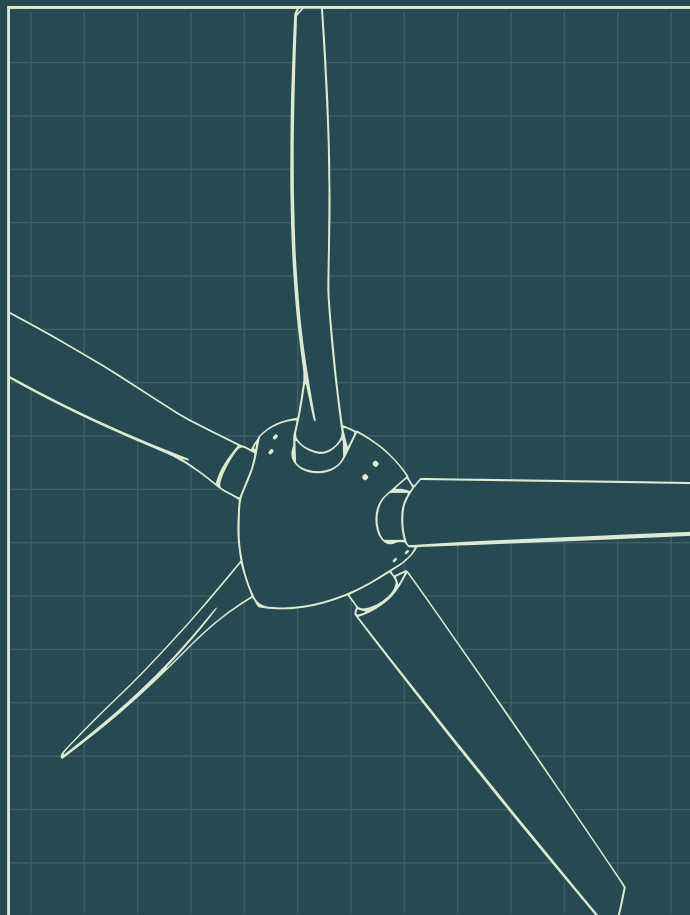
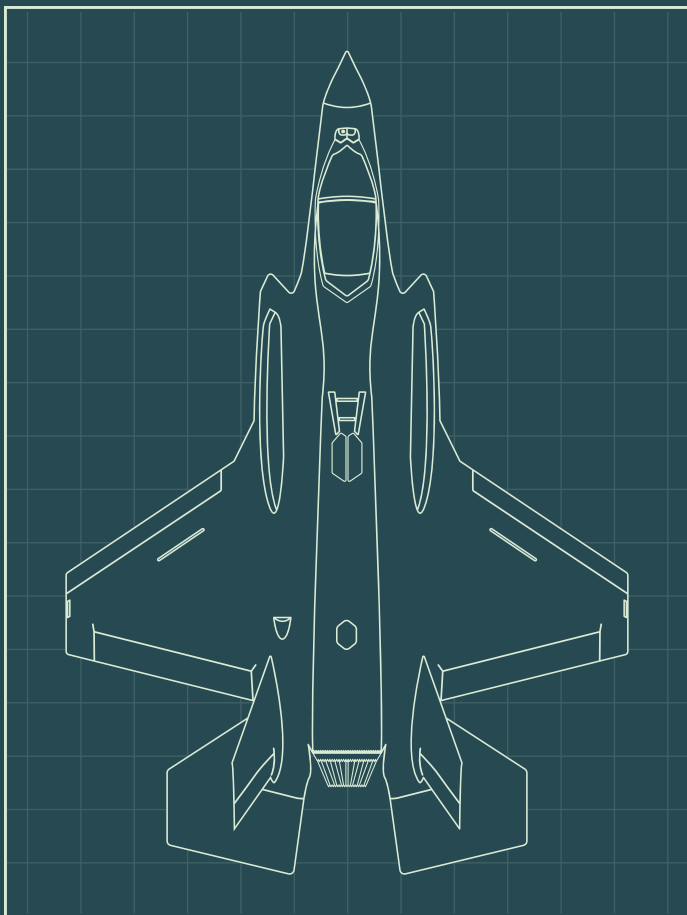


Alternative Defence Review

MAY 2025 | REPORT



ALTERNATIVE DEFENCE REVIEW

MAY 2025

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Executive Summary

The UK's 2025 Strategic Defence Review comes at a moment of intensifying global conflict, escalating climate crisis and soaring UK inequality. Yet, rather than rethinking the country's militarised foreign policy in response to these pressures, the Government proposes to dramatically increase defence spending, a move that risks worsening each of these crises. This *Alternative Defence Review* challenges the dominant war narrative—cultivated by political elites, the military-industrial complex, and the mainstream media—and offers a new vision for peace, justice, and security.

We examine how militarisation has distorted national priorities, fuelled global instability, undermined international law, harmed the environment, and diverted investment from public services and social infrastructure. In this report, we show that increased military expenditure will be economically inefficient, environmentally destructive, and socially regressive, offering limited job creation while stifling a more sustainable and just economy.

Our review calls for a shift toward a significantly demilitarised defence strategy rooted in *human security* and *common security*—prioritising diplomacy, global cooperation, conflict prevention, and investment in health, education, climate resilience, social care, and the creation of well-paid, secure, unionised and socially useful jobs. We advocate for a significant reduction in military spending, an immediate halt to arms exports to countries involved in active conflict or human rights abuses (including Israel and Gulf states), and a Just Transition for defence-dependent workers and communities.

This report offers a credible, democratic alternative to militarism: a sustainable economy grounded in social justice, global solidarity, and the urgent need to build peace—not war—for the 21st century.

ABOUT

This Alternative Defence Review was proposed by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in response to the RMT union's decision to '... campaign with other trade unions and peace organisations to convene a labour and peace movement summit to work out the basis of a new foreign policy with the promotion of peace and social justice at its heart'. The Alternative Defence Review is intended to be a contribution towards this.

Introduction

In July 2024, the Labour Government launched a new UK Strategic Defence Review (SDR), due to report in June 2025¹. Led by Lord Robertson, former NATO Secretary General, the initial scope of the SDR builds on the core themes of its predecessor, the Conservative Government's 2021 Integrated Review—namely, security and economic growth. Since the SDR was launched, Donald Trump has commenced his second presidential term, upending the entire 'rules-based international order' that has underpinned the post-Second World War world. It remains to be seen to what extent the new SDR will grapple with and address this new context. Currently, the SDR remains bound by the same strategic assumptions as its predecessor: the UK's 'independent' nuclear deterrent, a NATO-first defence policy, and commitments to the AUKUS pact². It reinforces the UK's global military presence, particularly in Ukraine, the 'Indo-Pacific,' and the Middle East. Despite escalating environmental crises and deepening global inequalities, there appears to be no intention to reassess or scale back the UK's military posture. Instead, the Government plans to increase defence spending from 2.3% to 2.5% of GDP, financing this escalation by cutting international aid and domestic welfare—directly undermining support for the world's most disadvantaged communities.

The UK has been a leading supplier of military equipment to Ukraine³, yet as the conflict drags on, international opinion, including within the US Administration, is shifting away from reliance on military superiority. Nevertheless, at the time of writing, Keir Starmer is proposing to deploy UK troops 'on the ground' in Ukraine. This signals a continuation of the flawed approach taken by previous Conservative Governments, demonstrating a lack of vision for how the UK can meaningfully contribute to global stability and peace. The war in Ukraine is now being seen as an economic opportunity rather than a

¹ UK Government (2024) Strategic Defence Review, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-defence-review-2024-2025-terms-of-reference/strategic-defence-review-2024-2025-terms-of-reference>

² A trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to build nuclear-powered attack submarines

³ Claire Mills (2023) Military assistance to Ukraine since the Russian invasion, House of Commons, London, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9477/CBP-9477.pdf>

humanitarian crisis, with rare-earth minerals becoming central to negotiations. The US, seeking to reduce its reliance on China, views Ukraine's untapped mineral wealth as a crucial asset, positioning the conflict within a broader geopolitical struggle over global supply chains.

Similarly, the devastating war in Gaza, with tens of thousands of civilian deaths and a worsening humanitarian crisis, further highlights the failures of militarised foreign policy, as relentless bombing, mass displacement, and humanitarian catastrophe unfold with the support of Western arms exports, including from the UK. Despite overwhelming international calls for an end to the violence, urgent humanitarian aid and adherence to international law, the UK Government continues to provide political, military and intelligence backing to Israel, deepening global instability and fueling resentment. A defence strategy rooted in justice and diplomacy, rather than military aggression, is essential to breaking cycles of violence and fostering long-term peace in the region.

UK defence policy remains heavily influenced by military leadership and the arms industry, which continue to push billions of pounds towards outdated and inappropriate weapons systems—including nuclear armaments—rather than fostering genuine security solutions. This approach stands in stark contrast to the United Nations' New Agenda for Peace⁴, which prioritises conflict prevention, sustainable development, climate action, and food security. Against this backdrop, our Alternative Defence Review directly challenges the prevailing 'defence' narrative, exposing its contradictions and highlighting the dangers of maintaining a militarised status quo. As we will demonstrate, military expenditure does not guarantee peace, boost economic productivity, or generate sustainable employment. Instead, it locks the UK into a cycle of conflict, aligning it with US foreign policy while distancing it from the priorities of the Global South. This compromises our country's ability to address urgent global challenges, including climate change and widening social inequalities.

The UK is uniquely positioned to take an enlightened and constructive role on the world stage by prioritising diplomacy and cultural influence—leveraging soft power over military force. Our Alternative Defence Review will explore how the UK can build global solidarity through its peace movement,

⁴ United Nations (2023) Our Common Agenda: A New Agenda for Peace, <https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace>

its powerful labour movement, and its rich and diverse communities with their extensive international links. It will also highlight how the UK's leadership in education, science, and innovation can be harnessed to foster peaceful and sustainable development worldwide, reinforcing a vision of security rooted in cooperation rather than confrontation.

SECTION 1

The Origins of the New War Narrative

In this section we examine how a particular war narrative was developed over the past decade, in the US, the UK, and increasingly across NATO members in Europe. We explain how this narrative provided the basis for policies that brought the world very close to nuclear disaster as recently as November 2024.

While the war narrative finds its roots in the UK's imperial past, in more recent years, it has been far more the product of the UK's 'special relationship' with the US, developed during the Cold War. The Project for a New American Century⁵, an influential neoconservative think tank, identified the rise of China as a long-term challenge to US global dominance, particularly in securing control over vital energy resources. Shortly after, the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—backed by the UK—set a precedent for interventionist policies under the guise of security and stability. The devastating consequences of these wars triggered widespread questioning of the role and reputation of the military, including among the Labour movement, not least in Britain.

This change of attitudes, and the stark economic reality after the financial crisis of 2008, were reflected in the Strategic Defence Reviews of 2010⁶ and 2015⁷. The 2010 SDR, overseen by David Cameron and Nick Clegg, saw retrenchment, spelled out in the Government statement to the Defence Committee that 'Our national security depends on our economic security and vice versa. So, bringing the defence budget back to balance is a vital part of how we tackle the deficit and protect

⁵ Project for a New American Century (2020) Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century, https://archive.org/details/ProjectForANewAmericanCentury_RebuildingAmericasDefenses/mode/2up

⁶ UK Government (2010) The strategic defence and security review: securing Britain in an age of uncertainty, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-and-security-review-securing-britain-in-an-age-of-uncertainty>

⁷ UK Government (2015) National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015>

this country's national security'⁸. The flagship aircraft carrier, Ark Royal, was decommissioned, the number of nuclear warheads reduced, army personnel cut by 7 per cent and air force by 15 per cent.

