukraine.

During his visit he spoke to soldiers of the King's Royal Hussars, an armoured cavalry regiment equipped with Challenger 2 tanks. He arrived in Estonia after addressing a

summit in Riga, Latvia, of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)—a military alliance of anti-Moscow northern European states. There he announced a £250 million contract to ensure the supply of artillery ammunition to Ukraine throughout 2023. The JEF was also addressed by video-link by Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky.

While Sunak has committed to being “all in” in backing Ukraine, even announcing a review of spending provoked a frothing response from the most pro-war sections of the media in the *Guardian*, who declared it a betrayal of the support offered by former prime minister Boris Johnson. Hundreds of thousands of rounds of artillery was not enough when Kiev “is calling for a step-change in western assistance,” it complained.

Sunak has not yet committed to matching the increase in defence spending to 3 percent of GDP by 2030 (more than £150 billion extra in the next eight years) pledged by his short-lived predecessor Liz Truss.

Fearful of British imperialism missing out on any spoils, the most predatory forces within the political and military elite are demanding that the defence budget be ramped up well beyond the 2 percent of GDP insisted on by NATO. The *Financial Times* reported earlier this month, “In early December, Britain’s defence minister Ben Wallace and the head of the armed forces Admiral Sir Tony Radakin went to see Prime Minister Rishi Sunak at 10 Downing Street with an overarching topic on their minds: the UK military’s need for money.”

Wallace is a prominent supporter of Johnson, who said he would back him before Johnson decided not to challenge Sunak in last summer’s Tory leadership contest. Only days before meeting Sunak, he declared of the regular UK army, reduced by decades of cuts to 72,000 troops, “If we just want to stay at home and do a bit of tootling around, we’ve got an armed forces big enough.”

Wallace and Radakin’s intervention, according to the *Daily Telegraph*, secured a military spending “increase by more than a billion pounds to avoid a real term cut over the next two years”, with Chancellor Jeremy Hunt expected to announce the increase in his Budget this spring.

Hunt is on record supporting a huge increase to 4 percent of GDP on defence, international aid and foreign office policies.

The rise is to coincide with the publication of a new Integrated Review (IR) of the armed forces. The previous one outlined by the Johnson government barely a year ago and centred on a “tilt” towards the Indo-Pacific region, away from Europe, will be torn up. Hunt declared in his November budget that it “is necessary to revise and update the Integrated Review, written as it was before the Ukraine invasion.”

Ahead of the review, Radakin in the annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture to the Royal United Services Institute—the premier defence and security think tank—posed the question that while the previous IR “was correct to identify Russia as the most acute threat and was the first to begin to grapple with the scale of the challenge of China... How do we manage a weaker but more vindictive Russia over the long term? Are we going to remain committed to a global outlook? And if so, how much do we invest?” Britain could “not shy away from our status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a nuclear power with global responsibilities and the 6th largest economy in the world.”

This required, “thinking big: accelerating the transformation of the Armed Forces to become even more lethal and integrated... Being even more global in our outlook.”

He proposed, “Might that mean an Army equipped with anti-ship or hypersonic missiles capable of striking the enemy thousands of kilometres away? Might it mean a British carrier regularly deployed in the Indo-Pacific at the heart of an allied strike group?”

Making clear the scale of the conflict the UK should prepare for, he continued, “Because the biggest lesson from the past year is to recognise that we are part of a generational struggle for the future of the global order.”

The immediate rise in the military budget just sanctioned is only a down payment. Everything else, above all workers’ wages, must be held at rock bottom levels as inflation soars so that the military budget can grow.

The plundering of social spending—including that required by an already collapsing National Health Service—to spend an extra £150 billion on the military this decade is a declaration of war against the working class. Public spending cuts will fund the £31 billion cost of four new submarines to carry the UK’s nuclear missiles and as many as 138 F-35 stealth fighter jets (£90 million each) to serve as the cutting edge of Britain’s aircraft carriers.



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