

UK's head of MI5 ramps up demonisation of Russia, Iran and China

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The head of the UK's domestic spy agency, MI5, has ramped up tensions against Russia, Iran and China, demonising the three countries as “state threats” in a “threat update” this week.

MI5 Director General Ken McCallum made the statement Tuesday “on the current national security threats facing the UK”, warning, “The first 20 years of my career here were crammed full of terrorist threats. We now face those alongside state-backed sabotage and assassination plots, against the backdrop of a major European land war.”

In a speech given from MI5's Counter Terrorism Operations Centre (CTOC) in London, McCallum bracketed Russia, Iran and China together as “autocratic regimes, whose repression at home increasingly extends to aggression overseas.”

Among their targets were “sensitive government information, our technology, our democracy, journalists and defenders of human rights”, said the MI5 chief.

McCallum saw no irony in making the speech from the capital city where Julian Assange, one of the most prominent journalists in the world, languished in a dungeon in a maximum security prison as part of a 14-year-long detention for exposing the dirty wars and human rights abuses of the imperialist powers.

McCallum said, “We've been growing our efforts against heightened state aggression for several years now. In just the last year the number of state threat investigations we're running has shot up by 48 percent.”

He added, “Russia continues its illegal attempt to subjugate Ukraine. While the Russian military grinds away on the battlefield, at horrendous human cost, we're also seeing Putin's henchmen seeking to strike elsewhere, in the misguided hope of weakening Western resolve.”

The “UK's leading role in supporting Ukraine means we loom large in the fevered imagination of Putin's regime, and we should expect to see continued acts of

aggression here at home. The GRU [military intelligence] in particular is on a sustained mission to generate mayhem on British and European streets: we've seen arson, sabotage and more.”

McCallum's government biography notes that this spook of more than 25 years' standing began his career in the Security Service “focussed on Northern Ireland-related terrorism. Senior operational roles in countering Islamist extremist terrorism followed, as well as a period leading MI5's early cyber security work, where he expanded the organisation's engagement with the private sector.”

In 2017, he became Deputy Director General of MI5, “with responsibility for all MI5's operational and investigative work” and “led MI5's strategic response to the 2017 terrorist attacks and to the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal in 2018.” McCallum took up his post as director general in April 2020.

The Skripal case in Salisbury, England, sparked a major international crisis in 2018, after double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found on a bench in Salisbury, England, in an unconscious state after being allegedly poisoned by a nerve agent, Novichok—which was blamed on Russia. Given the murky events attributed to Russia without any substantive evidence, McCallum is sure to give no further details about the “arson, sabotage and more” he claims is being organised by Russia on a staggering scale on Britain's streets.

On Iran, McCallum declared, “As events unfold in the Middle East, we will give our fullest attention to the risk of an increase in--or a broadening of--Iranian state aggression in the UK.”

McCallum said, “Since the killing of Mahsa Amini in 2022 we've seen plot after plot here in the UK, at an unprecedented pace and scale.” Amini, a 22 year-old woman, died on September 16, 2022, at the hands of the morality police of the Iranian clerical regime.

He added, again with no evidence provided, “Since January 2022, with police partners, we have responded to twenty Iran-backed plots presenting potentially lethal threats to British citizens and UK residents.”

While the MI5 head stated that “Like the Russian services, Iranian state actors make extensive use of criminals as proxies—from international drug traffickers to low-level crooks,” just one example is offered. This was the jailing in December of a man “for reconnaissance he had carried out against the then-headquarters of the *Iran International* media organisation”—a dissident Iranian television station located in West London.

In November 2022, the WSWS noted the increase in rhetoric against Iran, with *Iran International* being prominently utilised. We explained, “McCallum, the head of Britain’s spy agency MI5, claimed Iranian intelligence agents had been targeting people in the UK. He said there had been at least 10 threats since January to kidnap or even kill British or UK-based people perceived as enemies of the regime. On Saturday, the *Times* reported that London’s Metropolitan Police had stationed Armed Response Vehicles outside *Iran International*’s headquarters, following threats by Tehran against its journalists.”

While China is bracketed as a state threat alongside Russia and Iran by MI5, the lucrative economic interests for the ruling class in Britain’s relationship with Beijing mean that China cannot be treated with quite the same level of open hostility.

According to the China-Britain Business Council, “China is the UK’s third largest trading partner. China is the UK’s sixth largest export market. China accounts for 5% of total UK exports. China invested €79.6 billion in the UK from 2000-2021.” In addition, the UK’s higher education sector would come crashing down overnight without the huge revenues brought in by the many thousands of Chinese students who study in UK institutions every year paying exorbitant tuition fees. The China-Britain Business Council notes that “Chinese students added £5.4 billion to the economy in 2021.”

For this reason McCallum stated that “China is different... The UK-China economic relationship supports UK growth, which underpins our security.”

So, while “there are also risks to be managed... The choices are complex, and it rightly falls to Ministers to make the big strategic judgements on our relationship with China: where it’s in the UK’s interests to co-operate, and how we do so safely.”

What is required “is to build the UK’s resilience –

helping businesses, universities and others intelligently navigate the more contested world we now live in, engaging with China on real opportunities where the risks can be sufficiently managed.”

MI5’s designation of China chimes with a Sky News report published last week stating that “the [UK] Treasury is in detailed discussions with Chinese counterparts about holding a UK-China Economic and Financial Dialogue (EFD) as early as January. The meeting would take place in Beijing and would be the first such gathering since June 2019...”

Nevertheless, Britain’s role as Washington’s main junior military partner and provocateur in chief mean that any such calculations have definite limits and could be upended entirely by the election of Donald Trump in next month’s US Presidential election. Trump has declared China and not Russia as the main competitor and military rival of the US.

Britain’s leading role in NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine and the military targeting of Iran ensured that McCallum’s remarks led the front pages of four major UK newspapers: the *Financial Times*, *Mail*, *Express* and the *i*. While the other newspapers featured Russia as the main enemy, the intensification of the conflict with Iran ensured that on its front page the *i* made no mention of Russia and led off with a banner “MI5 warns about Iran plots on British soil.”

Further bullet points underneath included extracts from McCallum’s speech targeting Iran.

Virtually nothing was made by any newspaper of McCallum’s extraordinary statement that “The headline split of our counter terrorist work remains roughly 75% Islamist extremist, 25% extreme right-wing terrorism”—an extraordinary admission of the growth of homegrown fascist activity from such a leading security figure.



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