

'We've even got a shortage of bullets': Fears Britain's armed forces are too small to combat Russia as NATO chiefs ask Germany to stay in charge of 'rapid-reaction force'

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NATO chiefs fear Britain's military forces are so overstretched that they are not fit to be on the front line of the defence against Russia, sources have claimed.

The UK is due to take over leadership of **NATO's** rapid-reaction force from **Germany** at the end of the year. But reports in the German media, backed up by Ministry of Defence sources in the UK, claim that NATO has asked **Berlin** to remain in charge for an extra year because Britain cannot spare the 5,000 personnel required. An MoD source said: 'There are serious problems with ammunition shortages and other kit which is partly due to underspending – but also because of the amount of ammo and other ordnance we are supplying to Ukraine.'

'Our forces are also stretched because of the extent to which they are training Ukrainian forces.'

The claims come amid growing fears that the UK will be unable to defend itself if there is no extra money for the Armed Forces in Jeremy Hunt's Budget next month.



Senior military officers say the country is at its weakest since the Second World War. The Army is the smallest it has been in four centuries, while the Royal Navy is less than half the size it was at the time of the Falklands War in 1982.

NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) was founded in 2014 as the 'tip of the spear' – the first line of defence in the event of a Russian advance.

NATO says 'its job is to be ready at a moment's notice to respond to major crises immediately'.

Responsibility for the force is supposed to rotate every year or so. France led the formation last year when it was deployed for the first time, with troops sent to Romania in February following the Russian invasion of Ukraine to guard against further advances towards NATO territory.

The claims about the NATO request for Berlin to extend its command of the VJTF were published by Table.Media, a highly respected German outlet that prepares detailed, high-level defence briefings. The information service said NATO had expressed concerns that the UK would not be able to take over command of the unit

by the deadline of January 1, 2024, and had informally asked the Bundeswehr – the German military – if it would continue to lead it in 2024 instead.

MoD sources admitted it was unclear whether the UK would be able to spare the 5,000 personnel, who have to be ready to deploy within two to five days. Under the terms of the agreement with NATO, troops cannot be 'double enabled', meaning they are not meant to be working on other tasks while operating in the role.

Defence analyst Francis Tusa, writing in today's Mail on Sunday, says: 'The British Army is broken. It doesn't have the manpower to commit for a year to a mission such as VJTF.

'The resources, the numbers, the training, the equipment just aren't there.

'To cover gaps, the British Army tries to pretend that a unit can somehow, simultaneously, be "committed" to multiple tasks or missions.

'People choose to accept this at Army Command and in Main Building [the MoD's Whitehall HQ] – the UK's allies are less convinced.'

However, Lord Dannatt, the former Chief of the General Staff, said the Germans were being 'hypocritical' to highlight British weaknesses. He added: 'Germany's Armed Forces have been under-invested even more than ours in the last decade. Although our Army has been very low on the MoD's investment priority list, when it comes to playing our part within NATO, we will pull out all the stops to meet our commitments.' But he added: 'Germany, France and the UK have got to up their defence game considerably. Spending just 1.3 per cent of its GDP on defence, Germany has been lagging behind the NATO baseline of two per cent for years.

'Chancellor Olaf Scholz may have declared a Zeitenwende – an historic turning point – following the Russian invasion of Ukraine but the euros have got to start flowing in huge quantities into the German defence budget very soon, or his moment in history might start to look very hollow.

'For the same reason, our Government must really take seriously the under-investment in our Army. Of course, we are right to have gifted 14 Challenger 2 tanks, 30 AS90 self-propelled artillery guns and very much else to Ukraine.

'But we absolutely must not only replenish our stocks but also make a major new investment into our land forces. The planned cuts in the strength of our Army must be stopped and ideally reversed.'

Britain is Europe's biggest military donor to Ukraine, spending £2.3 billion last year, but there has been no rise in defence spending to compensate for the impact on our own needs. Previous Prime Ministers Liz Truss and Boris Johnson both pledged increases in defence spending as a percentage of GDP – but Rishi Sunak has made no such promise.

UK defence spending as a proportion of GDP has halved since the 1980s and currently hovers around the NATO requirement of two per cent. The US spends nearer four per cent and Russia five per cent.

Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey said: 'There are serious questions over whether the Conservatives can be trusted to deliver the UK's NATO commitments at this critical time. As threats increase and nations across NATO reboot their defence plans, the Defence Secretary has hollowed out our Forces and is pressing ahead with further cuts to the size of the Army.'

He added that Labour's commitment to NATO is 'unshakeable' and that if elected, a Labour Government would launch a defence review in the first year 'so that our capabilities match the threats'.

A Government spokesman said: 'NATO continues to recognise the UK as playing a leading role in the alliance and we are ready to honour our commitment to lead the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force in 2024. Any suggestion otherwise is completely untrue.

'The Autumn Statement reconfirmed that we will continue to maintain the defence budget at at least two per cent of GDP to be consistent with our NATO commitment.'

The spokesman added that an upcoming review would set out 'further how the UK will play a global role and equip our personnel with the capabilities needed'.