

OPERATION EPIC FURY



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No Winston Churchill: Operation Epic Fury and its Implications for the UK

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Background

The UK public has become accustomed to the insults levelled against the UK and its leadership by President Trump and his circle including Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer is “no Winston Churchill”. Initial views by President Trump on Andy Burnham are not exactly complimentary. But beyond the barbs, what can we deduce about the state of the UK/US relationship? Some commentators view the situation as terminal. Others see it as ultimately rock solid, able to weather the bumps in the road likely to be enduring for at least the rest of the Trump Presidency.

Operation Epic Fury started on February 28th 2026. Initiated by the US and Israel, the conflict with Iran has brought into sharp relief how successfully or otherwise the UK handles its defence, security and intelligence relationships with the US and the wider world, and how this resonates with the UK public. In addition, it has cast the spotlight on the major deficiencies and lack of capabilities in the UK Armed Forces. Lord Robertson, an architect of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) and former Defence Secretary and NATO Secretary-General, pithily stated that, “We are underprepared. We are underinsured. We are under attack. We are not safe... Britain’s national security and safety is in peril.” Going further, he stated, “The government has shown a “corrosive complacency towards defence”.¹

Similar sentiments were echoed by the two other SDR Architects, Gen Sir Richard Barrons and Dr Fiona Hill, all professionally invested in Atlanticism. Moreover, it has shown the general public the dangers of the UK being aligned with a US administration that does not always make evidence-based decisions and assessments in the conduct of its military operations and defence and foreign policy. In addition, it has highlighted the nature of UK reliance and dependency on US technology, raising questions about the UK’s true sovereignty position.²

Public polling and Parliamentary recommendations

Some five weeks into Operation Epic Fury, in early April 2026, a You Gov survey revealed some 43% of people now believed the UK was too close to the US, having

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cje4n5ppgw7o>, 14 April 2026

² SIPRI records 86% of UK defence imports as being from the US.
https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/fs_2503_at_2024_0.pdf



risen from 34% in April 2025. Only 18% of those interviewed thought a closer relationship with the US was desirable with just 29% assessing the relationship was appropriate. This scepticism traversed all age groups. Nearly two-thirds said maintaining UK policy independence and British values outweighed the preservation of the relationship. More telling was the public doubt about the oft-vaunted 'special relationship' between the two countries, with a mere 14% of UK respondents surveyed thinking this is the case, with some 60% saying the 'special relationship', as used to exist, was now moribund. Significant, also, was that some 57% of respondents favoured building stronger alliances with Europe.³

In late April 2026, the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee issued a report, 'Adjusting to new realities: rebalancing the UK-US partnership', chaired by Lord Robertson.⁴ The key immediate takeaways, in this report, were the UK must stop sentimentally defining the relationship as 'special', acknowledging the US approach is more transactional and interest-based and there is a need to work with other partners towards reducing our dependency on the US. Looking ahead, the report identified five core challenges that will shape the relationship, regardless of who sits in the White House. These five core challenges are the US pivot towards China as its main competitor and threat; continuing calls for Europe to pay its way; US antipathy towards globalisation; continuing protectionism, including tariffs, and domestic polarisation. Overall, it asserts the UK strategy must be pragmatic and hard-headed in adjusting to the new realities, with a shift towards NATO European components.

More specifically, the report recognised that despite political turbulence, "the UK-US relationship on defence and intelligence is extremely close and acts as a bedrock for the wider bilateral relationship".⁵ However, for the general public, this defence bedrock may not always seem that steady, given the multiple Trump administration diatribes, for example, denigrating the courage of British troops fighting in Afghanistan (retracted by Trump after an intercession by King Charles III) and, latterly, the UK's lack of support for the US in the Iran war. According to a leaked

³ Britons increasingly negative about the United States' impact on the world

⁴ <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/360/international-relations-and-defence-committee/news/213225/adjusting-to-new-realities-rebalancing-the-ukus-partnership>;

⁵ Ibid, para 37



Pentagon email, the US has even considered punishing the UK by reviewing its position on the UK's claim to the Falkland Islands.

Extent of UK military weaknesses laid bare

In early April 2026, the US War Secretary Pete Hegseth singled out the Royal Navy for ridicule. But, as The Guardian pointed out, "...the uncomfortable truth for Starmer is that many British politicians, military officials and experts suggest that there is some substance to the US barbs".⁶ Around the same time, the First Sea Lord, Gen Sir Gwyn Jenkins, admitted the UK is not ready for war and will not be until the end of this decade. By any measure, this is a shocking indictment, admitting the UK Government cannot fulfil its first duty to defend its citizens. The resignation of John Healey, the Defence Secretary on 11th June 2026, on the grounds of an inadequate uplift in the defence budget, is further testimony to the growing UK military shortfalls within a contested and increasing threat environment.

Operation Epic Fury exposed this UK gaping operational capability hole most publicly in the slow deployment and breaking down of HMS Dragon on its way to Cyprus, after a drone attack on RAF Akrotiri. It later came to light the UK no longer has any mine hunting assets in the Middle East to protect and demine in The Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.⁷ These deficiencies were further reinforced by the startling statistic that, whereas at the end of the Cold War the UK had 51 destroyers and frigates, it now has shrunk to only 13. The hard corollary to be faced is that if Argentina felt emboldened by US equivocation to attack the Falkland Islands, the UK would be highly likely incapable of reconquering them. These deficiencies and capability issues may not be high on the radar of the general public, but they should be.

