



Brexit Britain's security policy: cutting aid to spend on weapons

A string of announcements over the past year have set out Britain's security and defence priorities in the wake of Brexit. These show an emphasis on high tech military equipment such as robotic and nuclear weapons, while the overseas aid budget is slashed and action on climate change remains inadequate. **Dr Stuart Parkinson, SGR**, assesses the situation.

In March, the UK government profoundly changed direction on nuclear weapons – revealing a decision to increase the size of Britain's nuclear weapons stockpile by 44%, ending 30 years of phased reductions since the end of the Cold War. This decision was part of the 'Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy'¹ – many decisions from which had been released months earlier. Key among those was that funding for the military would increase by a total of £24bn over the coming four years.² Adjusting for inflation, this is an average rise of about 10% over the Ministry of Defence's budget for 2019/20 – and represents the largest increase since Britain's participation in the Korean War 70 years ago.³ Conversely, it was also announced that the international aid budget would undergo a huge cut.⁴ These spending decisions and policy changes were a shock to many – especially against the background of a healthcare system and a national economy in crisis due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. To make matters worse, the government also decided that public sector pay would be either frozen or held to small increases because the nation could not afford it.

The focus of the MOD's spending increase is military equipment – with nuclear weapons just one of the systems set to benefit. So which technologies are favoured, and how will that influence science spending? How do these fit within the overall strategy of the UK's military policies following Brexit? And where does this leave policy and funding in other areas essential for global security, such as international development and climate change?

Military technology in the UK

Let's start by looking at the technologies. Details have been given in a Defence Paper published as part of the Integrated Review.⁵ First priority for the new spending are the existing military equipment programmes that are running over-budget. The National Audit Office (NAO), a government spending watchdog, estimated that the MOD's budget shortfall in its equipment budget up until 2025 had been approximately £8.3bn before the new spending announcement (but could be significantly higher).⁶ Since about £7.5bn of the £24bn increase had already been promised in the Conservative Party's 2019 election manifesto – and hence was included in the NAO's spending assessment – this means that at least two-thirds of the spending increase will be swallowed up just trying to keep current plans on track.

Of these plans, the largest is the submarines programme, which includes Britain's nuclear arsenal.⁷ Central to this programme is the manufacture of the new nuclear-armed Dreadnoughts – four vessels which are scheduled to replace the Vanguards, which currently carry Trident nuclear missiles. The replacement is scheduled to begin in the early 2030s, with continuous deployment intended to continue until at least the 2060s. The March announcement means that the target level for the nuclear warhead stockpile in 2025 increases from 180 to 260.⁸ This is a reversal of the previous policy which had led to continuous reductions in the stockpile since the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, the conditions under which the UK might use these weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) have been expanded to include threats from chemical or biological WMDs “or emerging technologies that could have a comparable impact”.⁹

Condemnation of these profound policy changes has been widespread. Of particular note was the response from the UN Secretary General's spokesperson who stated that it breached the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – by which the UK is legally bound.¹⁰ It is also a challenge to the new UN Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons – which entered into force only in January and is supported by over 120 nations, but which the UK rejects.¹¹ As SGR has pointed out since 2008, launching the warheads carried by just one Trident



submarine would be more than enough to cause a catastrophic ‘nuclear winter’ threatening human civilisation as we know it¹² – so it is no surprise that these weapons attract such widespread international opposition.

Another of the UK’s major technology programmes is warships. With the two Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers – the largest ships in British naval history – now complete, construction of other warships is being ramped up. This is planned to include eight Type-26 and five Type-31 frigates – as well as developing new warships, the Type-32 and Fleet Solid Support ships. The intention is that a ‘Carrier Strike Group’ (CSG) will be “permanently available”.¹³ Regular deployment of such a group is planned for the seas around China and India as part of an ‘Indo-Pacific tilt’¹⁴ – very likely to fuel military tensions in the region. Indeed, the first deployment of the CSG began in May. This is in addition to the 20% of Royal Navy ships that are stationed in the Middle East at any one time.¹⁵ These clearly illustrate a core intention of the Integrated Review – a major expansion of military capabilities to ‘project force’ far from the UK – instead of, for example, focusing on protecting national territory.