The subsequent 2015 SDR sought to plug some of the gaps left by the 2010 Review but essentially maintained the status quo. This is to be contrasted with Boris Johnson's 2021 Integrated Review⁹ where a new war narrative identified China and Russia as military aggressors and, in China's case, also as an economic challenger. As such, the 2021 Review marked a key turning point and it is this narrative that has been dominant across most NATO powers in Europe and largely accepted on a cross-party basis in the UK. It provides justification for a scale of military expenditure not seen for a generation and for policies of confrontation in Europe that have recently come near to triggering nuclear war¹⁰. As in 2001, the origins of these policy assumptions lay within the US military-industrial complex and its public proponents, notably Robert Kagan, co-founder of the 1999 Project for a New American Century which laid the groundwork for the invasion of Iraq, and a member of the US State Department Policy Board until 2024. Kagan is the partner of Victoria Nuland, US Deputy Secretary of State 2021–2024 and one of the foremost advocates for a US military intervention to forestall the rise of China.

UK Government adoption of this policy turn was closely associated with the figure of Boris Johnson and the militarist wing of the Conservative Party. It was also powerfully backed by the UK's own military industrial complex led by BAE Systems¹¹, itself a joint British–US company in terms of ownership. The accompanying war narrative is evident in the proceedings of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee, which in 2018–19 debated the merits of forging a new and even stronger alliance with the US, despite the backdrop of the Chilcot Report into the UK's involvement in Iraq (2001–2009), and widespread criticisms of UK involvement with the US in the Iraq war. The Committee heard a number of witnesses from the US putting the case for enhanced military expenditure to combat China and Russia and, in order to secure this, for the UK to play a special role within NATO in Europe. Frank Kramer, former US Assistant Secretary for Defence 1996–2001, put the case for NATO expansion and who was later followed by Victoria Nuland

⁸ House of Commons Defence Select Committee (2013) Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part One The case for a national strategy (Section 15), 18 Dec <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/197/19705.htm>

⁹ UK Government (2021) The Integrated Review 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-integrated-review-2021>

¹⁰ Guy Faulconbridge and Anton Kolodyazhnyy (2024) Putin issues warning to United States with new nuclear doctrine, Reuters, November 20, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-issues-warning-us-with-new-nuclear-doctrine-2024-11-19/>

¹¹ BAE Systems plc is one of the world's largest arms producers headquartered in the UK. BAE sales (2017–21) were split between US (43%), UK (20%) and Saudi Arabia (14%). In 2019 Rheinmetall acquired 55% of BAE's combat vehicles business in a joint venture. BAE produces 13–15% of the US F–35 stealth fighter aircraft.

who, as US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, oversaw the coup in Ukraine in 2014. Nuland called for 'a reliable, dependable partnership that helps keep the rest of Europe solid on nuclear deterrence'¹². Also giving evidence was the Professor of War Studies at King's College London, John Bew, who had been Kissinger Professor at Stanford University for three years and was a close associate of Kagan¹³.

In 2019, Johnson appointed Bew as his special adviser on defence and, very shortly after Joe Biden's election as US President in November 2020, made Bew Director of his Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. Subsequently, on 19 November 2020, the UK Government announced £16.5 billion of additional defence spending over four years¹⁴ on top of its previous pledge to raise defence spending by 0.5% above inflation every year, an overall increase of £24.1 billion over four years. It was at this point – during a period of global peace in 2020 – that the language of 'Global Britain' re-entered the political lexicon, as did talk of the urgent need to counter and defeat external threats. Within months, the UK and the US had finalised the AUKUS treaty with Australia which effectively initiated the militarisation of the seas around China and mobilised a defence package by which Australia would be able to source nuclear-powered submarines for deployment in the Pacific. This was quickly followed by a wider programme of rearmament that successively involved South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines. June 2021 saw the signing of the New Atlantic Charter between the US and Britain, mirroring that of 1941. In all these initiatives, Bew held a key position as negotiator and the drafter of the policy documents.

Why did US policy take this turn towards heightened confrontation in 2020 – and why was Britain's role seen as so important? The answer, in part, lies in a trio of articles by Robert Kagan, published between 2021 and 2023 in *Foreign Affairs*¹⁵, the journal of the US Council on Foreign Relations. Kagan argued that action was needed to secure America's future economic and political dominance in the face of global challengers. He and others in these debates focused on the scale of the US trade deficit which had doubled since 2015 to \$USD 800 billion, mainly a consequence of the scale of both Chinese and German exports to the US. Longer term, it was argued, continuation of these trends would severely

¹² Victoria Nuland (2018) Oral evidence: The indispensable ally? US, NATO and UK Defence relations, House of Commons Defence Committee, HC 387, (Q95), 5 March 2018 <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/7682/html/>

¹³ Library of Congress (2021) Video where Kagan and Bew discuss Realpolitik, Realpolitik & American Exceptionalism, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021689362/>

¹⁴ PM to announce largest military investment in 30 years, 19 November 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-to-announce-largest-military-investment-in-30-years>

¹⁵ Robert Kagan (2021, 2022, 2023) A Superpower, Like It or Not (March–April 2021), The Price of Hegemony (May–June 2022), A Free World, If You Can Keep It (January–February 2023), *Foreign Affairs* <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>

compromise the dollar as world currency and hence its use as an unlimited source of US credit. Therefore, they argued, the US had to prepare for war, to consolidate and expand NATO and exploit its ability to exert both hard and soft power. The UK's part was to give a lead to NATO members in Europe and drive forward the re-armament process – to the benefit mainly of US and UK arms firms – and to stress the issue of external threat. A key aspect of the 2021 Integrated Review was the way in which it linked rearmament to domestic economic regeneration. It sought to exploit a populism that was very similar to that of Biden in the US, with the creation of new military jobs presented as part of the Government's focus on 'levelling up'. Military and naval production was to bring new prosperity to areas such as Clydeside, Fife, Belfast and North Devon.

The UK's highly organised armaments lobby also played a part in this, with the biggest lobbyist by far being the UK's BAE Systems. Between 2009 and 2019, BAE made 1,238 parliamentary interventions, while Leonardo (formerly Finmeccanica) made 313, Lockheed Martin 283, and Rolls-Royce 221¹⁶. The arms companies also sought community support through employees, trade unions and local politicians. They understood the importance of a war narrative in local campaigning. So did the Johnson Government.

It is important to stress here that the UK's armament companies are not 'self-standing' or independent. The dominant shareholders in BAE Systems were, and are, US investment companies. Rolls-Royce and Babcock, although smaller, also have dominant US shareholders – alongside British investment banks. Moreover, the UK's nuclear weapons arsenal, which successive governments have described as 'independent', is in reality dependent on the US for warhead design and manufacture, while Trident missiles are leased by the UK from the US. The UK's nuclear dependency on the US is itself enshrined in the secretive Mutual Defence Agreement that has not been subjected to any substantial parliamentary debate since it was first signed back in 1958. Johnson's populist badging of new regional defence contracts paralleled, or reflected, the Biden administration's linking of rearmament to economic growth. This period saw a reassertion of US priorities in NATO, particularly via the UK, as well as a further expansion of NATO membership. In July 2022, the heads of

¹⁶ Calvo Rufanges, J. (2016). The Arms Industry Lobby in Europe. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 60(3), 305–320; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764215613406>; also Dr. Sam Perlo-Freeman, 'From revolving door to open-plan office: The ever-closer union between the UK government and the arms industry', World Peace Foundation, September 2024 <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/OpenPlanOffice.pdf>

the UK Security Service (MI5) and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) gave an 'unprecedented joint address'¹⁷ warning of a growing threat posed by the Communist Party of China.

From 2021, geopolitical tensions escalated towards deeper confrontation—well before any Russian military action against Ukraine. In July of that year, a UK-led carrier strike force sailed through the South China Sea, followed by another UK carrier force patrolling the Russian coastline in the North China Sea in September. In October 2021, the Washington Post printed its story that the US now had sufficient nuclear potential to knock out all Russian and Chinese bunker-based nuclear weapons simultaneously and pre-emptively¹⁸. In response, Russia made proposals to the US on 17 December 2021 for minimum security guarantees¹⁹. Chatham House²⁰ argued that they should be taken seriously, but was ignored, further entrenching the path towards conflict²¹. It was in this context, in February 2022, that Russia launched its military operation against Ukraine as it sought guarantees for the security of its Western borders²². Six weeks later, an agreement was initiated in Istanbul, negotiated by Turkey, Germany and France, and agreed by Russia and Ukraine. Much of it was based on the never-implemented Minsk II Treaty negotiated in 2015. However, within days, on 9 April 2022, Boris Johnson intervened, with backing from Anthony Blinken and Victoria Nuland, and Ukraine abandoned the agreement²³. Across Europe, the UK then led the call for further NATO expansion initially, by accelerating NATO membership of Sweden and Finland, alongside demands for an escalation of military spending by NATO members.

Eighteen months later, Europe witnessed a confrontation that brought the world closer to nuclear conflict than any time since the early 1960s. In developing the crisis to this point, the UK played a critical role. UK military assistance to Ukraine has been equivalent to almost a quarter of US military support since February 2022 (approximately \$USD 60.7 billion [£48 billion]) and outstrips all EU military aid (€11.1 billion [£9.24 billion]) delivered through the European Peace Facility (EPF)²⁴. On 2 May 2024, UK Foreign Secretary, David Cameron, visited Ukraine promising £3 billion military aid annually for 'as long as it takes'. Cameron added that Ukraine had a right to use long range weapons provided by the UK to strike targets inside

¹⁷ Joint address by MI5 and FBI Heads, 06 Jul 2022 <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/joint-address-by-mi5-and-fbi-heads>

¹⁸ Washington Post, 29 October 2021. Richard Norton-Taylor previously reported an earlier stage of this development: Biden's 'new' nuclear strategy and the super-fuse that sets it off, Theodore Postol, Responsible Statecraft, Aug 29, 2024 <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/biden-nuclear-strategy/>

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Russian Federation (2021) Press release on Russian draft documents on legal security guarantees from the United States and NATO, 17 December, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1790809/

²⁰ Patricia Lewis (2021) Russian treaty proposals hark back to post-Cold War era, Chatham House, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/12/russian-treaty-proposals-hark-back-post-cold-war-era>

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Russian Federation (2022) Press release on submitting a written reaction to the US response concerning security guarantees, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1799157/

²² Klaus Wiegrefe (2023) Der Spiegel, 25 September <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/ukraine-how-merkel-prevented-ukraine-s-nato-membership-a-der-spiegel-reconstruction-a-c7f03472-2a21-4e4e-b905-8e45f1fad542>

²³ Samuel Charap and Sergei Radchenko (2024) The talks that could have ended the war, Foreign Affairs, 16 April, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/talks-could-have-ended-war-ukraine>

²⁴ House of Commons Library (2025), Military Assistance to Ukraine, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9477/>

Russia and that it was up to the Ukrainian Government whether to do so. In response, Russia's foreign ministry warned that if Ukraine used UK-supplied weapons to strike Russia, Moscow could retaliate at 'any British military facilities and equipment on the territory of Ukraine and abroad'²⁵. On 7th July 2024, less than 48 hours after being appointed, UK Secretary of State for Defence, John Healey, visited Kyiv and Odesa, announcing a new package of military support for Ukraine²⁶. Keir Starmer and Volodymyr Zelensky also agreed a new defence industrial support treaty to enable Ukraine to draw on £3.5 billion of UK export finance. In addition, the UK and allies established an International Fund for Ukraine (IFU) to coordinate purchase and transport of military equipment to Ukraine from third countries and/or industry²⁷. On 17 November 2024, Biden authorised Ukraine to use US-supplied long-range ATACMS missiles to strike targets inside Russia. The next day, Starmer followed suit, granting permission for Ukraine to fire UK-supplied Storm Shadow missiles. On 20 November, Ukraine launched both ATACMS and Storm Shadow missiles into Russian territory for the first time. In response, on 21 November, Russia deployed a new hypersonic 'Oreshnik' intermediate ballistic missile against Ukraine's Yuzhmash missile factory in Dnepropetrovsk and destroyed several ATACMS launch systems. Russian military officials warned that any further strikes on Russian soil would trigger additional retaliatory attacks. As a nuclear power, these developments marked a dangerous escalation, with the UK at the forefront of a trajectory that brought the world to the brink of nuclear confrontation—a level of risk not seen since the Cold War.

