

Continual War Is the Backdrop to British Politics. General Patrick Sanders' Proposal: "A 'Citizen's Army' Ready to Confront Russia"

Andrew Murray is surprised by the latest comments by General Sir Patrick Sanders who seems not to have noticed Britain's military meddling around the world over the last 25 years

By [Andrew Murray](#)

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So how has this "post-war" Britain been working out for you?

There has been a lot of comment on General Sir Patrick Sanders's recent speech urging preparations for a "citizen's army" ready to confront Russia whenever the latter gets through Vladimir Putin's Ukraine adventure.

But the most remarkable contention by the head of the British army was the one asserting that we have been dwelling in a "post-war world" but now need to man up for a "pre-war" one.

It might well suit an eminent general to wish to blank out the last generation since they have been inglorious, to say the least, in terms of British martial prowess.

But these are the facts of the real world we have actually been enduring. Over the last 25 years, Britain has fought in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and now Yemen.

It has further been a deeply involved proxy party to the continuing war in Ukraine, and in the Saudi/UAE aggression against Yemen prior to the present direct attacks. And our politicians are underwriting Israel's genocide in Gaza.

So we have neither been in a "post-war" world, nor a "pre-war" one, but a world of war. We

are living in a country almost permanently fighting somewhere with someone.

Many of these wars have been flagrantly illegal — the aggressions against Yugoslavia and Iraq and the intervention in Syria most blatantly. Others have been in a grey area from that point of view.

A legal war is not necessarily a just, prudent or sustainable one. But the point is worth stressing given the fondness of British politicians for wrapping themselves in legality and plumping their bottoms on what they hope is the moral high ground.

In fact, Britain is a rogue state. And a bipartisan rogue state at that. All the wars just listed have enjoyed full-throated support from the front benches of both Labour and Tories. It has not mattered one whit who is in government and who is the “official opposition.”

That consensus briefly broke down when Labour successfully opposed strikes on Syria in 2013. Then leader Ed Miliband was so overcome with embarrassment at this victory that he never alluded to it again.

And under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership Labour challenged the attacks in Iraq and Syria in 2015, although for reasons that remain utterly incomprehensible it permitted a free vote to the party’s entitled imperialist faction in the Commons.

But war is by and large an Establishment project that all politicians buy into. There is dissent on the US right over continuing to prolong the Ukraine conflict, but in the Conservative Party here not a peep.

A third observation is that several of these conflicts were Nato-badged and led — the bombardment of Yugoslavia, the occupation of Afghanistan and regime change in Libya. All aggressions, and all disasters — a point to remember when anyone extols Nato’s “purely defensive” character.

With the obvious exception of the US, no other country in the world engages so consistently in military aggression. France may perhaps run Britain close, but even Paris sat out the Iraq calamity.

And all this is without mentioning the Pacific, where Britain is flexing its military and diplomatic muscles through Aukus and aircraft carriers without as yet doing any actual fighting.

Sir Patrick was exercised about fighting Russia — perhaps a “citizens’ navy” to confront China too was an imaginative leap too far.

The point is that, despite all the complaints of the brasshats and their media epigones that the British armed forces are now too enfeebled to stand sentinel on our sovereignty, Britain fights wars almost continually and all over the place.

Indeed Richard Gott, once of The Guardian before that organ took up permanent residence on the dark side, set out to write a book showing that Britain had been fighting somewhere or other every year from the 18th century on.

His researches terminated, likely through exhaustion, several hundred pages in but only in

the mid-19th century. There will be a second volume eventually, and probably a larger one. Gott is attempting the literary equivalent of painting the Forth rail bridge.

So the question is not — how do we fight Russia, but why do we fight so much? The answer is surprisingly terse — finance capital, in two words, or imperialism if you feel one is sufficient.

Britain's centuries-long record of aggression, now continuing unabated, is the direct extension of the hegemony of the City of London in our capitalist system. First, it funded the plundering of much of the world through trading, while using government debt incurred in war-fighting to assume a dominant place in the state.

Then it became the vehicle for the massive export of capital which greased the establishment of a formal empire, an informal empire alongside it, and a central financial role in world monopoly capitalism as a whole. Not a project that could be undertaken without sustained violence.

And so on into the sterling area, the invention of the eurodollar market, the post-cold war globalisation and every phase in the metamorphosis of imperialism. If you are laundering surplus value from across the globe, you need an open world market for capital — and that requires a world police force.

Today, capital's global cop is clearly the US. The imperative for bourgeois Britain is to stay close to Washington above all, to ensure that the world order accommodates the parasites of the Square Mile.

So today Britain's wars are usually fought as junior partner to the US. Even when London takes the lead, as it did with Paris in attacking Libya, US military back-up is vital.

And when Britain's contribution is mostly symbolic — the RAF can be doing nothing in the Red Sea that the Pentagon could not do for itself — it is still a down payment on a world order it profits from.

The point here is that support for finance capital, for the City of London, is support for war in the end. In a week when Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves have fallen over themselves to appease big capital — on corporation tax, on bankers' bonuses and likely on private equity taxation — that seems relevant.

I met Ed Balls a dozen years ago, when he was shadow chancellor. On being urged not to follow New Labour by letting the City dictate economic policy, he said that such a proposal was "not a break with the last Labour government, but with the policy of the last 200 years."

He gets more marks for historical erudition than political courage. The worst of it is not bankers getting rich while industrial workers get laid off, bad as that self-evidently is. It is that British finance capital is always marching us to war.

There is no need to be too mechanistic. Clearly Gordon Brown could have carried on obliging the bankers and Tony Blair could still have declined to invade Iraq.

The tendency to war is ineluctable, but no particular conflict is inevitable. The masses get a vote if we press hard enough.

But the connection remains tight. We have never been “post-war” because we are not “post-capitalist.”

Now that would be an objective worth forming a citizen’s army for. Gen Sanders may however prefer to find a berth with the Royal Hedge Fund Fusiliers.

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Featured image: Secretary of State for Defence Grant Shapps, speaks to Chief of the General Staff General Patrick Sanders during a visit to a military training camp in East Anglia in the UK, November 29, 2023

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