

Starmer visits British-NATO troops in Estonia, pushes war agenda

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Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer met with British troops on Russia's border today, as part of a visit to Norway and Estonia.

Starmer has made 16 international trips since Labour formed a government in July—more than any of his predecessors in the same timeframe—spending more than six working weeks out of the country. The most common reason for Britain's Member of Parliament for NATO's trips is to escalate the imperialist-backed war in Ukraine against Russia.

He continues with this agenda, apparently in the face of mounting concern among Labour's political strategists in Downing Street, while his own and the government's popularity plummet. Just 20 percent of respondents told Ipsos they were pleased with Labour's performance in a survey conducted at the end of November. The same pollster found that Starmer had the worst approval ratings (minus 34) of any prime minister after five months in office.

This is an entirely secondary concern for a Labour leader who was ushered to power by the British and American ruling class with the mission of continuing Britain's role as NATO's chief provocateur—taking over from the crisis-ridden Conservative government. He is in Estonia for a conference of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), set up in 2014 as a British-led Northern European adjunct of the imperialist alliance.

More than simply disregarding popular sentiment, Starmer is aware that his warmongering policy will meet social opposition which he is preparing to confront and suppress.

Speaking at the summit, Estonian Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur told the media, “My main message is that paying 2 percent of GDP [spent on the military] to secure the peace is not very much. We don't have time to wait to go up to 3 percent or even to 2.5 percent. We need to do it immediately... it should be at least 5 percent”.

Starmer responded, “Not many people in the UK are keen on their taxes going up again and they are right about that. Nor are they very keen on having their public services cut. So there's no point pretending that this isn't a real debate.

“But the first duty of government is obviously national security, to keep our people safe. And that is why defence spending, NATO, working with our allies and JEF is so important.”

In the first instance, “Ukraine needs all the capability that it can get... A lot of money has been raised, funding has been raised, but more is going to be needed.”

Making an appeal to British business, Starmer warned “this is a different world to the world of 10, 20 years ago,” while touting the economic benefits of his war agenda: “Defence spending doesn't sort of sit in a silo over here with no effect on the rest of the economy, no effect on technology. It has a huge effect on technologies, the cutting edge of technology and change, which can then be used in other areas...”

Throwing a bone to the corporatist trade unions—who, at the Trades Union Congress, pledged to dragoon their members into this militarist programme by supporting Britain's “defence” industry—Starmer added, “There's a huge number of well-paid jobs that are very important to our economy in defence spending as well.”

He concluded, “We have to make that positive case. I don't personally feel that we can sort of sit back and assume that all of those in our respective countries necessarily accept all of our arguments unless we make them in that positive way.”

Starmer is happy to “make the case” for more money for the military, while he and the political establishment continue to work to keep the population in the dark about the consequences of the wars and aggression it will pay for.

NATO has tens of thousands of troops in Eastern

Europe, with 300,000 at a state of high readiness targeting Russia. Britain leads the alliance's battlegroup in Estonia. Just this summer its soldiers participated in NATO's largest-ever series of exercises in the Baltic, involving 9,000 troops, 50 vessels and 25 aircraft. A few days ago they joined Estonian, Latvian, French and American soldiers in Exercise Pikne 10 kilometres from the Russian border.

It was these soldiers Starmer spoke with Tuesday, reportedly telling them, "The Russia we face today is unlikely to change for a generation. It is the most acute threat we face, and it will endure beyond the end of the war in Ukraine."

This was within hours of Ukraine's hugely provocative assassination on Russian soil of the general, Igor Kirillov, in charge of its chemical, biological and radiological weapons unit. Russia responded to the British prime minister's visit by flying two Tu-22M3 nuclear-capable bombers over neutral waters in the Baltic Sea.

Nor do the imperialist powers' ambitions stop with Russia, with Starmer urging reporters in Tallinn, "It's really important that we see this as not just a Ukrainian sovereignty issue but as a much wider conflict," referring to the "join-up between different points of tension around the world, parts of the Pacific, parts of the Middle East."

The prime minister's comments follow political interventions from yet more senior military figures demanding rapid hikes in military spending to meet the demands of a world war.

The latest was Sir Richard Shirreff, a former deputy allied commander in Europe for NATO, who wrote in the *Independent* Saturday that the West would "only achieve peace for ourselves, our children and grandchildren and prevent a third world war between NATO and Russia with a band of deterrent steel from the Baltic to the Black Sea".

The UK would have to "make the necessary sacrifices to preserve peace by deterring war... We have to fight a second cold war to avoid a third world war," or else "the costs, in terms of blood and treasure will be appalling."

Lord West, a former Royal Navy admiral and security adviser to then Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, told the same paper, "There is absolutely no doubt from anyone who knows anything about the military and about defence that our forces are underfunded.

"I think the fact that defence wasn't mentioned in that list [Starmer's list of political priorities] is a political error, and it's a terrible error, full stop. It is beyond belief, really. With the world as dangerous as it is, knowing how

underfunded we are, that he's not willing to mention that as one of the priorities—I find that very worrying."

The well-connected former Tory defence secretary Ben Wallace commented—with Starmer only committing at this stage to increasing spending to 2.5 percent of GDP following a military spending review next spring—"Now is the time to commit to 3 percent GDP by 2030. For Starmer to not invest in our security would be a dereliction of duty."

That Starmer did not satisfy these demands by his trip to Estonia was made clear by Ed Arnold at the Royal United Services Institute think tank, who criticised the prime minister for a "lack of urgency" when "The Nordic and Baltic states are crying out for more U.K. leadership." The Labour leader's "agenda was unambitious."

Shirreff, West and Wallace all emphasised the need to respond to the threatened scaling back of US military support for NATO under Donald Trump.

Shirreff said bluntly, "This is something that we now have to be ready to do without the US lead and it means gearing up to be ready for war in every respect"; West argued that while he did not think Trump would "just suddenly pull out of NATO," European nations should "be pulling more weight in defence terms"; Wallace warned that the UK had become "overdependent on the US which has limited our choices and left us vulnerable".

These fears were underscored Monday when Trump described authorising Ukraine to use US and UK-supplied long-range missiles for strikes on the Russian Federation as "a big mistake... a very stupid thing to do" which he "might" reverse.

Walking the tightrope of keeping Trump sweet while criticising his comment, Starmer responded by saying it was "important that we put Ukraine in the strongest possible position if there are to be negotiations, and even if there aren't to be negotiations," adding, "it would be a big mistake, in my view, to take our eye off the ball and not ensure that Ukraine is in the strongest possible position".



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