The election of Donald Trump has changed the focus of US military aggression from Russia to China. The US administration's focus on Greenland and Panama are real and represent, for the Trump strategists, key and credible attempts to gain major new sources of minerals and strategic control of the Arctic (Greenland) and to control trade routes (China to Brazil, Cuba, Nigeria, Angola). The Middle East will remain a fulcrum of conflict (with Turkey and Israel – and therefore the US – in tacit alliance). Donald Trump is now demanding European states increase their defence spending to 5% of GDP, putting even greater pressure on fragile European economies – including the UK's – and hardening a shift to the far right triggered by economic insecurity²⁸. These demands for major increases in military expenditure have economic

²⁵ Guy Faulconbridge and Muvija M. (2024) Russia warns Britain it could strike back after Cameron remark on Ukraine, Reuters, 6 May <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-warns-it-can-strike-british-military-targets-after-cameron-remarks-2024-05-06/>

²⁶ Peter Felstead (2024) New UK Defence Secretary John Healey wastes no time in showing support for Ukraine, 8 July, ESD, <https://euro-sd.com/2024/07/major-news/39215/healey-visits-ukraine/>

²⁷ UK Government (2024) International Fund for Ukraine, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/international-fund-for-ukraine-ifu>

²⁸ George Monbiot (2025) The Urge to Destroy, <https://www.monbiot.com/2025/04/14/the-urge-to-destroy/>

benefits for the US since most NATO weapons are bought from US-based companies, highlighting that these militarisation policies may be more about narrow US economic self-interest than global security.

This is the international context in which the Starmer Government is undertaking the UK's 2024-25 Strategic Defence Review. The war narrative, as adopted by Boris Johnson and carried forward by Keir Starmer, is not therefore 'our' narrative. Its origins demonstrably lie elsewhere – and it endangers the UK and the whole world. If carried forward, it will demand levels of expenditure that will irreparably damage the economies of all European countries, terminally damage social welfare systems and intensify support for the far right. It will also undermine efforts to combat climate change and address poverty at home and in the Global South.

SECTION 2

How the Government Promotes its War Narrative

Giving evidence to the 'Defence in the Grey Zone', Defence Committee Inquiry on 25th March, 2025, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Armed Forces, Luke Pollard stated that the SDR:

“...will set out a clear assessment of the threats that we are facing as a nation. That will contribute to that national debate as to why we, as a Government, are spending more on defence, the reason behind those decisions, and why we are doing it in a way that can benefit more people.

Further, and significantly, he stated:

“What we have to do is find a way of taking the public on that journey with us, because there will be actors that are seeking to deliberately undermine confidence in the voices of myself as a Minister, the armed forces and our Ministry of Defence, just as much as they will of individual politicians who make that case as well, so we still have a lot of work to do there²⁹.

²⁹ UK Parliament (2025) Defence in the Grey Zone, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15655/pdf/> – see page 34

The journey to which Pollard refers didn't start with the SDR. As highlighted in the earlier section, the war narrative became more explicit following the 2021 Integrated Review under Boris Johnson's premiership. However, the militarisation of the state and building societal acceptance for war goes back further. As discussed earlier, 2014 seemed to be a pivotal year when public attitudes to defence, security and the armed forces started to change³⁰ on the grounds of increased security threats from terrorism, notably ISIS and Al-Qaeda³¹. This was accompanied by an increase in militarisation of the UK state and society.

It was also in 2014 that Quaker Peace & Social Witness produced a briefing on a 'new tide of militarisation' emerging over previous decades³². Militarisation and militarism are vast topics but here are taken to be understood as the 'extension of military culture and influence into everyday life such as in education, central and local government and business, charities etc'³³ as part of building public support for the military, arms companies, and state warfare. This refers not only to the size of armies or defence budgets, but also to a shift in social beliefs and values that legitimise the use of force, and to the organisation of society around the production of violence—for example, through the growing allocation of labour and resources to military purposes, and the alignment of other institutions with military goals, often without public awareness or scrutiny³⁴.

While the concept of a military-industrial complex may be more familiar to the US context, there are particular ways this has manifested itself in the UK, from dealing with extreme weather events to the militarisation of policing and the militarisation of sporting events³⁵. In the former we have seen 'troops on the ground' deployed to provide invaluable photo-ops for politicians to reinforce this military message, often ignoring the role of the under-resourced fire and rescue services. This blurring of civilian and military life is even more poignant in policing. A joint report by the Campaign against Arms Trade (CAAT) and Netpol in 2022, described 'how a war mentality has infiltrated policing at various levels – from counter-terrorism to anti-protest policing to border control to the policing of gangs'³⁶. For example, at UK arms fairs, military-grade weaponry is marketed to police and security agencies.

30 Joel Rogers de Waal (2014) <https://yougov.co.uk/international/articles/10712-report-british-attitudes-defence-security-and-armed->

31 Cameron, D. (2024) Threat level from international terrorism raised <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/threat-level-from-international-terrorism-raised-pm-press-conference>

32 Quakers (2014 – updated May 2018) The new tide of militarisation <https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/new-tide-militarism-june-2018>

33 Forces Watch (2018) What is militarism? <https://www.forceswatch.net/comment/what-is-militarism>

34 See Catherine Lutz (2002) Making War at Home in the United States: Militarization and the Current Crisis, *American Anthropologist*, 104 (3): 723–735, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3567250>

35 Daniel Fitzpatrick (2021) 'Football Remembers' — the Collective Memory of Football in the Spectacle of British Military Commemoration. *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 16(1), 57–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2021.1930701>

36 Keren Weitzberg (2022) A very British problem: the evolution of Britain's militarised policing industrial complex, Campaign the Arms Trade/ Netpol, <https://caat.org.uk/app/uploads/2022/08/A-Very-British-Problem-WEB.pdf>

This is normalised via powerful societal institutions including politicians, and the mainstream media.

The SpyCops Undercover Policing Inquiry showed the lengths to which the state will go to protect the militarisation agenda. Infiltration of CND and the wider peace movement by undercover police in the 1980s and 1990s not only served to smear and discredit activists but to subvert the processes of democracy itself³⁷. Sadly, these practices continue to the present day, as advocates for peace, or against war and imperialism, have been targeted using Public Order and counter-terrorism legislation. The National Union of Journalists has condemned abuse of counter-terror legislation as harmful to media freedom and for creating a climate of fear among UK journalists, for example, reporting on Gaza³⁸. Negative media portrayal of activists to suppress free speech and build a picture of activists working against the state and public interests is deliberately used to usurp democratic processes of electoral and lobby politics³⁹. Yet, the campaign tactics of peace activists are designed to ensure public debate and to call political institutions to account.

Militarisation is pervasive in the fields of education and research. Bringing a 'military ethos' into schools and military style discipline is often used as language to 'build character'. The Troops to Teachers programme, a fast-track scheme to bring ex-service personnel into teaching, exemplified this ethos through the assertion that 'pupils would benefit from the experience, background and skills that ex-military personnel had gained in "our inspiring armed forces"'⁴⁰. Not surprisingly, given the lack of resources in education and demoralisation of the teaching profession, this programme was not successful⁴¹. While programmes to support personnel to move from military to civilian work should be welcomed, it should be premised on the principles of a Just Transition as set out in later sections of this report.

A further and more direct 'entryism' into schools is the MoD and Department for Education Cadet Expansion programme, launched in 2012. A recent report⁴² noted that 'nearly 60% of school cadet units are now in the state sector, often in disadvantaged areas of the UK, where previously the majority were in independent schools'. The accompanying press release from the MoD seeks to entrench a military mindset of discipline that offers better life chances for those joining the

37 CND (2024) Spycops and the secret state, 16 July, <https://cnduk.org/cnd-spycops-and-the-secret-state/>

38 Claire Mills (2024) Replacing the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: Progress of the Dreadnought Class, House of Commons Library, _ NUJ alarmed at ongoing police crackdown of journalists, 28 Oct, <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-alarmed-at-ongoing-police-crackdown-of-journalists.html>

39 Lockheed Martin (2018) Modernized Lockheed Martin Trident II D5 Missile Test Certifies Submarine for Patrol, Connor Woodman, 'The Infiltrator and the Movement', Jacobin, <https://jacobin.com/2018/04/uk-infiltration-secret-police-mi5-special-branch-undercover>

40 Department of Education and Ministry of Defence (2013) Press Release: New routes for talented ex-armed forces personnel to become teachers – 7 June, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-routes-for-talented-ex-armed-forces-personnel-to-become-teacher>

41 Schools Week (2019) Rebooted Troops to Teachers fails to take off, 18 October,

42 University of Northampton Institute for Social Innovation and Impact (2025) The Impact and Value of School Based Cadet Forces in the UK, Research Commissioned by the Ministry of Defence and the Combined Cadet Force Association,

cadets⁴³. Schools continue to be recruiting grounds for the military, often with the assistance of arms companies such as BAE Systems, who run their own outreach programmes from primary to college level⁴⁴.

In UK Higher Education we see an even greater embedding of militarisation. This is a sector in crisis, with around 90 universities making redundancies and closing departments. Thousands of jobs have been lost, threatening the sector's international standing. Most of the losses are in the humanities, while STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects are hardly affected, mainly because they can attract urgently needed income from non-academic stakeholders. However, this also opens the door to outside influence on academic study and research.

A 2024 joint report by Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) and Demilitarise Education (dED), 'Weaponising Universities'⁴⁵, shows how the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and arms manufacturers bring military research programmes and values into universities. The Military-Industrial-Academic-Complex (MIAC) involves establishing arms industry-funded research on campus and dedicated research centres sponsored by the arms industry and/or the MoD.

Using Freedom of Information requests, dED has found that the MIAC is worth over £2.3 billion to UK universities. Research partnerships (funded by weapons-producing companies and/or Government bodies) account for £1.2 billion of the total. These projects often involve companies like BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce or Qinetiq as industrial partners. Universities also collectively invest over £1 billion directly or indirectly (via third parties) to arms companies, as a way of ensuring a regular income⁴⁶.

Two key areas of research are highlighted: 'Emerging and Disruptive Technologies' (EDTs), such as AI, autonomous systems, and hypersonic weapons, which are changing the nature of warfare; and 'Militarized Environmental Technologies' (METs), that seek to reduce the environmental impact of military activities (such as aviation) but which also serve as a way to 'greenwash' the unsustainable activities of war.

In addition to funding from military research, universities collectively earn £47 million from awards provided by the

43 Ministry of Defence (2025) Press Release: Cadet experience gives youngsters a clear advantage at work and further education, new study finds, 7 April, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cadet-experience-gives-youngsters-a-clear-advantage-at-work-and-further-education>

44 BAE systems (2025) Education Outreach <https://www.baesystems.com/en/digital/careers/our-people/graduates-and-students/education-outreach>

45 Campaign against the Arms Trade (2024) Weaponising Universities: Research Collaborations between UK Universities and the Military Industrial Complex, 27 February, <https://caat.org.uk/publications/weaponising-universities-research-collaborations-between-uk-universities-and-the-military-industrial-complex/>

46 Declassified UK (2023) Explained: The £1BN-plus deals between UK Universities and the arms trade, 7 February, <https://www.declassifieduk.org/explained-the-1bn-plus-deals-between-uk-universities-and-the-arms-trade/>

defence industry for studentships, sponsored courses, graduate schemes, careers fairs, etc. The MoD also offers various funding, scholarship and sponsorship schemes for the education of military personnel and their families. To date, 64 universities have developed partnerships with arms producing companies of one kind or another, 24 of them worth over £10m. The University of Bristol has benefited the most with £71 million worth of partnerships from 48 links.