Another major area is combat planes. Again, the focus on expanding the offensive capabilities of the technology is clear. Not content with completing the deployment of the new long-range F-35 Lightning strike planes and expanding the number of Protector drones – an armed drone with ‘global reach’ – the strategy is then to develop the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) intended to use artificial intelligence and drone technology “to defeat any adversary in air-to-air combat”.¹⁶ Planned spending on this project is £2bn over the next four years.¹⁷

The FCAS illustrates the critical role that the MOD sees for applying emerging technologies to a wide range of military applications. Other new initiatives include:¹⁸

- A ‘National Cyber Force’ whose mission is to “deceive, degrade, deny, disrupt, or destroy targets in and through cyberspace”;
- A ‘Defence Centre for Artificial Intelligence’, carrying out R&D using AI for military purposes; and
- A ‘Space Command’ to “enhance the UK military command and control of the space domain” set up with funding of £1.4bn over 10 years. The first satellites are due to be launched in 2022.¹⁹

Underpinning the development of these new technologies is an extra £375 million a year aimed “to master the new technologies of warfare”.²⁰ The wide range of research areas highlighted is especially concerning: space; cyber; quantum technologies; engineering biology; directed energy weapons; and advanced high-speed missiles.²¹ The Integrated Review talks about the importance of the UK being a “Science and Tech Superpower” but the main area of extra government science spending seems to be military – with repeated references to opportunities that may be derived from ‘dual-use’ research which can be applied to both civilian and military applications.²² Indeed, the new Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA) – being set up with £800 million of public money to back ‘breakthrough technologies’ – has been inspired by the US military body, the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).

The British military’s rapidly growing interest in robotic warfare technologies also gives a clue as to why the government is currently opposing a new UN treaty on lethal autonomous weapons (LAWS). While it claims to object to such weapons, it argues that such a treaty may “stifle innovation” – a high risk position to take.²³

When Boris Johnson announced the new military spending in November, he emphasised his intention for Britain to take a leading role in developing new military technologies.²⁴ He drew on science fiction imagery as he described British soldiers of the future being able to order “a swarm attack by drones” or “paralysing the enemy with cyber weapons”, while “our warships and combat vehicles will carry ‘directed energy weapons’, destroying targets with inexhaustible lasers”. This approach was strongly criticised by peace campaigners. For example, Kate Hudson of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament said, “by... boosting spending on military posturing and weapons systems, he will help increase global tensions and escalate the risk of a new arms race”.²⁵

The over-arching narrative of the Integrated Review is the promotion of a post-Brexit concept of ‘Global Britain’ – but central to this is the UK asserting itself as Western Europe’s most heavily-armed nation, while championing NATO and the country’s role within it. Deploying more forces to other parts of the world – whether it is the oil-rich Middle East, the Polish-Russian border, or off the coast of China – is seen as central to the concept.

Meanwhile – not mentioned in the main Integrated Review paper, but covered in the accompanying Defence paper²⁶ – is the fact that the UK continues to be one of the world’s leading arms exporting nations. Official data – collated by Campaign Against Arms Trade – shows that the government approved export licenses for £5.1bn of military goods in 2019.²⁷ As SGR and our collaborators have discussed before,²⁸ this includes supplying Saudi Arabia with weapons which have been used to carry out war crimes in Yemen. Despite legal action to try to prevent such exports, the British government and arms corporations continue to dodge efforts to hold them to account.

Side-lining a broader approach to security: poverty and the climate crisis

The Integrated Review highlights the importance of measures that help tackle the roots of conflict – such as global poverty, climate change and other environmental degradation. Yet these have not fared as well in the government’s spending plans.

