



Britain's Fantasy Military

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As the Trump administration signals that it might pull back from the Ukraine war and potentially even NATO, loud noises are emerging from London. Representative is a [recent article in *The Telegraph*](#) that argued that, through Britain's Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the country could lead a deployment of "40,000-50,000 troops" that would be "be armed to the teeth – Challenger 2 and Leopard 2 main battle tanks, heavy artillery and attack helicopters would all likely feature."

The JEF is a NATO initiative that was conceived of in 2012 and became operational in 2018. It includes the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the Baltic countries, and the Nordic countries. The JEF was never conceived of as a land army. Instead, it is best thought of as a subbranch of NATO that takes on minor maritime roles. In 2019, for example, the JEF launched BALTIC PROTECTOR, which involved minor naval operations and urban warfare simulations. This appears to have been a series of operations broadly under the umbrella of the more extensive American-led BALTOPS exercises aimed at defending the Baltic region, presumably from the possibility of a Russian naval attack.

The fact that some in Britain are floating the possibility of using a minor subbranch of an American-led maritime operation to defend Ukraine against the Russian military hints at the fact that Britain might be retreating into fantasy as the United States pivots on the Ukraine war. The British army currently has around 1,000 troops stationed in Estonia, where they lead the local NATO force. In addition to these soldiers, there are around 1,400 French and Danish troops and the possibility of bringing in around 4,000 additional Estonian troops. Needless to say, this modest force would not be suitable to fight the sort of industrial scale warfare that we are seeing in Ukraine.

Nor is this small force in the Baltics that is being touted as a serious military backstop for Europe unrepresentative of the British military as a whole. The reality is that Britain's military is either largely non-existent or highly dysfunctional. After the plans for JEF intervention in Ukraine started to circulate, British defence analysts began to highlight just how little materiel the country had. *The Independent*, for example, [pointed out](#) that Britain had only 25 functional main battle tanks. [Reports](#) suggest that Britain gave 14 Challenger tanks to Ukraine, meaning that they gave away around 36

percent of their tanks. To get a sense of just how limited Britain's military is, consider that Germany [sent a total of 148 tanks](#) to Ukraine, nearly four times more than Britain's functional stock before it donated some of these to Ukraine!

Britain's main military planning problems stem from the fact that the country cannot decide whether it wants a land army, an extensive navy or an air force. Britain appears to want to replicate something like the American military but on a much more limited budget. The result appears to be a highly dysfunctional military that aims to do everything but, in reality, can do almost nothing. During the recent crisis in the Red Sea, for example, Britain explored the possibility of sending an aircraft carrier to assist the Americans in their attacks on the Houthis in Yemen. But the British government was soon [notified](#) that the country lacked the personnel to staff either of its two aircraft carriers. A month after this debacle, the British aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth was [sidelined](#) from NATO exercises because there were problems with its propeller.

Similar problems can be seen with the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent. In February 2024, the Trident nuclear programme [tried to test-fire a missile](#), but it misfired and fell into the ocean. The last test before this had been in 2016, and that test also failed, meaning that it is not clear that the British nuclear deterrent works. Trident is already an extremely controversial system in Britain because it is so expensive to maintain. The fact that there was not a national outcry when it failed to fire a successful missile shows just how atrophied the debate around military expenditure in the United Kingdom has become. Politicians are encouraged not to question aspects of military expenditure or the functionality of the British military because doing so is deemed "unpatriotic." Dominic Cummings, former chief advisor to Boris Johnson, [publicly stated](#) that the post-Brexit Johnson government tried to solve at least some of these issues, but after they were run out of Downing Street, the system reverted to its old ways. Elsewhere, Cummings has hinted at the fact that these attempts at reforms may have played some role in turning the establishment in Westminster and Whitehall against him.

Occasionally, former civil servants highlight the absurdity and dysfunctionality of the British military in letters to newspapers. For example, at the end of February, former Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury Philip Oppenheim wrote a [letter to *The Financial Times*](#) entitled, "UK must use the defence debate to rethink its place in the world." He highlighted that Britain has "two aircraft carriers that came in at 50 per cent over budget, but that only hold half the number of planes as a US carrier

because they are not equipped with launch catapults,” that “Britain’s ‘independent’ nuclear deterrent is in reality totally dependent on the US,” and despite the fact that it has failed its test fire twice, Trident nevertheless “accounts for a fifth of total defence spending, ringfenced.” Oppenheim concludes what is obvious to any neutral observer: British military spending is not geared toward producing a functional military but rather a fantasy military that is the product of “something to do with a yearning still to be taken seriously and for a ‘seat at the top table.’”

This highly dysfunctional use of funds means that Britain has almost no deployable army. Headline numbers suggest that the army could deploy 10,000 to 20,000 men. This would barely make a splash in the context of the Ukraine war as these troops have little training to deal with artillery-driven trench warfare, and since thousands of troops are dying on the frontline every week, such a deployment would not last long. It also seems unlikely that Britain could stomach such rapid losses. Britain suffered less than two hundred casualties in Iraq, and even this was enormously controversial. If thousands of British troops were killed in the Ukrainian trenches in only a few weeks, the country would likely experience a major political crisis.

Taking all of this into account, ideas emerging from London that the country could deploy a serious military force that would make a meaningful difference in the Ukraine conflict appear to be the stuff of fantasy. The military planning and procurement system in Britain is a machine built to give the illusion of global importance and allow the British to at least nominally take part in NATO exercises. It is not a force built for actual warfare. Nor is reform likely. Even though the country has seen a public debate on the state of the military in the domestic press, if history is anything to go by, nothing will change. The news cycle will move on, and Parliament will continue to ignore the deep problems and waste that surround the British military. A lot of this has to do with the fact that the Ministry of Defence has one of the best public relations machines in Whitehall, and so for every negative article that comes out about Britain’s actual military capabilities, multiple positive articles will come out exaggerating these capabilities.