There is a growing opposition to the militarisation of HE with students and staff at many universities calling for divestment from arms companies and an end to the military presence on campus at events such as career fairs. In fact, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, and Warwick universities have stopped hosting defence companies. Universities should be helping to build a diverse society that can question conformity and consider alternative views, rather than further company profits and/or political/military motives. However, as the Government ramps up defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2027, with no extra funding for universities, there will be increasing pressure for universities to take on more military work.

A key part of this militarisation programme is support for the UK's nuclear weapons programme as a symbol of both security and power. Whether a future Prime Minister will press the nuclear button seems to be a primary question of every mainstream journalist as a priority qualification for being elected to office. In the 2017 election BBC Question Time special, Jeremy Corbyn was pressed on this relentlessly. But what was defining in this instance, was the contribution from a young woman who prefaced her question to Corbyn on human rights with the statement: 'I don't understand why everyone in this room seems to be so keen on killing millions of people'⁴⁷.

This illustrates what has been a decades-long depiction that it is peace that is a threat to our national security rather than, in fact, warmongering and posturing that poses an existential risk to millions across the planet. This carefully cultivated war narrative—reinforced through government policy, education, media, and public institutions—demands urgent challenge. The aim of this report is not only to expose its workings, but to empower a wider democratic conversation about what truly keeps us safe.

⁴⁷ Chris York (2017) Jeremy Corbyn On BBC Question Time Pressed On The Nuclear Issue, 2 June,

⁴⁸ See Patrick Bigger and Ben Neimark (2017) Weaponizing nature: The geopolitical ecology of the US Navy's biofuel program, *Political Geography*, 60:13–22,

SECTION 3

The Harms of the Current Approach

The UK's current approach to defence, based on high military expenditures and magnified perceptions of threat, drives significant environmental and social harms. The defence sector, globally and nationally, is responsible for exceptionally high levels of greenhouse gasses, pollution and use of non-renewable resources⁴⁸. A 2020 report by Scientists for Global Responsibility (SGR) and Declassified UK found that the UK military-industrial sector produced greater quantities of carbon emissions than 60 individual countries⁴⁹. Furthermore, the US military emits more carbon than two thirds of entire nation states⁵⁰. Many of these environmental harms expose workers and communities to high levels of danger. For example, Silicon, identified as a critical defence mineral by the UK Government, relies amongst other sources, on Brazil where deaths from silicosis among miners are high⁵¹.

While the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) acknowledges the environmental impacts of their operations, their solutions are primarily technical, focused on decarbonisation rather than wider sustainability and social issues⁵². The proposed fossil fuel replacements, particularly biofuel and nuclear, even where lower in carbon emissions, still threaten ecosystems, biodiversity and human health⁵³. This technical approach avoids consideration of the fundamental and wider environmental and social harms caused by militarism. Military spending diverts crucial resources from social welfare and environmental protection, including healthcare, education, social care, clean energy, and flood defences. The 2024 Labour Budget allocated just £11.3 billion to climate change mitigation

49 Stuart Parkinson (2020) Will the UK Reduce its Military Carbon Emissions?, Rethinking Security, <https://rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/2020/07/02/uk-military-carbon-emissions/>

50 Oliver Belcher et al. (2020) Hidden carbon costs of the 'everywhere war': Logistics, geopolitical ecology, and the carbon boot-print of the US military' Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 45 (1): 65-80, <https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/tran.12319>

51 Eduardo Algrante (2021) Mortality from silicosis in Brazil, American Journal of Industrial Medicine, 6 January, documents 3164 deaths between over a twenty-six-year period in the mining areas: 1980 and 2006.

52 See Karen Bell et al. (2023) The necessity of a transformational approach to just transition: defence worker views on decarbonisation, diversification and sustainability, Environmental Politics, 33(2): 281-301, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09644016.2023.2199661>

53 See Stuart Parkinson (2020) Will the UK reduce its military carbon emissions?, Rethinking Security, <https://rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/2020/07/02/uk-military-carbon-emissions/>

and adaptation—covering everything from carbon capture and nuclear energy to tree planting and EV charging—compared to at least £58 billion for military spending.

The UK already spends more on its military than France, Germany and Spain in both nominal terms and as a share of GDP. Without accounting for the planned increase or anticipated cost overruns, the UK will spend a minimum of £288.6 billion on military equipment over the next decade. Although public investments are not zero sum, there are trade-offs in the allocation of state resources that determine the capacity of different sectors of the economy. As the only major manufacturing sector to be directed by Government contracts, the military industry consumes a disproportionate share of the skilled research and development (R&D) workforce. Between 1987 and 2009, the military sector received 35 per cent of the UK's public R&D funding⁵⁴.

In 2025, UK Government ministers repeatedly held up military spending as 'an engine of growth' for the British economy. A Ministry of Defence press release claimed 'Military boost to Ukraine front line will support UK growth and jobs'⁵⁵. But as UK Chancellor, Rachel Reeves', Spring Statement 2025 demonstrated, increased military spending occurs at the expense of other areas of public spending. Her 2025 Spring Statement budget funds the increase in defence spending, previously announced by Keir Starmer in February 2025, by cutting overseas aid. The economic fallacy of 'military Keynesianism' recycled by advocates of arms spending, relies on the assertion that military spending generates wider positive economic and social effects through development of technology, R&D investment and jobs. But building a tank, bomb, or missile system confers little benefit to the wider economy and zero benefit in terms of efficiency, speed, or productivity to other economic sectors. By contrast, investment in public infrastructure such as new roads, railways, or technology in universities rarely generates a direct financial return. But benefits to end users and consumers through quicker journey times, cheaper fares and transportation costs, new medical procedures, or scientific techniques raise prosperity generally and benefit the Government through tax receipts from increased economic activity.

⁵⁴ Enrico Moretti, Claudia Steinwender, John Van Reenen (2019) The Intellectual Spoils of War? Defense R&D, Productivity and International Spillovers, NBER Working Paper, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w26483/revisions/w26483.rev0.pdf

⁵⁵ UK Government (2025) £4.5 billion military boost to Ukraine front line to support UK growth and jobs, 16 January, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/45-billion-military-boost-to-ukraine-front-line-to-support-uk-growth-and-jobs/>

Military spending generates a smaller economic multiplier than other public investments meaning it generates less overall economic activity and fewer secondary benefits than spending on essential services or infrastructure. An example of this public investment 'multiplier effect' is that in 2019 every £1 spent on rail generated £2.50 of income elsewhere in the UK economy. The UK rail sector supported £42.9 billion of economic production and raised £14.1 billion in tax revenue according to research by Oxford Economics⁵⁶. This additional Gross Value Added (GVA) comprised £17.8 billion in the rail supply sector, £0.9 billion in station retail and suppliers, and £12 billion across the wider consumer-facing economy due to wage-funded employee spending (the so-called 'induced impact'). Investing in a new rail network benefits local communities through improved services, job training, and increased employment. In contrast, producing a fighter jet offers more limited economic benefits, mainly through the spending of those directly employed in its production. With global supply chains, many of these benefits are increasingly offshored.

The new military Keynesians also claim military spending is 'jobs rich'. However, as discussed further later in this report, military spending does not add to the productive capacity of the economy, so has zero net economic benefit. Claims that military spending is 'jobs rich' rely on unevidenced assertions about MoD procurement on job creation in the arms industry. There are other more efficient sectors in which public money can create high-skilled, higher wage jobs.

Analysis for the Scottish Government⁵⁷ showed that military spending has one of the lowest 'employment multipliers' of all economic categories, ranking 70 out of 100 in terms of numbers of jobs generated. Health is rated number 1. Economic sectors from agriculture to energy, food manufacture, chemicals, iron and steel, transport, computers and construction all have greater 'employment multipliers' than military spending. Investing in health is two and half times more 'jobs rich' than military spending. This drain on public investment produces social and environmental underfunding which widen existing inequalities with race, gender, class and disability dimensions, as communities most reliant on public services and environmental protection are left increasingly vulnerable.

⁵⁶ Oxford Economics (2021) The Economic Contribution of UK Rail, September, <https://oeservices.oxfordeconomics.com/publication/open/359506>

⁵⁷ Cited in Michael Burke (2025) Increasing military spending will not raise living standards, 28 February, Socialist Economic Bulletin, <https://socialisteconomicbulletin.net/2025/02/increasing-military-spending-will-not-raise-living-standards/>

Furthermore, the funding freed up from investing in war could be used to pay the necessary climate reparations to the Global South. As the IPCC stated, '... moderate reductions in military spending (which may involve conflict resolution and cross-country agreements on arms limitations) could free up considerable resources for the SDG [Sustainable Development Goals] agenda, both in the countries that reduce spending and in the form of ODA [Official Development Assistance]'⁵⁸. In 2021, 50 Nobel laureates signed a letter urging reduced military spending to create a UN Fund to address poverty, health crises, and climate change⁵⁹. However, as outlined earlier, the UK Government plans to cut its aid budget from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI to increase military spending. David Miliband, head of the International Rescue Committee, called this a blow to the UK's global humanitarian reputation. UNICEF warned the cut would risk lives, and Sarah Champion, chair of the International Development Select Committee, emphasized that aid spending helps prevent wars, stating, 'Aid vs defense isn't a realistic narrative for keeping the world safe'⁶⁰.

An aggressive military stance perpetuates a culture of securitization that marginalizes vulnerable groups and increases societal divisions. The arms trade fuels wars and violent conflict, with arms imports significantly increasing the probability of an onset of conflict⁶¹. Its use of raw materials, minerals especially, depend on overseas supply and are seen to require Britain's military force to maintain their flow through international 'choke points'⁶². A defence strategy should focus on how to avoid war through international relations, diplomacy, arms control and disarmament treaties. The UK should shift its focus from military defence to human security to prioritise climate resilience, social welfare and equality. A real defence strategy would prepare for a range of modern threats, from environmental crises to social polarisation. Reorienting defence priorities towards human security would not only mitigate the harms of the current approach, but would also ensure a more inclusive, sustainable, and just future for all citizens.

58 IPCC (2022, p.84) Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change, Working Group III contribution to 6th Assessment Report https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6/wg3/IPCC_AR6_WGIII_Full_Report.pdf

59 Dan Sabbagh (2021) Colossal Waste: Nobel Laureates call for 2% cuts to military spending worldwide, The Guardian, 14 Dec, <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/14/nobel-laureates-cut-military-spending-worldwide-un-peace-dividend>

60 Catarina Demony (2025) Charities appalled by UK cut to aid budget to fund defence spending, Reuters, 25 Feb <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/charities-appalled-by-uk-cut-aid-budget-fund-defence-spending-2025-02-25/>

61 Oliver Pamp et al. (2018) The build-up of coercive capacities: arms imports and the outbreak of violent intrastate conflicts, Journal of Peace Research 55(4): 430–444, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343317740417>

62 UK Government (2024) Critical Imports and Supply Chain Strategy, January 2024; UK government's response to Task and Furnish recommendations on industry resilience for critical minerals.

