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How prepared is Europe for conflict? Can the US still be relied on?

DM: Richard, your book caused a furore when it appeared around 10 years ago. There was even talk of you being court-martialled because some in authority disliked its messages. You served for three years as Nato's Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe. How do you assess our military readiness? You've said America is no longer an ally: has that changed since the midterm elections? And how well is Europe progressing towards its defence targets for 2030 and beyond?

RS: No, we're not ready. In military terms, readiness is about having the right number of military personnel, soldiers, sailors and air personnel. It's about having the right equipment. It's about ensuring that you've got the necessary sustainability in logistic terms, and it's about ensuring that your people are properly trained and ready for war. But I'd extend it further than that. It's also about societal readiness, societal resilience. I would draw a distinction between our friends in Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and this country, and other countries in Western and Southwest Europe, which are patently not ready.

Our armed forces are absolutely on the back foot, absolutely no question mark about the really high-quality people we've got, but we don't have enough of them. And I think there are real question marks about equipment as well.

America under the current leadership is not an ally. Here is a country or a president who has threatened to attack the territory of a Nato ally. And when he went after Greenland earlier this year, I was in Canada at the end of September doing giving a lecture at the University of Toronto. And the morning I gave the lecture there on CBC was a discussion with Andrew Leslie, former head of the Canadian Army, discussing Canada's military plans to withstand and stop an American invasion.

That is not the act of an ally. The current leadership in America has brought us far from the shining city on the hill. America is now the predator, and America is now a bully. And you have America aiding and abetting a brutal, blood-stained, war crime-led, war criminal-led state in Russia, helping them to achieve their aims in Ukraine, that is not the act of an ally.

What do Canada and the US midterms mean for transatlantic leadership?

DM: What about Carney? We do have a Canadian audience here. What do you make of Carney as a war leader?

RS: As I listened to Prime Minister Carney's speech at Davos in January, I thought: ‘Just maybe, cometh the hour, cometh the man’. He's absolutely on the money, and he is also a leader who's not prepared to be bullied by Trump. He stands up to Trump. I think Trump realises that he's met his match, and he seems to me to have all the qualities needed for successful leadership.

DM: Trump’s party lost the midterm elections because of the war in Iran. So could you say that had he taken sensible military advice and not lost those elections, Nato would actually be in an even worse state. The Republicans would have won the election, and he wouldn't have faced the backlash that he has now. Could it be that his stupidity has helped matters somewhat?

RS: I want to say one thing about Trump. If it wasn't for Trump, European governments wouldn't have been frightened into promising to increase defence spending. Many countries, as well, notably, have not yet done so. I think the midterm elections were a remarkable affirmation of American democracy and sent a very powerful signal, and it was a kicking for Trump. But he's still in power; he's still got two years. And I think we have to expect more of an angry, vengeful, increasingly irrational Trump.

Nothing is off the table with Trump. He'll double down on trying to force a capitulation deal on Ukraine. You can absolutely forget about this thing ending with a sort of peace deal, Northern Ireland peace process style.

I think he will he will continue to double down on Iran. The fact is that as long as the Iranians are able to interdict any shipping at all, the Americans have got a massive blockade. Yes, the Iranians may be facing major financial problems where they can't, you know, most of their ships are out of the Gulf because they've delivered huge amounts of oil, so they will face problems. And of course, we've heard that the Americans are intending to impose a blockade on the land borders as well. But the fact is that all it takes is for a couple of drones lobbed from 200 kilometres inland of the Strait of Hormuz.

The midterm elections were a fantastic result, but I think we have to expect two more years of utter craziness.

Is Britain implementing the Strategic Defence Review?

DM: Your depiction of him, angry, resentful, vengeful. It does sound remarkably like the incumbent in the Kremlin, who of course does make an appearance quite a lot in your book. Although you simply call him the president, your book is really quite noteworthy because there's so many sideswipes at living people who you, in a very uncamouflaged way, dress up as characters who come in with cameo performances. One of whom is David Cameron, certainly. And there's quite a number of other people. Nato ambassadors, for instance, do not come off lightly. And there's a wonderful depiction of how the Belgian waiters come in bearing chocolates because the Nato ambassadors have to miss their lunch during an important session. But you do make a lot of these sideswipes at the establishment. Tell us how you think the Labour government is now matching up to the strategic defence review that George Robertson put together now last year, June 2025. Nothing has been done on this so far, .