Perhaps, though, the wider issue here is what kind of war should the UK be preparing for? There is a wide consensus, amongst defence commentators, the UK is already at 'war' with Russia at the sub-threshold level. Evidently, there is a clear need to be able to defend the UK shores and skies from Russian undersea and drone activity and

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/apr/01/us-royal-navy-jibes-are-uncomfortable-because-they-have-substance-pete-hegseth>, 1 April 2026

⁷ Britain had maintained four minehunters and a mothership in Bahrain for 20 years. Three were removed in the past year, two to be retired, including HMS Middleton, which was towed back to the UK in January.



have a missile defence system fit for purpose. Defence of the home land has taken on a sharper focus, but the UK is not prepared properly.

Politicisation within the US system

Operation Epic Fury has also thrown into sharp relief the dangers of being sucked into a conflict where clear objectives are not evident, or keep changing, and where unfounded assertions are made about military success, including threats to decimate “whole civilisations”. The conflict has reflected the creeping US politicisation of the executive and judiciary which has cascaded into the independence of decision-making within the White House and the US military and Intelligence Community. This context exposes the complacency of treating the UK-US intelligence relationship as a sacred cow. Whilst the recent House of Lords report on the topic raised concerns about US politicisation undermining trust, it also maintained that, “there is scope for cautious optimism that the US intelligence agencies will be able to weather political challenges and maintain close ties with the UK”.⁸ The assumption should not be made, though, that the Trump administration is an aberration.

The politicisation of US intelligence has manifested itself in many guises. From the political appointees taking key roles in the intelligence Community, such as the rookie Tulsi Gabbard as Director of the Office for the Director of National Intelligence (and about to be replaced by another political appointee) to the sacking in August 2025 of the Director of Defense Intelligence, Lt Gen Kruse, for ostensible ‘unfavourable’ assessments of the impact of US air strikes in June 2025. At the time, a leaked DIA report assessed Iran’s nuclear programme had been set back by months only, which was in contradiction to President Trump’s assertion that all Iranian nuclear sites had been completely destroyed; the DIA report was almost certainly correct.

President Trump has posted extensively on Truth Social about the annihilation of the Iranian military and capabilities. Meanwhile, US War Secretary Pete Hegseth and the Chief of Staffs, General Dan Caine, have presented an optimistic view of the U.S. military’s performance, weapons stockpiles and damage caused to Iran’s forces,

⁸ <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/360/international-relations-and-defence-committee/news/213225/adjusting-to-new-realities-rebalancing-the-ukus-partnership/>, para 82



which leads to the conclusion that either analysts are adjusting their assessments for political reasons or their assessments are being ignored.

In addition, there has been a purge of a whole raft of other senior military personnel. Since he came to office, the US War Secretary has removed over 20 senior leaders including the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces; the Chief of Naval Operations; the Army Chief of Staff, the Vice-Chief of the Air Force and the Head of the Coast Guard, as well as many senior military lawyers. As the House Armed Services Committee stated after the firing of the Army Chief of Staff, “Purging military leadership ... is a cause for serious alarm... Doing this because these individuals haven’t demonstrated the same ideological view or personal loyalty presents a profound threat to our national security and national defense ... and erodes the non-partisan role of the military as well as the good order and discipline among the force”.⁹ Given the enduring relationship the UK has on both a bilateral and multilateral level with the US, this is of direct concern to the UK public.

Unpicking this further there are various levels to explore. If the US President and his top team are not making evidence-based decisions based on truly independent and objective intelligence assessments, then this has implications for the UK. It is wholly undesirable to be connected with decisions based on unsubstantiated and even deliberately false assessments. There is a high degree of probability, however, that what has been taking place at the US high level political and military level has not entirely cascaded down and supplanted bilateral US to UK military and US to UK intelligence channels, with objectivity still prevailing in these domains, and UK views and assessments still being heard.

Encouragingly, internal US intelligence assessments in April 2026 reportedly contradicted the Pentagon by indicating Iran retained a substantial portion of its air force, missile capabilities and naval assets.¹⁰ Latterly, in early May 2026, a secret CIA assessment concluded Iran still holds significant ballistic missile capabilities and also it can survive any US blockade of the Strait of Hormuz for at least three to four

⁹ <https://democrats-armedservices.house.gov/2026/4/smith-responds-to-hegseth-s-wartime-firing-of-top-military-leaders>

¹⁰ <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/04/02/politics/iran-missiles-us-military-strikes-trump>



months.¹¹ Again, President Trump's many assertions about the obliteration of Iran's nuclear facilities is not reflected in the latest International Atomic Energy Report, which, as of late April 2026, declared Iran has accumulated sufficient enriched uranium to potentially create 10 nuclear bombs, with significant stockpiles moved to undisclosed sites.¹²

General public resonance

For the general public, however, the overriding issue of Operation Epic Fury and the often fragile ceasefire that has followed has been the increase in the cost of living and the rate of inflation. The hike in petrol and diesel costs, surpassing the increase soon after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, has been the most immediate and tangible manifestation. Looking ahead, some people were worried about their foreign summer holidays actually taking place and without too much extra cost. Government plans to cap energy prices and futureproof the country against increases in gas prices look set to provide only marginal savings to household bills.¹³

The public interest is in a lasting peace in the Middle East whereby Iran cannot hold the world to ransom in closing the Strait of Hormuz, with the attendant global supply chain shocks. The achievement of the one clear and constant objective of US military action – to ensure Iran does not become a nuclear weapons state – still seems far away, with the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Iran and the US in June 2026 basically parking how this will take place. They will also want to be reassured the UK Government can properly defend the UK homeland and overseas territories, such as Cyprus. Above all, they will want to know the country can be defended, that we retain sovereign decision-making rights, and we have the capacity to shape events without them being inflicted upon us by other nations, although this is highly unlikely given globalisation and great power rivalries.

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¹¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2026/05/07/cia-intelligence-iran-trump-blockade-missiles/>

¹² <https://www.iaea.org/topics/monitoring-and-verification-in-iran>

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c79jg43vd8no>



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Comment

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