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UK plans deployment of hundreds more troops as part of US-led Afghan build-up

Driven by intractable crises and the further erosion of its global standing as it prepares to exit the European Union, Britain is seeking to reinforce its military presence in the Middle East as part of a new carve-up by the imperialist powers.

Theresa May's Conservative government plans to send 400 additional combat troops to Afghanistan to support the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM).

The RSM was set up in January 2015 and comprises around 15,000 NATO troops with a remit to provide training, advice and assistance to Afghan security forces and institutions. NATO troops supposedly only have an advisory role and do not undertake combat missions.

The UK has around 600 troops taking part in the RSM as well as special forces troops. Following a request from US President Trump last summer the UK sent an additional 85 troops. The proposal to commit an additional 400 follows a further request from Trump.

UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has written to May, who is expected to formally announce the deployment of the additional troops at a July NATO summit in Brussels.

The UK participated in the US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in November 2001 following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The destruction of the World Trade Center and attack on the Pentagon provided a pretext for the US and its NATO allies to bring Afghanistan under direct Western control. An initiative which is central to securing dominance over the Eurasian land mass.

The UK committed thousands of troops, mainly based at Camp Bastion in Helmand Province in the south of the country. At its height the camp held 40,000 troops. In the spring of 2014 the camp was handed over to Afghan security forces as the numbers of UK combat troops was wound down. The last UK combat forces left in October 2014, with the remaining 600 commissioned to the RSM.

The Afghan conflict has cost at least £40 billion, with 450 UK armed forces personnel killed and tens of thousands left wounded, ill or psychologically damaged. According to the last poll taken by YouGov more than half of those surveyed thought that UK involvement in Afghanistan had “not been worthwhile,” with only a quarter thinking it had.

The US-led war, now in its seventeenth year, has resulted in catastrophe. Afghanistan has seen a recent surge in the number and impact of attacks by the Taliban and other insurgent forces. In recent months there have been major attacks in the capital Kabul by the Taliban and a group affiliated to Islamic State (IS).

On January 27, the Taliban detonated a massive bomb hidden in an ambulance on a crowded street in Kabul. Over 100 died and more than 200 were injured.

On April 22, a suicide bomber struck at a queue of people waiting to register to vote. The attack, in a Shia area of the city, claimed over 60 lives and injured more than 100. IS claimed responsibility for the attack.

More than 20 people were killed on April 30 in a double suicide bombing.

Most recently the Taliban conducted a major attack on the provincial capital, Farah, on May 15 and 16 in which they penetrated the security cordon around the city.

A UK parliament-briefing document issued April 24 this year noted:

“NATO has increased troop numbers since the Resolute Support mission began in January 2015. Troop levels will rise to around 16,000 in 2018 to combat what is described as a ‘challenging situation.’ The percentage of districts under insurgent control or influence has doubled since 2015. The UN reported over 10,000 civilian casualties in 2017, over half of which were attributed to the Taliban. The US has significantly increased the number of airstrikes since President Trump unveiled a new South Asia Strategy last August, releasing more weapons in 2017 than in any year since 2012.”

General Sir Richard Barrons, who retired in 2016, gave his support to the proposal to send additional troops. He was Commander of the Joint Forces Command from April 2013 till April 2016. He held command in Afghanistan on several occasions, beginning in 2002.

Barrons is a long-time proponent of confronting Russia and has demanded a huge rearmament programme.

Speaking on the BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme, Barrons said the government, "has to recognise that the decision to leave in 2014... hasn't worked."

He added, "When we left it was not the case that the Afghan national army and air force were strong enough to tip the balance against the Taliban and that now has to be reset. It will send an important message to our allies that they should step up as well..."

"The only way this war is going to end is when the Taliban and their supporters realise they can't fight their way back to government and that just fighting year on year, with casualties on both sides is in no one's interest."

Another retired general, David Richards, the Baron of Herstmonceux and former Chief of the Defence Staff, speaking to Sky News harkened back to the 2001 invasion:

"That initial campaign was stunning in its simplicity and its success. In under two months the Taliban were gone. If you're looking for models for future generations of soldiers to look at, I think that's got to be one of them."

The response of Barrons and Richards echoed Trump who, speaking in January rejecting the notion of peace talks with the Taliban, said the US would "finish what we have to finish."

What is being proposed by Richards would require the massive increases in military spending—at the expense of public spending. In an op-ed piece published in the *Times* in March, and co-written with Michael Clarke, a former director of the influential Royal United Services Institute military think tank, he complained that "spending on defence, security, diplomacy, intelligence, international aid and R&D comes to £62 billion a year, less than 10 percent of government spending."

This should be increased, even though "some of the trade-offs against social policy, health or education might be severe if spending were increased on defence and intelligence."

"Would this be justified? ... Yes, at least for the coming decade."

In a meeting earlier this month at the White House, NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg backed the sending of extra troops and praised Trump.

"Let me thank you for the leadership you show on the issue of defence spending because it is very important that we all contribute more to our shared security, and it is really having an impact because, as you said, allies are now spending more on defence," Stoltenberg said.

Trump said at the same press conference that NATO military spending by the alliance's members should be increased from a standard two percent of GDP to four percent.

The UK recently stepped up its intervention against the Assad regime in Syria, carrying out missile strikes against government assets. Thousands of UK personnel are intimately involved in maintaining the military war machine of Saudi Arabia, enabling it to carry out its one-sided slaughter in Yemen.

The return to Afghanistan with larger numbers of troops only enhances the growing danger of a wider war in the region, involving the world's nuclear powers.

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