RS: Last year's defence review was a really good document. It was properly thought through, and it took on board the lessons from the fighting in Ukraine. And it's not an easy thing to aim off, to identify and make decisions and make recommendations about the size, shape and structure of armed forces, both now and sometime into the future. And I think it did it really well. And I would highlight in particular the balance, the decisions or the conclusions drawn about the balance of equipment. I mean we hear constantly, of course, about the drone war in Ukraine. We also hear, I'm delighted to see it on the table there, that the tank is dead. But the reality is that the tank is not dead, and I think that Strategic Defence Review made a very sensible deduction that roughly 20% of current and future equipment should be legacy tanks, armoured infantry fighting vehicles, manned ships and aircraft. 40% should be autonomous systems, robot tanks, robot ships, robot aircraft and 40% should be consumables, drones, artillery shells and the like. The trouble is, though, of course, that as we know, it's stuck. It's not gone anywhere.

It's not been properly funded, and I'm afraid when I hear the prime minister of this country say on the floor of the House of Commons that he's not prepared to defend national security at the expense of social security, I don't have much hope that it will be.

DM: People like George Robertson make the point that Britain spends about five times as much on welfare as on defence. Which politician do you think is capable of going to the people and saying, 'Look, you're going to have to make some sacrifices.'

RS: David, I'm still waiting.

DM: You don't see anybody among the current leaders? John Healey, for example?

RS: I'm not going to name names. I'm strictly apolitical, of course, as an ex-soldier. But I don't see anybody at the moment who stands out as somebody prepared to step up to the mark.

Is Germany moving decisively towards greater military readiness?

DM: Some of the most colourful representations in your book are about the Germans. There's a portly German ambassador who keeps popping up because the Germans are not pulling their weight. They are now pulling their weight, partly because they were frightened about Trump, as you've just said. Have you changed your view about the essentially pacific nature of the post-war Germans?

RS: I lived many years in Germany as a soldier, and Germany was always really good to us as a family, and I have great affection and an attachment to Germany. I think unquestionably there is a strong streak of almost-pacifism throughout German society as a consequence of the history of the 20th century, which means that the notion of the use of armed legal force by the state is a problem. And I was in Berlin last week talking to a number of quite senior people in German business and other sectors. Germany is aiming to be ready to deter Russia by 2029, and it's putting up the cash to do so. And it's spending money pretty sensibly.

It's not just legacy armaments. It's recognising the imperative of the new capabilities in warfare as well, it has pretty much completed the basing of a brigade in Lithuania. Now that's a pretty powerful signal. It having some major debates about how to

man the force, is conscription going to come in? So there are still issues. I'm not convinced that that streak of pacifism I described earlier is completely gone. But the leadership is heading absolutely in the right direction, and I wish we could follow suit here.

Could a ceasefire in Ukraine change the European security outlook?

DM: Germany's defence budget will be the size of Britain and France together by 2030. Do you not think that might be reversed if Putin does come with some kind of peace blandishments, and also if the Americans appear to be somewhat more reasonable? There's a strong feeling that Germany and Russia should somehow team up together: technology, minerals, oil and so on. Do you not fear that? In fact, the thing we might have to worry about most would be a more reasonable and a less bellicose Putin, rather than an aggressive Putin.

RS: We have to understand that this war is never going to end while Putin is in power. Because this war is not about land; it's about empire. Naked imperialism. It is about rebuilding another Russian empire. Deep in the Russian DNA is the notion that Ukraine can never be a sovereign state. It doesn't exist as a country. It's an aberration of history, and that Russia cannot be the country it sees itself without Ukraine as an integral part of it. That is never going to lead to the state of affairs that you outlined. There is not going to be a peace deal that meets that requirement. And even if there was some form of ceasefire arrangement which temporarily stopped the fighting, all that is going to happen is that Putin is going to use the opportunity to rebuild, regenerate, retrain, and when he's ready, he will continue his quest.

Because this is a regime which is defined by war, whether it's Chechnya, whether it's Syria, whether it's Crimea, whether it was Georgia. It's a regime that has to have war in order to maintain its momentum and in order to maintain its power, despite the costs, and the costs are utterly horrific.

DM: What about America?