Let’s start by looking at the aid budget. As mentioned earlier, the government announced in November that spending on international development would be slashed. The annual budget will fall from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income.²⁹ Analysis by the Centre for Global Development (CGD) estimates that, in 2021, this will amount to a £4.5bn cut from the 2019 level – a 30% cut.³⁰ Some details of the cuts in the budgets for individual countries and programmes have so far been released^{31,32} – and they show that many of the poorest nations will suffer the most. For example, Yemen is due to receive less than half the previous year’s amount. The CGD analysis looks at the impacts of a range of cuts – for example, cuts in immunisation programmes could lead to as many as 100,000 extra deaths.³³

When the Integrated Review itself was published in March, it stated, “we will return to our commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on development when the fiscal situation allows” – but gave no indication of when that might be.³⁴ Indeed, the reduced priority with which this government views overseas aid is exemplified by the decision, in mid-2020, to merge the Department for International Development (DFID) with the Foreign Office to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The merger decision was widely criticised. For example, Richard Reeve, co-ordinator of the Rethinking Security network, stated that, “Tackling poverty and inequality are crucial steps in reducing insecurity

Figure 1.
UK Government spending, 2020-21 (£bn)

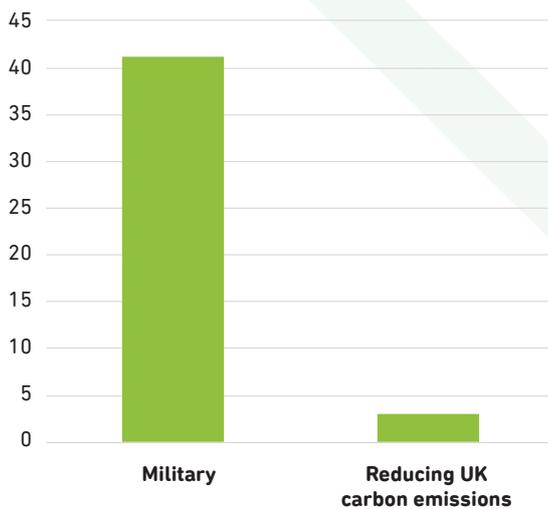
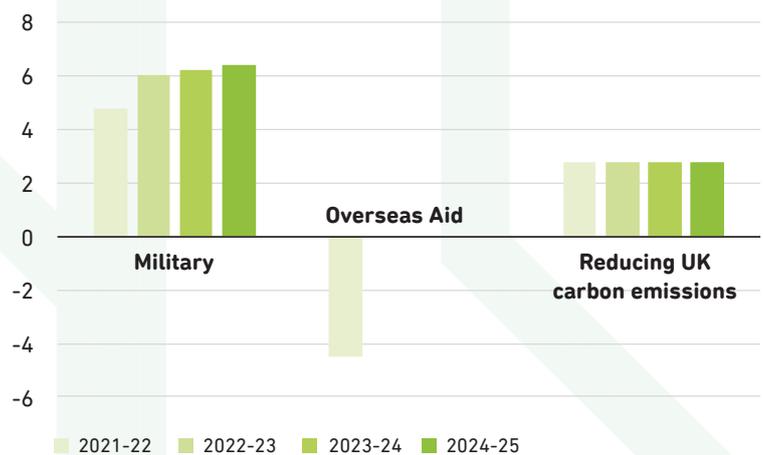


Figure 2.
UK Government spending changes relative to 2020-21 (£bn)



References for these figures are provided in the text.

and conflict. DFID has been world-leading in its focus on conflict prevention; its loss risks aid spending being diverted to narrowly defined security and trade objectives rather than global wellbeing.³⁵

The growing climate crisis is another major source of global insecurity, with leading military figures regarding it as a ‘threat multiplier’.³⁶ The government had already been planning to spend £2.9bn a year on international climate finance between 2021 and 2025 – and this at least seems to have survived the aid budget cuts.³⁷ On a domestic front, the autumn saw the release of a ‘Ten point plan for a green industrial revolution’ aimed at boosting the UK’s efforts to reduce its own carbon emissions.³⁸ The headline figure for this plan was given as £12bn, but SGR analysis³⁹ of the document leads us to conclude there is a maximum of only £11bn during this parliament – so average annual spending of nearly £2.8bn, less than half the increase in the military budget. Closer examination of the plan also reveals that low-cost renewables such as onshore wind and solar photovoltaic farms are excluded, while more speculative and controversial technologies such as ‘advanced nuclear’ and carbon capture, utilisation and storage are to be given hundreds of millions of pounds. Furthermore, efforts to rapidly increase home insulation and domestic low carbon technologies via a ‘Green Homes Grant’ have already run into major problems with only 13% of a planned £1.5bn fund being spent during the 2020-21 financial year due to administrative problems.⁴⁰ The scheme has since been closed to new applicants.