SECTION 4

Waste and Irrelevance

In 2018, the UK Ministry of Defence's 'Global Strategic Trends – The Future Starts Today'⁶³ report identified emerging threats to national security, including climate change, terrorism, and hybrid warfare (e.g. cyber-attacks, biological warfare, drones, lasers). NATO's Defense College has since echoed these concerns about increasing threats from hybrid warfare. Such threats target critical infrastructure, such as energy pipelines and undersea cables, along with information warfare, and AI. However, the UK's defence establishment has been slow to adapt, relying on outdated concepts of national security. The MoD has repeatedly ignored persistent and damning criticism of its procurement strategy – notably from the National Audit Office (NAO)⁶⁴ – and retained the assumption that it can continue to pour money into military projects that are now wholly inappropriate, or unusable. In 2023, the NAO identified a £16.9 billion black hole in Britain's defence equipment programme⁶⁵. In 2024, for the second successive year, the MoD did not publish an annual report on the state of the programme. Consequently, the NAO has not been able to produce its own assessment of the Government's defence procurement plans.

An emblematic example of a wasteful major procurement project is the £6 billion programme (initially £3.9 billion) to build two aircraft carriers, Queen Elizabeth and Prince of Wales. These have been described by Lord Richards, a former chief of defence staff as 'unaffordable vulnerable metal cans'⁶⁶. The two ships have been plagued by serious mechanical problems and the navy does not have sufficient personnel to crew

⁶³ Ministry of Defence (2018), Global Strategic Trends – The Future Starts Today, 2 October, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-strategic-trends>

⁶⁴ CND (2019) National Audit Office releases report on MOD failure to clean up old nuclear submarines, <https://cnduk.org/westminster-diary/national-audit-office-releases-report-on-mod-failure-to-clean-up-old-nuclear-submarines/>

⁶⁵ CND (2023) 'Out of control': Cost of Britain's nukes rose by 62% in 2023, <https://cnduk.org/out-of-control-cost-of-britains-nukes-rose-by-62-in-2023/>; CND (2020) MoD wasted 1.35 BN in Trident Chaos, <https://cnduk.org/mod-wasted-1-35bn-in-trident-chaos-says-watchdog/>

⁶⁶ Richard Norton-Taylor (2025), Dodgy tanks, outdated warships: how can we trust UK defence chiefs to spend our billions wisely?, The Guardian 10 Mar, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/10/tanks-warships-uk-defence-billions-waste>

them. The carriers also have significant military flaws. They are vulnerable to drones and fast, long-range missiles. The carriers were built to host up to 36 F-35 fighter jets, which have themselves been beset with software and design problems. The estimated price of each plane has escalated to more than £90m. In 2018, the Ministry of Defence decided to buy a total of 48 – some land-based and flown by the RAF – at an overall cost of more than £13bn over 30 years. Britain's role in the US-led F35 programme has meant that it also supplies crucial components to Israeli jets that have been used to bomb Gaza. Other examples of delay, soaring costs and chronic issues with conventional weapons programmes include:

- A fleet of new Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft which was scrapped in the 2010 Defence and Security Review because of delays and cost overruns. This project wasted almost £4 billion of public money⁶⁷.
- A new radio system for the army, called Bowman, which cost £2.5 billion. It was twenty-five years late and still did not work properly⁶⁸.
- A new fleet of Type 45 Daring class destroyers, described by the navy as 'state of the art' vessels. Their Rolls-Royce engines could not cope with the energy consumed by the ships, which broke down with catastrophic propulsion and electrical failures. The destroyer programme was two years' late and £1.5 billion over budget. In early 2024, five of the navy's six Type 45 destroyers, all less than 15 years old, were being maintained in dock⁶⁹.
- £5.5 billion spent developing Ajax, an armoured vehicle with problems including noise and vibration that injured soldiers testing the vehicles. It is reported that they will not be ready until the end of this decade, more than a decade late⁷⁰.
- The Astute programme, building the UK's fleet of nuclear-powered, conventionally armed attack submarines, plagued by cost overruns and delays. The Astute submarines have been delivered years later than planned and the cost of the programme is forecast to be £2.6bn

⁶⁷ David Maddox (2012) MoD clawed back just £500,000 after scrapping £3.8bn Nimrods, The Scotsman, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/uk-news/mod-clawed-back-just-ps500000-after-scrapping-ps38bn-nimrods-1622164>

⁶⁸ Richard Norton-Taylor (2025), How Britain is wasting its defence budget, <https://www.declassifieduk.org/how-britain-is-wasting-its-defence-budget/>

⁶⁹ Richard Norton-Taylor (2025), How Britain is wasting its defence budget, <https://www.declassifieduk.org/how-britain-is-wasting-its-defence-budget/>

⁷⁰ Ben Quinn (2023) British army's new Ajax fighting vehicle will not be ready until end of decade, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/20/british-armys-new-ajax-fighting-vehicle-will-not-be-ready-until-end-of-decade>

⁷¹ See David Cullen (2020) Trouble Ahead: Risks and Rising Costs in the UK Nuclear Weapons Programme, Nuclear Information Service, <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Trouble-Ahead-low-resolution-version.pdf>; UK Government (2023)

above its initial budget⁷¹. These figures do not take into account a major fire involving the last Astute submarine in October 2024, which is likely to have both cost and timeline implications for the programme⁷². Even the Astute submarines that have come into service have suffered from reliability problems, with all five of them being confined to port for three months in 2024⁷³.

The UK defence establishment and arms industry have been allowed to indulge in such wasteful and unsuitable projects because of the lack of accountability and effective scrutiny by independent and democratic institutions, including Parliament. This is particularly true of the special forces, which are protected by a wall of official secrecy even greater than that protecting the security and intelligence agencies. This failure is all the more significant given the increasing role of special forces in military conflicts and their growing cooperation and links with those agencies, notably Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ).

The private contractors that receive public investment in military procurement programmes benefit from unusual arrangements, such as uncompetitive contracting practices. In 2023/24, 44 per cent of MoD contracts were non-competitive, consuming £16.4 billion of public investment⁷⁴. The security provided by these contracts, as well as direct subsidies for R&D, helps to underpin above average returns on investment at military firms, and high returns to shareholders as a result⁷⁵.

The exaggerated claims about contribution to the economy (and to Britain's national security) are bolstered by the special relationship between serving senior defence officials and military figures and leading arms companies. Central to this is the rotation of staff between the MoD and the companies that it procures weapons from: 40 per cent of senior military and MoD personnel take roles at arms and security companies after leaving Government employment⁷⁶.

In addition to the waste and irrelevance of the conventional programme, there are the same major issues with the nuclear approach, as discussed in the next section.

MOD Government Major Projects Portfolio Data, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mod-government-major-projects-portfolio-data-2023>. The full extent of the delays to the Astute programme is not known because the government has refused to publish an end date for the programme since 2021.

72 Nuclear Information Service (2024) Major 14-Hour Fire in Barrow Submarine Assembly Hall, 1 November 2024, <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/article/major-14-hour-fire-in-barrow-submarine-assembly-hall/>

73 Navylookout (2023) Why Are No Royal Navy Attack Submarines at Sea?, 29 August 2023, <https://www.navylookout.com/why-are-no-royal-navy-attack-submarines-at-sea/>

74 Ministry of Defence (2024) MOD trade, industry and contracts: 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/mod-trade-industry-and-contracts-2024/mod-trade-industry-and-contracts-2024>

75 See Khem Rogaly (2023) The Asset Manager Arsenal: Who Owns the UK Arms Industry?, Common Wealth, <https://www.common-wealth.org/publications/the-asset-manager-arsenal-who-owns-the-uk-arms-industry> and Khem Rogaly (2023) Welfare to Arms: Shareholder Payouts in the Arms Industry Since 2010, Common Wealth, <https://www.common-wealth.org/publications/welfare-to-arms>.

76 Sam Perlo-Freeman (2024) From revolving door to open-plan office: the ever-closer union between the UK government and the arms industry, CAAT, <https://caat.org.uk/publications/from-revolving-door-to-open-plan-office-the-ever-closer-union-between-the-uk-government-and-the-arms-industry/>

SECTION 5

Nuclear Weapons

UK defence doctrine typically ascribes a special status to nuclear weapons. The 2023 Integrated Review Refresh described them as '[t]he foundational component of an integrated approach to deterrence and defence'⁷⁷, and the 2024 Nuclear Enterprise Command Paper claimed they are the 'cornerstone of our national security'⁷⁸. This belief enables a budget-setting approach that treats spending on nuclear weapons as untouchable. In recent years, not only have other Government departments been cut while military spending rose, but the increasing costs of nuclear weapons have also begun to threaten other MoD budgets⁷⁹. Over the past five years, UK expenditure on its nuclear weapons programme has increased by 43 per cent⁸⁰. The National Audit Office warns that the cost to replace the UK's nuclear arsenal will rise by more than £99 billion over the coming decade. The UK is in the midst of a longstanding project to upgrade every element of its nuclear weapons platform: submarines, warheads, missiles and supporting infrastructure. The Dreadnought submarine programme began in the early 2000s and entered its main production phase in 2016⁸¹. A life extension programme for the Trident missiles used by both the UK and US began to deliver updated missiles in 2017⁸², and a further life extension is planned⁸³. In 2020, the UK's plan to design a new nuclear warhead, its first since the end of the Cold War, was announced in the US congress⁸⁴. An embarrassed UK Government released a parliamentary statement 12 days later⁸⁵. Numerous infrastructure projects to support these upgrade projects are at various stages of completion, and many more appear to be planned.

The planned in-service date for the Dreadnought submarines has been moved back around a decade, from the initial date of 2024, while the original estimated cost of £15–20 billion for

⁷⁷ UK Government (2023) Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/641d72f45155a2000c6ad5d5>

[/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/641d72f45155a2000c6ad5d5/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf)

⁷⁸ Ministry of Defence (2023) Delivering the UK's Nuclear Deterrent as a National Endeavour, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6622702b49db8813ba7e576/Defence_Nuclear_Enterprise_Command_Paper_v6.pdf

⁷⁹ David Cullen (2023) Spiralling Nuclear Costs Make the MOD's Equipment Plan Unsustainable, Nuclear Information Service, <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/comment/2023/12/spiralling-nuclear-costs-make-the-mods-equipment-plan-unsustainable/>

⁸⁰ International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons www.icanw.org/ (2024), Surge: 2023 Global nuclear weapons spending, June 2024 https://assets.nationbuilder.com/ican/pages/4079/attachments/original/1718371132/Spending_Report_2024_Singles_Digital.pdf From 2019–23, US nuclear spending increased by \$16.1 billion (45%), UK increased by \$2.4 billion (43%).

⁸¹ Claire Mills (2024) Replacing the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: Progress of the Dreadnought Class, House of Commons Library, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/>

the submarines has increased to £32 billion, plus a £10 billion contingency⁸⁶. At present, the Government line is that the first submarine, HMS Dreadnought, will come into service in the 'early 2030s'.

Delays to the Dreadnought programme increase the pressure on the current Vanguard-class fleet, which has struggled to maintain patrols in recent years. For most of the period that the UK has operated nuclear-armed submarines, standard patrols have been three months long. However, many recent patrols have been closer to six months⁸⁷, due to the repair time required on the Vanguard submarines between patrols. The Vanguard class have now all been at sea longer than their originally planned 25-year life and are likely to be kept in service for 37 years or more⁸⁸, even if there is no delay to the Dreadnought programme. According to the National Audit Office, the Ministry of Defence is prioritising the Dreadnought delivery timetable 'over immediate cost constraints'⁸⁹, but there is no guarantee that this disavowal of budgetary restraint will keep the project on track. The most recent update on progress at the Rolls-Royce site which will produce the nuclear reactors that will power the Dreadnought submarines suggested that delays there were also likely and could affect the submarine delivery timetable⁹⁰.

