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**THE UK'S MOBILISATION
SINCE THE WAR IN UKRAINE:
THE CATALYST FOR
RENEWED UK-EU DEFENCE
RELATIONS?**

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Introduction

In January 2024, General Sir Patrick Sanders, the Chief of General Staff of the British Army stated that "Ukraine really matters" (Sanders, 2024). In his address at the International Armoured Vehicles exhibition in London, General Sanders emphasised the significance of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its impact on the future. The General was referencing historical failures to understand crises' consequences and previous failures in averting conflicts and cautioned against repeating history by failing to learn from it and stressed Ukraine's geopolitical importance.

In the same speech, the general calls for a substantial increase in the British army's size, aiming to nearly double its current capacity. This initiative is part of the UK military's broader strategy to address a persistent recruitment shortage that has diminished its manpower over time (Secretary of State for Defence, 2021). Additionally, he emphasised the significance of traditional mobilisation while stressing the necessity for ordinary British citizens to be ready for a level of civic involvement similar to World War mobilisation efforts.

General Sanders is not the only notable figure alerting the British public that there are dangers to come. Grant Shapps, the UK Secretary of Defence, delivered a repurposed version of former US president George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" (Bush, 2021) speech in January 2024, remarking that the world has transitioned "from a post-war era to a pre-war era" (Shapps, 2024).

This InfoFlash delves into the recent speeches delivered by Sanders and Shapps, which have sparked numerous news articles centred around military conscription in the UK and the potential for its reinstatement. Additionally, this paper also explores broader defence topics, examining the evolving recent dynamics between the UK and the EU in the realm of defence cooperation.

The 'Pre-War' Speech by the UK Defence Secretary

Defence Secretary Shapps' speech marks a clear and significant shift in thinking, with some commentators highlighting the importance of this speech in the realm of the UK's defence and security trends, claiming it to be a "historical event" (European Pravda, 2024). The reasoning is clear: the UK Defence Secretary has asserted that the UK and the world must prepare for war, and this might have profound geopolitical implications. This speech is important and merits attention for several reasons. First, it outlined the government's strategic vision and policy direction for UK defence and security in response to evolving global threats, especially the conflict in Ukraine. Secondly, Shapps' speech addressed initiatives to enhance the UK's military capabilities, such as investments in defence equipment, technology, and personnel. This could signal efforts to modernise and strengthen the UK Armed Forces to address emerging threats effectively. The speech also has some implications for the UK's international relations, including its defence cooperation with allies such as the EU, NATO, and the US. It highlighted the UK's commitment to collaborative defence initiatives and its key role in promoting regional and global security. Overall, Defence Secretary Shapps' speech provided crucial insights into the UK's defence and security strategies, reflecting the government's response to contemporary challenges and its commitments to safeguarding national interests.

Shapp alludes to a speech held in the same location by Margaret Thatcher right before the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), which marked the beginning of an era of optimism in defence. Although conflicts persisted after the end of the Cold War, the absence of major threats to the continent fostered an atmosphere of impending peace (Rockoff, 1998). This resulted in the idea of a peace dividend, which refers to the economic benefits that occur when a country reduces its military spending in times of peace, freeing up resources to invest in other areas such as social programs and infrastructure. It typically follows the end of a war or a significant reduction in geopolitical tensions (Rockoff, 1998).

Nevertheless, Shapps asserted that Russia's authoritarian regime has grown assertive after unlawfully annexing Crimea in 2014 and the launch of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine years later. According to Shapps, a key difference now is that during the Cold War, "there was a perception that we were engaging with rational entities" (2024), which is no longer the case, as current emerging powers are less stable and more irrational. Shapps concludes that it is unclear whether a doctrine of mutually assured destruction will remain effective when dealing with actors like the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, North Korea, or Putin's Russia, arguing that "we cannot make that assumption" (Shapps 2024).

The speech shows that the UK considers that there is a real threat of multiple conflicts and believes that a Russian victory in Ukraine may embolden malignant actors and heighten the risk of future escalation and conflict (Shapps 2024).

The Implications for the UK

The UK has significantly cut its defence capability and spending from 2010 onwards as part of the government's broader austerity measures (Borges et al., 2013). The reasoning for the first cuts was that the UK would not become involved in any fresh conflicts in the coming decade (Borges et al., 2013). Five years later, amid the Arab Spring, Russia's unlawful annexation of Crimea, and the Syrian civil war, the UK identified international terrorism and Russia as pressing threats to the UK (Hammerstad, 2015). This led to an increased focus on counterterrorism measures and diplomatic tensions with Russia.