In April, the UK parliament agreed a new legally-binding target of a 78% cut in carbon emissions by 2035 in line with recommendations by the Climate Change Committee (CCC).⁴¹ However, Britain is not even on course to meet its 2025 target, so the CCC has urged the government to markedly increase domestic action.⁴² Among its recommendations is that government spending on emissions reduction should increase very rapidly to between £9bn/y and £12bn/y – and that other (non-budget) measures are also needed to help switch or stimulate the rest of the UK economy to spend at least £40bn/y. This would require, for example, a doubling of the government spending planned for 2021–22. But note this is only to reach the net-zero carbon target by 2050. A growing number of climate scientists argue that we need to hit this target before 2035.

One further new UK climate strategy is worth noting here – that of the MOD.⁴³ However, this is severely undermined by a lack of emission reduction targets and the MOD’s aim “to use the green transition to add to its capabilities”.

Offensive insecurity v human security

In an in-depth SGR report published in 2013,⁴⁴ we revealed how UK research and development spending was used to help pursue a political agenda which prioritised military approaches to tackling security problems over approaches which sought to tackle the root causes of conflict. Indeed, we highlighted that, even within military R&D, technologies which had a capability for ‘force projection’ far from the UK were prioritised over more technologies more useful for defence of national territory. The report, we titled *Offensive Insecurity* to highlight the focus on aggressive military technologies while repeatedly underfunding efforts to tackle the root causes of conflict. Examining the spending commitments underlying the ‘Global Britain’ approach shows this militarisation agenda is being accelerated – despite claims that it is a balanced set of policies. One of the clearest examples is a comparison between the average annual government spending planned for the period 2021–25: for the military, it is £47bn; for reducing UK carbon emissions, it is only about £6bn (see Figures 1 and 2).⁴⁵

A fundamental shift is needed – and this can be best exemplified by the ‘human security’ agenda. This is an approach championed by the United Nations which puts the wellbeing of the individual at the centre of security policy, and includes related concepts such as shared security and planetary security.⁴⁶ It defines three freedoms:

- Freedom from fear – including protection from violence and environmental crises;
- Freedom from want – including provision of decent food, healthcare, and housing;
- Freedom from indignity – including from human rights abuses.

Following this approach – rather than the traditional approach of ‘national security’ – the emphasis shifts from a military focus to a much broader one which prioritises, for example, spending on health, welfare and environmental protection. >>

» The jobs dimension

Prioritising human security would also have employment benefits for British workers. In announcements on the Integrated Review, Boris Johnson has highlighted jobs which will be created in the arms industry by the extra military spending – but these are actually much smaller in number than those which the government has estimated will be created by the extra (inadequate) spending on the ‘Ten point’ climate plan. For an extra £24bn of military spending, the government estimated 40,000 jobs would be created over four years.⁴⁷ Yet the much lower £11bn of government spending over the same period on the climate plan would create over 90,000 jobs in that sector, the government estimates.⁴⁸

A more rigorous economic assessment needs to be carried out to compare the job creation potential of these different spending patterns, but previous academic analyses have shown that military spending creates significantly fewer jobs than most alternatives.⁴⁹

A radical and ethical security review

The government’s Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy was widely trailed in the media as “the most radical reassessment of Britain’s place in the world since the end of the Cold War”. In reality, it mixes grand ethical aspirations with many of the most militaristic and aggressive elements of the UK’s late twentieth century policies – such as ‘Great Power’ rivalry, technological arms racing, uncritical nationalism, and failure to give adequate help to the world’s poorest. It then adds a new, high technology edge to them. Given over 125,000 British people have died in the COVID-19 pandemic, and the nation has one of the highest death rates from this disease in the world,⁵⁰ it is not hard to see how badly the government is failing to live up to its own rhetoric of protecting its citizens – let alone improving security elsewhere.

In early 2021, the Rethinking Security network⁵¹ – of which SGR is a member – took the first steps in carrying out an ‘Alternative Security Review’ for the UK. This aims to do what the government failed to – follow a radical and ethical examination of the UK’s approach to tackling security problems from the level of the individual to the international scale. Only approaches like these offer a chance for the UK – and other nations – to make the world a secure place.

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