The programme to build the UK's new nuclear warhead, which will be called Astrea⁹¹, is described as a 'parallel project' to a new US warhead, the W93. In practice, this means the two warheads will likely be very close in design, and the evidence suggests that they may be substantially larger in terms of destructive power than the current UK warhead⁹². The Astrea warhead and W93 will be compatible with Trident missiles and submarines. The Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) was brought back under Government control in 2021 as an arms-length body, following poor performance by the private contractors who previously ran it⁹³. AWE will build the new warhead and is planning a substantial infrastructure programme⁹⁴. The full scope of this infrastructure programme has not yet been made public, but there have been substantial problems in previous infrastructure projects at AWE that were supposed to lay the groundwork for the new warhead.

The UK's ageing Trident submarines have been beset by technical problems that have questioned the viability of the 'Continuous at Sea Deterrent'. In recent tests, Trident

[documents/CBP-8010/CBP-8010.pdf](#)

82 Lockheed Martin (2028) Modernized Lockheed Martin Trident II D5 Missile Test Certifies Submarine for Patrol, <https://news.lockheedmartin.com/2018-03-28-Modernized-Lockheed-Martin-Trident-II-D5-Missile-Test-Certifies-Submarine-for-Patrol>

83 David Cullen (2022) Extreme Circumstances: The UK's New Nuclear Warhead in Context, Nuclear Information Service, <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Extreme-Circumstances-print-version.pdf>

84 Jamie Doward (2020) Pentagon Reveals Deal with Britain to Replace Trident, The Observer, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/feb/22/pentagon-gaffe-reveals-uk-deal-replace-trident-nuclear-weapon>

85 UK Government (2020), Defence Secretary Announces Programme to Replace the UK's Nuclear Warhead <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-announces-programme-to-replace-the-uks-nuclear-warhead>

86 David Cullen (2020) Trouble Ahead: Risks and Rising Costs in the UK Nuclear Weapons Programme, Nuclear Information Service, <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Trouble-Ahead-low-resolution-version.pdf>

87 See Dan Sabbagh and Rob Edwards, Safety Fears as UK Trident Submarines Are Put to Sea for Longest-Ever Patrols, The Guardian, 6 Dec 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/dec/06/safety-fears-as-uk-trident-submarines-are-put-to-sea-for-longest-ever-patrols> David Cullen, Extended Patrols: Vanguard Problems Are Here to Stay, Nuclear Information Service, 02.11.2023 <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/comment/2023/11/extended-patrols-vanguard-problems-are-here-to-stay/>

88 Assuming HMS Dreadnought comes into service in 2033, that each subsequent Dreadnought is launched at two-year intervals after that, and each Vanguard submarine leaves service

missiles have misfired. Former top civil servant at the MoD, Jon Thompson, told MPs that Trident was ‘the single biggest future financial risk we face’. Overall, Trident has been predicted to cost a total of more than £200 billion over a 30-year lifespan⁹⁵. In 2021, the Government broke with a decades-long trend of reducing the size of its nuclear warhead stockpile, scrapping a planned reduction to 180 warheads, and instead increasing the stockpile to 260⁹⁶. Given the challenges facing the nuclear upgrade programmes, and the current submarine fleet, it is quite possible that the next change to the UK’s nuclear posture will be forced on the Government by technical necessity, if maintaining patrols becomes unsustainable.

three years before it is replaced in the fleet by a Dreadnought submarine.

89 National Audit Office (2023) The Equipment Plan 2023–2033 <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/The-Equipment-Plan-20232033.pdf>

90 UK Government (2023) MOD Government Major Projects Portfolio Data, 2023 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mod-government-major-projects-portfolio-data-2023>

91 Nuclear Information Service (2024) Astraea: New Warhead Named in Defence Command Paper, <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/article/astraea-new-warhead-named-in-defence-command-paper/>

92 Nuclear Information Service (2022) Extreme Circumstances: The UK’s New Nuclear Warhead in Context <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Extreme-Circumstances-print-version.pdf>

93 Nuclear Information Service (2021) AWE Becomes a Non-Departmental Public Body, <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/article/awe-becomes-public-body/>

94 AWE (2024) AWE Launches Prior Information Notice to Begin Market Engagement for Its Future Materials Campus Programme, <https://www.awe.co.uk/2024/12/awe-launches-prior-information-notice-to-begin-market-engagement-for-its-future-materials-campus-programme/>

95 Andrew Chuter (2015) Nuclear Sub Project Poses UK’s Biggest Financial Challenge <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2015/10/15/nuclear-sub-project-poses-uk-s-biggest-financial-challenge/>

96 David Cullen (2022) Extreme Circumstances: The UK’s New Nuclear Warhead in Context, Nuclear Information Service <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Extreme-Circumstances-print-version.pdf>

SECTION 6

The Growth and Jobs Myths

On 24th January 2025, UK Defence Secretary John Healey announced a £9 billion contract with Rolls-Royce for nuclear submarines, claiming it would boost jobs, growth, and the nuclear deterrent, with over 1,000 new jobs created. He stated, 'defence is an engine of growth in this country'⁹⁷. The Government has made clear it sees defence as central to its growth strategy both through its Industrial Strategy Green Paper⁹⁸, and Defence Industrial Strategy Statement of Intent⁹⁹. Both cite trade unions as key partners in developing these strategies. However, the claim that defence contributes significantly to the UK's economic growth is misleading. Arms sales make up just 0.004% of the Treasury's total revenue, and the defence industrial sector accounts for only 1% of the UK's economic output. Although one study suggests a minor correlation between high military expenditure and economic growth in the UK¹⁰⁰, other 'long-period' correlations fail to show any positive linkages¹⁰¹. The defence sector is highly concentrated¹⁰², with 44% of Government contracts awarded non-competitively, and small and medium-sized firms securing just 5% of orders. This monopoly structure means much of the supposed 'growth' is captured by a small number of large firms, not the wider economy¹⁰³.

Furthermore, much of the profit generated by the defence sector is not reinvested in the UK. The defence sector's biggest firm, BAE Systems, is effectively a joint US and UK company. A near majority of its capital, as a company, is invested in the US and the majority of its major shareholders are US investment companies, BlackRock being the biggest. It has, by far, the

⁹⁷ John Healey, BBC Radio 4 Today, 24 January 2025 (from 08:27:16)

⁹⁸ UK Government (2024) Department for Business & Trade, Invest 2035: the UK's modern industrial strategy, 24 Nov, Partnerships and institutions <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/invest-2035-the-uks-modern-industrial-strategy/invest-2035-the-uks-modern-industrial-strategy#partnerships-and-institutions>

⁹⁹ UK Government (2024) Ministry of Defence, The new partnership with industry and workers, 2 December 2024 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-industrial-strategy-statement-of-intent/defence-industrial-strategy-statement-of-intent#the-new-partnership-with-industry-and-workers>

¹⁰⁰ Dimitros Dimitrou et al. (2024) Military expenditure and economic growth: evidence from NATO and non-NATO alliances, Defence and Peace Economics, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10242694.2024.2346860>

[10242694.2024.2346860](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10242694.2024.2346860)

highest footprint of state–corporate lobbying in the UK and follows a similar path in the US. It has also been found guilty, more than once, of large–scale corporate bribery to secure contracts. Similarly, Britain’s second biggest military company, Rolls–Royce, was fined £600m in 2017 – while the auditors of Babcock, the third biggest, was heavily fined for accounting irregularities in 2023¹⁰⁴. Structures of ownership in armaments, in which short–term investment companies dominate, also closely match those which Andrew Haldane, among others, has identified as one of the major causes of Britain’s dangerously low levels of investment and productivity¹⁰⁵. High profits are extracted but not reinvested. In short, military expenditure does little to foster long–term economic growth.

The myth of defence as a jobs engine is similarly distorted. Currently, the number of workers employed in the defence sector is around five per cent of the total in manufacturing and only 0.6 per cent of those in full–time work in the UK¹⁰⁶. Defence employment tends to be regionally very concentrated¹⁰⁷ with 31.1 per cent of jobs being in the north–west of England. For towns like Barrow in Furness, where BAE employs 9,500 workers, defence jobs are seen as crucial to the local economy¹⁰⁸. However, this dependence on military contracts is risky. Historically, Barrow’s shipyard was a diversified business, but as naval shipbuilding took precedence in the 1960s, it became increasingly reliant on fluctuating defence contracts. While the yard undertook naval shipbuilding contracts, its most profitable division was a mechanical engineering works that produced diesel engines for British Rail¹⁰⁹. The decision starting later that decade to prioritise naval shipbuilding over the civilian engineering and cement divisions carried significant risks for workers in the long term. By 2006, nearly three–quarters of jobs had been lost as the Vanguard–class nuclear submarine contract ended.

The strategy of relying on BAE Systems to protect jobs in Barrow has comprehensively failed the working class of Barrow, and South Cumbria. In reality, increasing demand for advanced military equipment, such as the Airbus A400M Atlas military transport aircraft or Type 45 naval destroyers, did not significantly boost numbers of directly employed workers, but rather increased sub–contracting in the global supply chain, which is less well unionised.

101 Jordan Becker and J. Paul Dunne, ‘Military spending composition and economic growth’, Defence and Peace Economics, 2023/3 and, in the same issue, Lugman Saeed, ‘Impact of military expenditure on economic growth’. However, these also fail to cover the most recent period of fast expansion in military spending.

102 UK Government (2024) Ministry of Defence: Trade, Industry and Contracts, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/mod-trade-industry-and-contracts-2024/mod-trade-industry-and-contracts-2024>

103 Keith Hartley and Jean Belen (eds) (2020) Economics of the Global Defence Industry, Routledge

104 Rhona Michie ed. (2024) Monstrous Anger of the Guns, Shadow World Investigations

105 Andrew Haldane (chair), Industrial Strategy Council Annual Report, 2021

106 ADS and ONS, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/fulltimeparttimeandtemporaryworkersseasonallyadjustedemp01sa>

107 Briefing issued by the Ministry of Defence, 30 April 2024

108 Oxford Economics (2023) ‘BAE Systems’ Contribution to the UK Economy’, <https://www.baesystems.com/en-uk/our-contribution-to-the-uk-and-its-regions>

109 Maggie Mort and Graham Spinardi (2010) Defence and the decline of UK mechanical engineering: the case of Vickers at Barrow, Business History, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00076790412331270099>

The UK's rapid deindustrialisation, which saw the steepest decline in manufacturing jobs among G7 countries between 1962 and 2008, has left former industrial regions struggling with job losses. Military contracts are often seen as the last source of manufacturing jobs in these areas. However, deindustrialisation resulted not only from shifts in production, but also from failed economic policies that subsidised multinational companies in low-paid service industries, replacing well-paid, unionised manufacturing jobs. In towns like Mansfield and Corby, Government efforts to attract investment through land selloffs, enterprise zones, and subsidies led to reliance on insecure, exploitative work in sectors like distribution and care¹¹⁰.

Given that defence dependent regions already rely on Government contracts to sustain private sector work, existing state resources could be redeployed to manage a transition to alternative manufacturing sectors. The use of civilian procurement to replace military contracts is one means by which manufacturing sites can be repurposed – just as the Barrow shipyard previously produced goods for British Rail¹¹¹. As with other Just Transition plans, a wider set of interventions would be necessary: from localised investment in retraining and wage guarantees to introduction of sectoral bargaining and the repeal of anti-trade union laws¹¹².