The UK's 'National Service' - the name of the country's conscription scheme - ended in 1960, and there are no concrete intentions or plans to reinstate it. Military spending cuts have led to a decrease in the size of the British Army from over 100,000 troops in 2010 to approximately 73,000 (Denyer, 2024). General Sanders stated that the British Army must reach a strength of 120,000 within the next three years, including reserves, emphasising that "Ukraine brutally illustrates that regular armies start wars; citizen armies win them" (Sanders, 2024). Worth noting is that Sanders is not necessarily advocating for conscription or an immediate mobilisation of volunteers but instead urges Britain to prepare for the mobilisation of tens of thousands in the event of a war. This would necessitate thorough planning and a shift in the government will, due to the logistical complexities of coordinating recruitment, training, and deployment, as well as dealing with a military whose spending cuts have decreased its strength slowly but surely since 2010 (Denyer, 2024).

Downing Street appears unenthusiastic about restructuring the British Army and has called General Sanders' speculative scenarios "unhelpful" (Beale, 2024). General Sanders aimed for his speech to serve as a wake-up call. Still, without political backing, it is improbable that the UK government's will to restructure the military, not sensing an imminent war on its borders, will miraculously change.

The Impact on UK-EU Relations

As per UK Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy, the Russo-Ukrainian war underscores the urgency for a security agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union (Posaner, 2024). Expressing a point of view that is common among many British politicians in the opposition, Lammy stressed the importance of fostering a strong relationship between the UK and Europe, and declared that the 'Brexit period' is over.

Since the Labour Party is hugely leading in the polls for the next general election (POLITICO, n.d.), and it is highly likely that they will constitute the next government in 2025, it is important to include the opposition's point of view on the subject of the future of UK defence. In December 2023, Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey revealed to POLITICO that a future Labour government would pursue a comprehensive defence and security agreement with the EU, alongside bilateral agreements with France and Germany (Posaner *et al.*, 2023). Healey explained that this deal with Brussels could focus on collaboration in logistics and cyber-security and facilitate a broader strategic dialogue. He emphasised the need for a security pact between the UK and the EU while clarifying that it would not aim to compete with NATO structures.

However, this is a complex process. Peter Ricketts, a former British diplomat, and current chair of the House of Lords European Affairs Committee, argues that there are areas of cooperation that warrant concern (Ricketts, 2024). Despite the UK applying to join the EU's Military Mobility project a year ago, progress in cooperation has stagnated due to complexities surrounding Brexit implications, political tensions, differing strategic priorities, and technical challenges (Posaner *et al.*, 2023).

Ricketts, who previously served as the UK's inaugural national security adviser under Prime Minister David Cameron, called for the government to negotiate for rule adjustments (Ricketts, 2024). According to Ricketts, the resurgence of large-scale conflict in Europe has made it clear that Britain and EU member states/the EU have common interests regarding freedom and security and that there is value in collaborative efforts that may be more effective. Consequently, he argues that the UK must prioritise the establishment of robust mechanisms for close cooperation to address the significant foreign policy challenges that lie ahead.

Conclusion

The British armed forces continue to face personnel shortages, equipment acquisition delays, and have been facing funding difficulties since the military cuts of 2010. Shapps and Sanders' positive outlooks and faith in the British military's ability to rise to the occasion gloss over significant deficiencies, and the government's commitment to raising defence spending to 2.5 percent of GDP is still very much lies in the realm of ambition rather than reality (Hammerstad, 2015). Funding is not made easier by the need to balance investments in defence with a wide array of competing demands for increased public expenditure (Hammerstad, 2015).

However, the war in Ukraine has caused a significant shift in the dynamics of UK-EU relations and has compelled both parties to collaborate in defence and security. The war highlights the importance of collective defence and solidarity in the face of common threats and serves as a unifying force that fosters a renewal of EU-UK cooperation. This collaboration is evident in the revitalised discussion on defence cooperation agreements and the pooling of resources to address joint security challenges. Despite Brexit, the Ukraine war has underscored the mutual interests and interdependencies that bind the UK and the EU prompting them to work together to ensure regional stability and security.

Whether the UK is entering a 'pre-war' era is not as straightforward as General Sanders and Grant Shapps' speeches make it out to be. What is clear is that Britain and the EU are entering an era of closer defence collaboration, whatever the future implications of cooperation.

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