

UK army chief warns NATO must be able to fight a major war in three years

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24 July 2024

Army head General Sir Roland Walker used his first speech in the role to call for a UK military force of “devastating lethality”. His plan was to “double” Britain’s “fighting power” in three years and “triple it by the end of the decade” to confront “an increasingly aligned axis of upheaval.”

“If we can double and then triple our fighting power, any British land force will be able to destroy an enemy force at least three times its size and keep on doing that.”

Speaking to reporters at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Land Warfare Conference, Walker explained his view that the UK and its NATO allies had to be able “to deter or fight a war in three years”. This was justified with reference to Russia’s war in Ukraine, China’s plans regarding Taiwan and Iran’s development of nuclear weapons.

Russia, said Walker, would at the present rate take 1.5 million casualties and “five years to grind their way through” to capturing the eastern Donbas, but would emerge from the war with “a sense of wanting retribution for the support that was given to Ukraine.” He estimated it would be three to five years before the Russian Army could fully reconstitute itself following any end to the Ukraine war.

In China, President Xi Jinping has stated he “wants a military option for Taiwan by 2027-28”, Walker said. This is combined with the alleged threat of Iranian nuclear weapons.

His warning to act now, before it is too late, centred on the assertion that China, Russia, Iran and North Korea were already acting in concert in Ukraine. Their collusion would, by 2027-2028, “have reached some sort of mutual singularity and your ability to deal with them in isolation—a specific crisis that can be managed by the rules-based system—I think is significantly

diminished. A problem in one area is likely to trigger a sympathetic detonation in another and therefore it is a global problem looked at from different perspectives around the world.”

Winning such a global struggle means building “fighting power” and “lethality” and being prepared to fight devastating wars.

Walker’s military pedigree includes a decade in the Special Air Service (SAS) regiment, as a captain and a major, with multiple tours of Iraq. Made a lieutenant-colonel in 2008, he led the Grenadier Guards in Afghanistan. He was later made Director Special Forces.

Having played his part on the front lines of British imperialism’s criminal wars, Walker is inclined to speak more bluntly about its aims.

While politicians in the NATO countries seek to present their increasing involvement in a war with Russia as a contained and measured affair, Walker has spelled out the reality. The imperialist powers are engaged in a multi-front conflict threatening direct war between major powers within three years.

By openly and repeatedly placing Russia, China and Iran in the firing line, and building its forces against them, NATO is pushing its targets into a corner, willing them to “act first” and provide a pretext, as in Ukraine. When Walker writes of China wanting “a military option for Taiwan” this is not so much a concern as part of NATO’s strategy.

References to an enemy “axis” are a deliberate and threatening allusion to George W. Bush’s January 2002 speech identifying Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an “axis of evil”. Then Undersecretary of State John Bolton gave a “beyond the axis of evil” speech a few months later adding Cuba, Libya and Syria.

Every one of these countries has been subjected to

crippling economic blockades and sanctions and three have been destroyed—one (Iraq) by a direct US invasion and two (Libya and Syria) by US-sponsored civil wars.

Today, the targets are much bigger, and the consequences terrifyingly so. They would involve not only the type of mass slaughter of opposing armies cited by Walker but raise the risk of a resort to nuclear weapons.

Walker was preceded at the RUSI conference by Ukraine's ambassador to the UK Valery Zaluzhny, Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed forces for the first two years of the war with Russia.

Zaluzhny did not mince words either, asking the audience, "Is humanity ready to calmly accept the next war in terms of the scale of suffering? This time the Third World War? Free and democratic countries and their governments need to wake up and think about how to protect your citizens and their countries."

He continued, "Perhaps the most difficult and the most important component is the society's readiness," arguing, "Society must agree to temporarily give up a range of freedoms for the sake of survival. Modern wars, unfortunately, are total. They require the efforts not only of the army, but also of society as a whole."

The RUSI Land Warfare Conference has been a key forum for a steadily escalating drumbeat of war for the last several years. In 2018, head of the British Armed Forces General Sir Nick Carter spoke about the need for the UK to "project land capability over distances of up to some 2,000 km" towards Russia, or "what the Germans did very well in 1940". In 2022, as a land war broke out in Ukraine, then head of the army General Sir Patrick Sanders declared that "The British Army must be prepared to engage in warfare at its most violent."

These discussions are now far advanced. At this week's conference, Walker concluded with the need for "absolute urgency to restore credible hard power in order to underwrite deterrence."

Labour's Defence Secretary John Healey was on hand to oblige. Having warned that "Russia is far from a spent force; and if Putin wins, he will not stop at Ukraine" and that "we face rapidly increasing global threats," he agreed with Walker: "We must urgently re-establish credible deterrence to keep these threats in check.

"That means looking at firepower, it means looking at enablement, it means looking at readiness, it means

looking at resilience... It means the things that matter in getting results, in being more ready to fight, in being stronger."

Healey went on to tout Labour's Defence Review launched last week as "the first of its kind for the UK, because it is externally led, and led by the former Secretary General of NATO George Robertson."

At a press briefing to launch the review, Robertson made clear the agenda behind it was that set out in detail by Walker. "We're confronted by a deadly quartet of nations increasingly working together," said Robertson, meaning Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, which NATO powers have "got to be able to confront."

The RUSI conference is a sharp warning to the working class in Britain and around the world. War on a scale unseen for decades is on the agenda of the ruling class—an agenda counted in handfuls of years.

The debate increasingly involves unaccountable military officers who have spent their lives obsessing over how to fight and win a war against their enemies, whatever the cost. Talk of "deterrence" is a thin smokescreen designed to hide the real consequences; as they acknowledge, planning for "deterrence" is in practical terms the same as planning for global war.



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