RS: There will be a time after Trump, and there will be a leader who takes a different line from Trump. But we have to accept that we're never going to return to the status quo ante with America as it was pre-Trump, the world will have moved on, and rightly actually it is it is high time that Europe stood up for itself without depending on America. And as we know, the national security strategy in America has stated quite categorically that it will not contribute to the conventional defence of Europe. So German leadership within Nato is going to be really critical. Now, the question is: is Germany prepared to assume the leadership within Nato? I asked a member of the Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee this question last year about Germany being the largest budget holder: so Germany should rightfully take on the SACEUR position and take the lead in Nato? And there was very noticeable hesitation about the notion of Germany taking on the leadership in Nato.

Can finance and military procurement be brought together?

DM: What about this marriage between defence and finance that we're talking about here today? You've seen so many bungles and foul-ups and mishaps in your time in the military establishment, the people, the faceless bureaucrats from the MOD, they get quite a swiping in your book. For example, do you think that you can apply the principles of finance in a good, efficient and constructive way to the defence procurement issue? Has your experience since leaving the military given you hope that such a confluence could be brought about?

RS: It absolutely can be brought about. The record is pretty appalling: procurement over budget, over time. The British defence budget is still skewed to legacy equipment, long-term projects for manned aircraft. In a sense, it's a supertanker that can't change direction quickly. But it also goes back to the discussion of national resilience. That is going to change only when there's a mindset shift. I think the mindset is shifting, But I can't see how we will build the necessary capabilities to deter war.

It's not about fighting war; it's about deterring, and if necessary, having to fight, which is the last thing anybody wants to do. I can't see how that's going to be achieved through public finance because the sums are so astronomical, the lag is so massive. I don't see that we have the political leadership in this country prepared to make the really tough decisions and ask the public to make the sacrifices necessary for that to happen until or unless we are actually physically at war when all bets are off. And so this is where I think agile funding is required.

So this is definitely a private equity business. This is private equity war. Having seen some of the stuff being built in Ukraine and spending a bit of time there, my line would be to invest in Ukraine, help Ukraine scale up, but also use that experience to sell into Nato. So I think there's got to be novel ways of finance.

What would it take to bring the war in Ukraine to an end?

DM: You're a senior military adviser under this ARES Military Expert Council, aren't you? How do you think it's going to end? You say it's not going to end until Putin is out, but could there be a deal under which it would give up territory? And what about Ukraine in Nato?

RS: I feel strongly that this is going to end only when Russia has been defeated, when Russia has been given such a massive strategic shock that Putin is removed from power, because while he is in the Kremlin, this war is not going to end. And how is that going to happen? Only with Europe and America absolutely indivisibly united together, and as we've said, how the heck that is going to happen? So therefore, this is going to run until that can happen.

DM: You think the Allies will have to make clear that Ukraine, or at least part of Ukraine, will be in Nato?

RS: The goal must be a Europe whole, free and secure against a Russia which is contained, because that Russian threat to Ukraine is never going to go away. That's your strategic vision. What are the objectives that have got to be ticked off to achieve that? Number one is an effective ceasefire in Ukraine, and that is only going to happen with a strategy. And there is no strategy. There is no strategy to support Ukraine. It is all about giving Ukraine enough to get by, enough to defend itself. We hear all sorts of platitudes such as We're with you to the end. We're with you for 100 years. But there's a strategy gap has got to be filled. This is going to require – absent America a strategy by Europe, Canada, coming together to design that strategy to give Ukraine the support it needs to achieve defeat of Russia. And that's going to need military support. The obvious gap is air defence and interceptor missiles. It's about helping them scale up what they've got.

We don't need to teach the Ukrainians how to fight, but they do need investment to allow them to scale up their extraordinary pace of innovation. Like any strategy, it's not just military, it's financial and it's economic. There've got to be ways to hit Russia seriously hard, as well as really doubling down on sanctions to bring down the Russian economy. That is what's going to end this war.

Could European politics undermine a united response to Russia?

DM: It looks very likely that Madame Le Pen will take over in France. Does that fill you with a certain foreboding, given the fact that the Rassemblement National has always taken a pretty pro-Russian line?

RS: The worst case is that she demonstrates that tendency to be pro-Russian, anti-Nato, pulls France's contribution to Nato, and immediately drives a coach and horses through any form of European unity. On the other hand, who knows? Maybe just maybe she'll go in the direction of Meloni. We'll see.

DM: We will have this meeting in the next few days: Xi, Putin and Trump. Let's say it was Putin and Trump and Shirreff. What would you say to those two people?