There are many areas of investment for jobs that could take the place of defence investment. In addition to green jobs¹¹³ the country needs more houses – as well as the retrofitting of existing stock. It requires local food production, to bring down prices for the many who cannot afford it. Investment is also urgently needed in public services: health, education and transport have all been undermined by years of neglect. The drive to increase UK military expenditure is occurring at a time when the country's foundational economy is in severe distress. New analysis by the Health Foundation's REAL Centre projects a potential £38 billion shortfall in the funding needed to improve the NHS by the end of the next parliament¹¹⁴. Similarly, two million older people now have some unmet need for social care¹¹⁵ and 8.5 million people (including two million children) in England are facing some form of unmet housing need¹¹⁶. In education, substantial spending cuts are anticipated in 2026–28¹¹⁷. Meeting these needs might seem both economically and politically unattainable – until it is remembered that

110 Maggie Mort and Graham Spinardi (2010) Defence and the decline of UK mechanical engineering: the case of Vickers at Barrow, Business History, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00076790412331270099>

111 Khem Rogaly (2024) A Lucas Plan for the Twenty First Century: From Asset Manager Arsenal to Green Industrial Strategy, Common Wealth, <https://www.common-wealth.org/publications/a-lucas-plan-for-the-twenty-first-century-from-asset-manager-arsenal-to-green-industrial-strategy>

112 Mijin Cha, Vivian Price, Dimitris Stevis et al. (2021) Workers and Communities in Transition: Report of the Just Transition Listening Project, Labor Network Sustainability, <https://www.labor4sustainability.org>

113 ONS currently define green jobs as 'employment in an activity that contributes to protecting or restoring the environment, including those that mitigate or adapt to climate change' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/experimentalestimatesofgreenjobsuk>

[/2023](#)

114 THF (2024) How much funding does the NHS need over the next decade? <https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/briefings/how-much-funding-does-the-nhs-need-over-the-next-decade>

115 Chloe Reeves, Aisha Islam, Tom Gentry (2024), Age UK: State of Health and Social Care, https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/health--wellbeing/state-of-health-and-care/state_of_health_and_social_care_24.pdf

116 National Housing Federation (2021) People in housing need, the scale and shape of housing need in England, <https://www.housing.org.uk/globalassets/files/people-in-housing-need/people-in-housing-need-2021.pdf>

considerably greater levels of industrial retooling and social reorganisation took place very quickly after 1945 and that the resources currently allocated to the defence sector could be redirected to meet these challenges¹¹⁸. However, Government plans are in the opposite direction: more defence employment not less. Here the wage premium in defence will directly affect *existing* jobs in the public sector. For each additional worker employed in defence, other jobs will be lost in the public sector, including in education and health.

Modelling of the employment impacts of Government spending in the US and continental Europe indicates that public spending on solar, wind, environmental protection and education creates more jobs than military contracts. If complemented by place-specific industrial repurposing plans and protections for workers, the redeployment of the military budget can increase rather than diminish economic security, as discussed in the next section.

¹¹⁷ Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (2023) What is happening to school funding and costs in England? <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/what-happening-school-funding-and-costs-england>

¹¹⁸ Stuart Parkinson (2024) 'Militarism and the Climate Emergency', in the Monstrous Anger of the Guns, ed. Rhona Michie, Pluto

SECTION 7

Defence Diversification and Just Transition

‘Defence diversification’ is a framework that seeks to reorient resources, technologies, and the labour associated with military production towards peaceful, sustainable, and socially beneficial purposes¹¹⁹. Sometimes called ‘arms conversion’ or ‘transitioning to socially useful production’, defence diversification challenges orthodox notions of national security that prioritise military preparedness. Its key premises include a security framework based on addressing economic precarity, environmental degradation and social inequality, economic restructuring and technological repurposing¹²⁰. Defence diversification views military industries as economic engines that can be reoriented to address climate change and deprivation, particularly underscoring the global arms trade’s present role in perpetuating conflict and inequality.

Historically, examples of defence diversification have emerged sporadically. For example, following the height of the Cold War, several countries, including the US, the UK, and the USSR, attempted to repurpose elements of armaments industries as military budgets shrank. In the UK during the 1970s, left-wing Labour Party members pursued arms conversion by setting up a defence study group in 1974 and publishing a report, ‘Sense about Defence’¹²¹. Although their report was rejected by the 1974 Labour Government, it remains the most comprehensive

¹¹⁹ Karen Bell et al. (2022) Decarbonising and Diversifying Defence in the US and the UK: A Workers’ Enquiry for a Just Transition: Summary Report, British Academy, London

¹²⁰ Karen Bell et al. (2022) Decarbonising and Diversifying Defence in the US and the UK: A Workers’ Enquiry for a Just Transition: Summary Report, British Academy, London, <https://www.decarbonising-defence.co.uk>

¹²¹ Labour Party (1977) Sense about defence: The report of the Labour Party Study Group, Quartet

statement on industrial conversion and diversification in the UK to date. The report included lists of alternative technologies to which defence industry workers could apply their expertise, from renewable energy to civilian transport¹²². At the same time, shop stewards' combines at Lucas Aerospace and Vickers put forward proposals for diversification into socially useful production but were opposed both by their management and trade unions¹²³.

After 18 years of Conservative rule, Labour returned to power in 1997. Their 1997 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) was largely seen as a continuation of the Conservative approach. However, alternative perspectives within the Labour movement, particularly from the Transport and General Workers' Union (T&GWU), argued for a shift in policy. In early 1997, the T&GWU published 'Arms Conversion', calling on the Government to use the post-Cold War context to transition defence jobs into socially useful production. With the reduction in military spending, there was a clear opportunity to diversify jobs into other skilled, essential sectors, rather than simply destroying manufacturing jobs and losing valuable skills.

Former T&GWU general secretary, Bill Morris, criticized the failure to seize this opportunity, noting, 'Rather than use the decline in military orders for more socially useful production, the defence industry contracted, leaving many workers unemployed'¹²⁴. He placed much of the blame on the Conservative Government's short-sighted procurement strategies, which increased military dependency while eroding skilled jobs. Morris argued that diversification would not only benefit defence workers but also strengthen British manufacturing and the wider economy and society.

The T&GWU's 1997 'Arms Conversion' report focused on the potential for positive change in the industry, given Labour's commitment to a Defence Diversification Agency (DDA), which 'should put defence diversification at the heart of industrial policy'. In the event, the 1997 Labour Government's commitment to a DDA was negligible. Whilst the SDR established a DDA, it was located within the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) with a focus on technology transfer between military and civilian firms and included no conversion work at all. In 2001, Vince Cable MP put down an EDM in Parliament, urging the Government to re-establish the DDA within the Department of Trade and

122 Karen Bell et al. (2023) Converting the US and UK Defence Sector to Civil Production: The Views of Defence Workers, Peace and Change, 49(2): 101-123, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pech.12648>. Karen Bell et al. (2023) The Necessity of a Transformational Approach to Just Transition: Defence Worker Views on Decarbonisation, Diversification and Sustainability, Environmental Politics, 3(2): 281-301, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09644016.2023.2199661>

123 Hilary Wainwright and Dave Elliott (1982) The Lucas Plan: a new trade unionism in the making? London: Allison and Busby

124 Bill Morris (1997) Arms Conversion, Transport and General Workers' Union

Industry ‘where it could be fully involved in the development of manufacturing strategy’.

Instead, that same year the Government spilt DERA in two – part remaining with the Ministry of Defence as the Defence Science & Technology Laboratory, and the remainder, including the DDA, becoming part of the newly formed QinetiQ, which became a public private partnership in 2002, with part-purchase by Carlyle Group, a US-based private equity company. The DDA subsequently faded out of existence.

More recently, there have been calls for a UK Government DDA to provide coordination, assistance and funding to diversification. These calls drew support from Unite the union and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) (see the Trade Union Action section of this document). Although few examples exist of comprehensive attempts at arms diversification, some examples of non-military production exist within the defence industry. For example, at least four UK naval shipyards – on the Forth, Lagan, Tyne and Mersey – are currently involved in production for the offshore wind sector¹²⁵.

Some now call for a Just Transition for defence workers. The term ‘Just Transition’ was originally developed by trade unions to highlight the equity and justice challenges associated with ecological sustainability¹²⁶. In a review of Just Transition policy and practice in 27 OECD countries¹²⁷, it was noted that interpretations of Just Transition span ‘jobs-focused’, ‘environment-focused’, and ‘society-focused’ models. The ‘jobs-focused’ interpretation, the primary model for labour unions, advocates for the workers and communities impacted by environmental and climate policies. The ‘environment-focused’ interpretation focuses on examining production and consumption patterns. The ‘society-focused’ interpretation tends to be the broadest, considering a Just Transition as a means to improve the lives of workers and their communities, as well as to address the problems of society as a whole, advocating for system transformation.

One key challenge for a Just Transition is the lack of similarly lucrative and secure jobs available to replace those lost due to climate measures¹²⁸. Individual losses in wages and security for workers have ripple effects across communities. Yet policies to support communities through a Just Transition are not always

¹²⁵ Khem Rogaly (2024) A Lucas Plan for the Twenty First Century From Asset Manager Arsenal to Green Industrial Strategy, Common Wealth, <https://www.common-wealth.org/publications/a-lucas-plan-for-the-twenty-first-century-from-asset-manager-arsenal-to-green-industrial-strategy>

¹²⁶ Stevis, D., Kraus, D. and Morena, E. (2020) ‘Introduction: The genealogy and contemporary politics of just transitions’ In Just Transitions: Social Justice in the Shift Towards a Low-Carbon World, edited by Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause and Dimitris Stevis, 1–31. London: Pluto Press.

¹²⁷ Tamara Krawchenko and Megan Gordon (2021) How do we manage a Just Transition? A comparative review of national and regional Just Transition initiatives. Sustainability, <https://justtransitionforall.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/sustainability-13-06070-v2.pdf>

¹²⁸ JTC (2020) Just Transitions: a comparative perspective, Just Transition Commission, Scotland <https://www.gov.scot/publications/transitions-comparative-perspective>

evident – there can be the assumption that workers are mobile and can move to seek new employment.

In 2022 research with defence sector workers in the UK and US, Bell and colleagues¹²⁹ found that there were worker concerns regarding a Just Transition in relation to (1) pay, which is usually better in the defence sector than in the ‘green’ sector or other manufacturing work; (2) attachment to defence jobs, with workers generally attributing their work as necessary for the country; (3) maintaining quality requirements for the military, which tends to be higher than that of civil sectors; (4) trust – the need to demonstrate that good jobs will be part of this transition. It was noted that workers not only focused on their own jobs but also took into consideration the wider issues pertaining to their sector.

For a transition to be successful, two approaches are necessary. First, the transition process must be managed at specific production sites to ensure that workers can move to jobs with the same or better terms and conditions in their local areas. Second, a wider social investment is needed to support communities more broadly through the transition.

The place-specific part of the transition requires state support to ensure that sites can be repurposed and that there is sustained demand for new products¹³⁰. This transition can be encouraged through public procurement and, as Unite the Union proposed in 2016¹³¹, a statutory duty for MoD suppliers to consider diversification. Military industrial sites are somewhat unique in the manufacturing sector because they operate as suppliers to the Government rather than a mass market. This means that a shift in Government demand can facilitate the repurposing of sites, building on close adjacencies in the skills base – for instance between naval shipbuilding, offshore energy and public transport production¹³².

To facilitate a Just Transition, a wider reallocation of resources will also be necessary to ensure that benefits flow to defence-dependent communities rather than just workers directly involved in military production. This means investment in the UK’s social infrastructure. Governments and international agencies such as the IMF generally focus on investment in terms of physical projects, but social investments are urgently needed too. This includes investment to produce

129 Karen Bell et al. (2022) ‘Decarbonising and Diversifying Defence in the US and the UK: A Workers’ Enquiry for a Just Transition: Summary Report’ British Academy, London, <https://www.decarbonising-defence.co.uk>

130 Khem Rogaly (2024) A Lucas Plan for the Twenty First Century From Asset Manager Arsenal to Green Industrial Strategy, Common Wealth, <https://www.common-wealth.org/publications/a-lucas-plan-for-the-twenty-first-century-from-asset-manager-arsenal-to-green-industrial-strategy>.