RS: I would try to get the message into Trump's head that this is about empire. It's not about land and there's not going to be peace until Russia's been defeated. And the message for Putin is that you've lost around 600,000 killed, by pretty accurate estimates, together with 1m+ seriously wounded. Your country has been laid waste. Your country has been devastated, and there will be no comeback for you as a consequence of this. The message should be that he has an orange jumpsuit and a set of handcuffs, and he's on his way to The Hague.

How could Europe take responsibility for its conventional defence?

Audience question 1: If Europe is to take over responsibility for its conventional defence, and if we're going to take the lessons from Ukraine, we're going to have to learn to fight differently. How do we plan for that? Can we plan for that within Nato?

RS: There's got to be an adult conversation. We have to be united as Europe and Canada. We have to be sitting down with America to say we accept absolutely the responsibility to take on conventional defence of Europe, but this has to be a phased transition. We are not going to be able to do it overnight. We must avoid falling off a cliff, if they suddenly pull everything out, and so we need to put together a joint plan, an agreed strategy for Europe to build up, and as Europe builds up, for America to step back.

At the same time, that gap analysis for Europe and Canada will be needed. Whether it's satellite surveillance, for example, or other capabilities, or where can we find other European ways, European-Canadian ways of carrying that out? Recognising that we don't have the advantages of America, of this very large country, which can achieve a degree of unity of purpose, which is very difficult in Europe. Where would it be best done? My view is that Nato can do it. And with an American SACEUR. It makes

most sense to be done in Nato, so America is bound in, and it is seen as in America's advantage to be conducted within Nato, in the longer term as well.

I mentioned German SACEUR rather flippantly. My view is that SACEUR should remain American. While America has said it will not contribute to the conventional defence of Europe, it has said that it will continue to provide a nuclear umbrella. So SACEUR has got to be American.

Would the US defend Europe in a crisis, and how can missile defence improve?

Audience question 2: If there is another SACEUR, it should be a British SACEUR, not a German. But that's another issue. My question is: You rightly say that Putin will continue the war as long as he sits in the Kremlin. But do you really think that if we have to fight tonight and there is another incident like the one we had in Leipzig in August, but the next time it's going to be an airport where 100, 200 people will be killed, and then we have to react. So, do you think that the Americans will be on board? And if not, how are we really prepared to fight tonight? If I put myself in the shoes of Putin, I would challenge Nato now as long as Trump is in the White House and with a vision that Le Pen comes to power and she will not be very helpful.

RS: If we have to fight tonight, will the US be on board? No, I don't think the US will be on board. I think we have to assume that Trump won't be on board tonight.

DM: So Article 5 is dead?

RS: Article 5, as it stands, is effectively dead. Yes, because we cannot trust America to come to the aid of a Nato member under attack. It's a fact, and we've got to get used to that. If Putin fights tonight, it's going to be one hell of a come-as-you-are party for Europe and Canada. It will be best effort with what we've got now, and tied together, I think, with the with your point. If I were Putin, I would absolutely seize the opportunity. And going back as well to the next two years, this is the really dangerous time. Putin is no fool. He will see the potential. I would assume the shadow war, the drone war, the covert war will continue until it is effectively deterred, and the way to effectively deter it, amongst other things, is to put Nato aircraft in the skies above western and central Ukraine to shoot stuff down as it if it if it's approaching Nato, but also to shoot stuff down as it's as it's flying into Ukrainian cities. So we have to deter that, but also we have to be ready for the worst case. I wouldn't put it past Putin, for example, seizing Spitsbergen. There are Russian miners there. You could just see a scenario where he claims the Norwegians have been bullying them, and I take it over.

That forces an Article 5-less-America decision on the rest of Europe. Is Europe, are the Portuguese going to go to war with Russia over Spitsbergen? I'm not privy to any planning, and I don't want to be privy to any planning. But Europe’s got to be ready for the worst case imminently now.

Audience question 3: What about anti-ballistic systems in Europe? So we don't have protection. I mean, that's the biggest issue at the moment in Ukraine, and Europe doesn't have it without the Patriots.

RS: This is a major gap. It brings us back to the discussion about doing a proper gap analysis, identifying where there can be European solutions, now or in the near future, but also working alongside America to achieve a graduated approach to minimise the disruption of America pulling out of the conventional defence of Europe. The problem, of course, with America and anti-ballistic missile interceptor systems is that in the first four days of the Iranian lunacy, Trump used whatever it was, more in the first four days than America has given to Ukraine in four years of war. So there's an industrial lag in the US as well.