131 Unite (2016) Defence diversification revisited, <https://www.unitetheunion.org/media/1108/unite-diversification-revisited.pdf>

132 Khem Rogaly (2024) A Lucas Plan for the Twenty First Century From Asset Manager Arsenal to Green Industrial Strategy, Common Wealth, <https://www.common-wealth.org/publications/a-lucas-plan-for-the-twenty-first-century-from-asset-manager-arsenal-to-green-industrial-strategy>.

economic benefits as well as equality and social justice outcomes. Investment in the care economy, for instance, would create jobs to meet demand across the country¹³³ with many of these jobs taken by women, thereby contributing to reducing the gender employment gap. Investments in the UK care sector would, of course, need to be accompanied by a strategic approach to improving pay and conditions, career structures and training.

A Just Transition from military production to socially useful and sustainable industries must therefore be about more than simply moving workers between jobs. It requires a broader economic vision—one that centres social justice, environmental responsibility, and regional resilience. By aligning industrial policy with community needs and environmental goals, the UK can begin to shift from a destructive economy to one that genuinely supports human and planetary wellbeing.

133 Jerome De Henau and Susan Himmelweit (2020) The gendered employment gains of investing in social vs. Physical infrastructure: evidence from simulations across seven OECD countries, Open University: IKD Working Paper No 84, <https://university.open.ac.uk/ikd/publications/working-papers/84>

SECTION 8

Trade Union Action

Questions of peace, international diplomacy and treaties including arms control, nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament defence strategy are central concerns for trade unions and trade unionists. In times of war, the principle of solidarity across national borders has been inspired by the understanding that 'a bayonet is a weapon with a worker at both ends'.

Public investment and strategic economic, social and environmental policies are all impacted by state expenditure on arms research, development and manufacturing – where the resulting technologies and materials are largely unusable outside the context of war. Because of the debates around growth, jobs and public spending in relation to defence, trade unions have necessarily been drawn into political debate on arms expenditure. Frank Cousins, general secretary from 1956 to 1969 of the Transport & General Workers' Union (T&GWU, today part of Unite the Union) from 1956 to 1969, famously told his union's conference in 1957 that separating trade unionism and politics was a 'false distinction'. In 1959, the T&GWU biennial conference adopted a position of opposition to British use of the atomic bomb, arguing that basing a defence policy on the threat to use nuclear weapons was 'morally wrong, militarily dangerous and economically unsound'¹³⁴. Cousins personally supported the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament from its inception in 1958. The popular opposition to the Conservative Government's nuclear policy in the 1950s was expressed not only through protest marches, but also in the labour and trade union movement.

In 1959, the General & Municipal Workers' Union (today GMB) voted for unilateral nuclear disarmament at the union's annual conference, a decision hurriedly reversed at a 'Special Conference' held a month later. In the 1960s, USDAW

¹³⁴ Geoffrey Goodman (1979) *The Awkward Warrior, Frank Cousins: His Life and Times*, Davis-Poynter: 200–234

(Shopworkers), NUR (Rail workers, today RMT), NUM (Miners) and AEU (Engineers, today part of Unite) followed the T&GWU by voting for unilateral nuclear disarmament at their union annual conferences. At the 1960 Labour Party Conference in Scarborough, a motion from the AEU calling for unilateral nuclear disarmament was carried overwhelmingly and a motion from the T&GWU explicitly demanding an end to any defence policy based on nuclear weapons passed by a smaller majority.

Debates that polarised labour movement politics from the late 1950s are being played out again years later. In 2017, the TUC Congress called on Labour to set up a Shadow Defence Diversification Agency (DDA) and develop a national industrial strategy including arms conversion¹³⁵. At this gathering, Motion 17 (Defence, jobs and diversification) initiated by Newcastle Trades Council recalled the 1976 'Lucas Plan'¹³⁶, describing it as a 'pioneering effort by workers at arms company Lucas Aerospace to retain jobs by proposing alternative, socially useful applications of the company's technology and their own skills' and noting 'in the four decades since the Plan was drawn up Britain's manufacturing industry has shrunk from 25 per cent to 14 per cent of GDP, with the 'defence' industry now representing 10 per cent of all manufacturing'.

The motion acknowledged workers 'are rightly concerned about potential loss of jobs, for example if Trident replacement is cancelled'. Unite supported the motion and endorsed a DDA at its Policy Conference on 2 July 2018 with an Executive Statement on 'Defence and Defence Diversification'. In November 2018, the Labour Regional Conference in Northwest England, where many arms industry jobs are based, backed the creation of a shadow DDA and called for discussions with shadow Ministers, unions and businesses about its development. However, with the Labour's change of leadership in 2019, the DDA dropped off the agenda.

In September 2021, following the announcement by the Johnson Government of the AUKUS pact, pressure intensified to reverse trade union support for a national industrial strategy that included arms conversion and defence diversification. TUC's 2022 Congress narrowly agreed a GMB motion (*Economic recovery and manufacturing jobs*¹³⁷) which argued, '...the 1990s submarine order gap, which led to catastrophic losses in jobs and skills, must never be repeated ... there is

135 Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Steward Committee (1976) Corporate Plan: A contingency strategy as a positive alternative to recession and redundancies, <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/htcs9tbnnktkuwd/Lucas-Plan-53pp-alternative-corporate-plan.pdf>; see also Story of the Lucas Plan by Brian Salisbury, former member of Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards Combine Committee <https://lucasplan.org.uk/story-of-the-lucas-plan/>

136 Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Steward Committee (1976) Corporate Plan: A contingency strategy as a positive alternative to recession and redundancies, <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/htcs9tbnnktkuwd/Lucas-Plan-53pp-alternative-corporate-plan.pdf>

137 Economic recovery and manufacturing jobs, TUC Congress 2022, Composite Motion 02 <https://congress.tuc.org.uk/motion-04-defending-manufacturing-jobs/#sthash.qnxpHtVj.dpbs>

welcome potential for manufacturing orders under the Aukus agreement' and concluded 'Congress believes that the world is becoming less safe, and the policy carried in 2017 in favour of diversifying away from defence manufacturing is no longer fit for purpose'.

The motion called on the TUC to support 'immediate increases in defence spending in the UK' and 'demand a 30-year pipeline of defence work, including the Astute and Dreadnought programmes that are essential to jobs at BAE Systems in Barrow and Rolls-Royce in Derby'.

This reversal of TUC policy of defence diversification – and the reversal of its opposition to Trident replacement via support for the Dreadnought programme – has been supported by all principal unions in the supply chain, including GMB, Unite and Prospect, but this has not taken place without opposition. In 2024, the Scottish TUC General Council's statement on Military Spending¹³⁸ explained,

“... the General Council does not support further expansion in military spending, recognising that the UK already spends over 2.1% of GDP on defence, exceeding its NATO commitments. We recognise that further increases in public spending on defence could be at the expense of spending on public services at a UK level with potential impacts in Scotland. We recommit ourselves to supporting international policy positions which, if enacted in good faith, would see UK and world defence spending decrease in the medium to longer-term.

138 STUC General Council Statement 2024 – Military Spending, <https://www.stuc.org.uk/news/congress2024/general-council-statement---military-spending/>

The STUC argued that defence workers' skills are crucial to achieving a Just Transition to net zero and called for 'creation of a Scottish Defence Diversification Agency' to publicly fund our energy, heat, and transport transitions, pointing out that a Just Transition through defence diversification is inherently a green transition.

A transition of the defence sector would mean worker dialogue with all options open, including a discussion of arms conversion to socially useful production. It would require including the perspectives of workers in the Global South who supply the UK defence sector and, in some cases, have suffered the impacts of our wars and colonialism.

In 2024, the RMT union declared at its Annual General Meeting 'Peace is a Labour Movement Issue', noting the permanent state of armed conflict in which Britain has actively participated and the increasing danger of armed conflict between nuclear powers. RMT argues that the best traditions of trade unionism include working for peace, and that there is no contradiction with defending good jobs and working conditions. The union committed to reiterate and strengthen support for organisations campaigning for peace globally and in Britain; to convene a labour and peace movement summit to work for a new foreign policy with promotion of peace and social justice at its heart; and to campaign for socially useful, well paid, unionised jobs including a commitment to build a campaign for defence diversification based on the principles of Just Transition.

Trade unions have a critical role to play in resisting the current trend towards militarisation and as advocates for an economy that prioritises social welfare over war profiteering. By mobilising workers against defence contracts that fuel conflict and pushing instead for investment in green jobs, public services, and international solidarity, the labour movement can help build a more just and peaceful society with sustainable union jobs at its core. Organising around conversion of the arms industry towards socially useful production is not only a necessary economic strategy, but an imperative for the achievement of a non-militarist defence approach.

Conclusion

The dominant war narrative has been supported by powerful societal institutions – most politicians, the military and the mainstream media. In response, this Alternative Defence Review advocates for a genuinely open public debate on the UK's increasing militarisation, alongside stronger scrutiny and democratic accountability.

The ongoing war in Gaza serves as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences of militarisation. The UK's continued arms sales and political support for Israel's military actions—including the provision of components used in attacks on civilian infrastructure—contradict its stated commitment to peace, human rights, and international law. Similarly, the UK's arms exports to authoritarian regimes in the Gulf region, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, contribute to human rights abuses and regional instability. These policies entrench violence, prolong conflict, and undermine the UK's moral and diplomatic credibility.

A truly ethical defence strategy must centre on the principle of 'common security'—that no nation can achieve genuine safety at the expense of another. This is inseparable from a broader vision of 'human security', which prioritises the needs, rights, and dignity of individuals over military dominance. Together, these principles offer a foundation for a peaceful international order based on cooperation, justice, and mutual well-being. To achieve this we must prioritise ceasefires, humanitarian relief, and long-term conflict resolution, rather than perpetuating cycles of violence through military alliances and arms exports. The urgent need for an alternative approach has never been clearer.

In line with this, we call for a foreign policy that addresses global and national poverty, inequality, health and environmental crises—and invests in the jobs that would accompany this agenda.

WE NEED:

- A. a significant reduction in military expenditure (within a framework of Just Transition)
- B. to fully implement the policies of the United Nations and Global South on climate change
- C. to use our influence to secure speedy resolution of existing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East; and to de-escalate tension in the Pacific
- D. to oppose attempts to create new theatres of military conflict
- E. to immediately halt arms exports to governments engaged in active conflict or serious human rights violations, including Israel and Gulf states

A transition away from militarisation requires a reallocation of resources towards building resilience and security in ways that genuinely protect people's lives. Investment in diplomacy, conflict resolution, and sustainable development will provide long-term stability, as opposed to the short-term, profit-driven motives of the military-industrial complex. If national security is truly about safeguarding the well-being of citizens, then this must be measured in terms of access to healthcare, education, climate justice, and economic stability rather than the capacity to inflict mass destruction. A non-military defence strategy aligns with the urgent need to address existential threats that no amount of weaponry can counteract. Climate change, pandemics, cyber threats, and economic inequality are the defining challenges of the 21st century. Redirecting military spending towards tackling these crises will not only strengthen domestic security but will also position the UK as a global leader in sustainable peacebuilding. We now have the opportunity to lead by example, shifting from an outdated militaristic model to a cooperative, multilateral approach rooted in the principles of international law and human rights.

The alternative we advocate is one rooted in building a sustainable and just economy—one that offers an abundance of decent and socially useful work; funds high-quality public services; rebuilds public infrastructure; invests in socially useful technologies and education; and works actively for international peace and security. The prioritisation of peace over war can no longer be framed as naive or idealistic—it is, in fact, the only rational and sustainable choice for achieving a just and secure future for all.

