

## A new era for arms conversion?



**Stuart Parkinson argues that recently announced military cuts coupled with an expanding 'green' sector suggest the start of major shift in the UK economy.**

Britain's new coalition government inherited a Ministry of Defence budget with a projected overspend of £38 billion,<sup>1</sup> and a record deficit in the public finances as a whole. So when the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) was published in October,<sup>2</sup> there was little surprise that it laid out significant cuts to military personnel and equipment over the next five to ten years. During the same period, however, both government and industry projects a major expansion of low carbon and environmental industries. So are we entering a new era of arms conversion for a sustainable society, for which SGR has long argued?

### Cuts to military equipment

The overall reduction in the budget of the Ministry of Defence (in real terms) is projected to be nearly 8% over the next four years.<sup>3</sup> This is significantly less than the cuts made to many civilian departments – such as education, communities and local government, or environment – and does not include extra spending allocated for military operations in Afghanistan or MoD pension payments. Nevertheless, this reduction will lead to large cuts in the vehicles and other equipment available for UK armed forces.

Table 1 (see page 26) shows the main cuts to conventionally armed ships, submarines, aircraft and armoured vehicles planned between 2010 and 2020 as a result of the SDSR.<sup>4,5</sup> For comparison, the 2005 levels are also shown.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these figures is the cuts that have already been made over the last five years – in simple numerical terms, they are comparable with those planned in the SDSR. Furthermore, when taken over the whole period, the reductions in some equipment areas approach those made as the Cold War ended.<sup>6</sup>

Looked at from one angle, the changes in the SDSR represent a real cut in 'force levels'. Older equipment is being phased out early. For example, the aircraft carrier, 'Ark Royal,' and its Harrier jets are being retired as this article goes to press, and the UK will not be able to launch fighter planes from sea for the next decade. Also, the four remaining Type-22 frigates will be cut and not replaced, while the numbers of Challenger tanks and AS90 armoured vehicles will be cut by 40% and 35% respectively. There will also be cuts in the levels of new equipment bought. For example, the numbers of new fighter planes – specifically, Typhoons and Joint Strike Fighters – will be significantly lower (although specific figures have not yet been announced), while the new Nimrod MRA4 maritime reconnaissance aircraft have been cancelled altogether.

There are also cuts to Britain's nuclear weapons arsenal. The total number of operational warheads will be reduced from 160 to 120, while each nuclear-armed submarine will carry fewer warheads (down from 48 to 40). The decision on whether to replace the Trident submarines will be delayed until 2016 – after the next general election – with the operating lifetime of the existing vessels to be extended to allow for this. This offers an improved opportunity for campaigners to make the case for cancellation of the replacement system.

However, it is clear in some cases that military capabilities will be enhanced. For example, the two

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**SGR conference 2011**

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Equipment	2005 level	2010 level	2020 level
Aircraft carriers	3	2	1 (+ 1 in reserve?)
Destroyers and frigates	28	23	19
Submarines (conventionally armed)	11	7	7
Challenger (battle tanks)	~360	~330	~200
AS90 (heavy artillery)	~140	~120	~80
Fast jets (fighter planes)	~250	~200	??
Nimrod (maritime reconnaissance planes)	14	0	0
VC10/ TriStar/ A330 (air tankers/ transport)	24	18	Up to 14

Table 1 – Main cuts to UK conventional military equipment between 2005 and 2020<sup>4,5</sup>

new Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers will be three times the size of their predecessors – although only one will be actively deployed and fighter planes will only be carried from about 2020. Likewise, the new Astute class submarines will have greater capabilities than the Trafalgar class they replace. Possibly most disturbing of all is the rise of robotic aircraft ('unmanned aerial vehicles') to make up for some of the lost capability in air power (see pp.20-21).

Nevertheless, taken together these changes do comprise a real reduction in military capability. Such a change will be difficult to reverse given public opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and increasing support for nuclear disarmament.

Just as importantly, they mark an increasing shift in the UK industrial base away from the military/defence sector, freeing up skilled workers for other key areas of the economy. Perhaps the most significant changes in the short term will come as a result of a reduction in military servicing and maintenance contracts due to the early retirement of older equipment.

### Expansion of the environmental sectors

The situation is very different in the low carbon and environmental sectors in the UK, which include renewable energy, energy efficiency, pollution control, recycling and related areas. A recent government-commissioned report concluded that these sectors now employ an impressive 880,000 people, including those in the supply chain.<sup>7</sup>

As the national 'Low Carbon Transition Plan' continues to be rolled out, new funding streams have been confirmed for offshore wind, marine power, small-scale renewables and trains. In addition, a new parliamentary bill will be introduced, a major aspect

of which will be to improve delivery of energy efficiency measures. A new 'Green Investment Bank' will also be set up. (These measures are discussed further on pp.12-14). While there is concern that all the measures currently being proposed or implemented are not yet enough to meet the UK's climate change targets, there is nevertheless a widespread belief that these sectors will expand markedly over the next five to ten years and beyond.

### Arms conversion for a sustainable society?

As discussed in the last SGR Newsletter,<sup>8</sup> there has been considerable resistance within the military industrial sector to 'conversion' to civilian technologies. However, there are signs that this attitude is at last starting to change, as shown by quotes<sup>9</sup> from the CEO of the West of England Aerospace Forum: "This is a perfect opportunity for [defence industry] diversification and renewable energy presents a massive new market...A [wind] turbine blade is not dissimilar to a helicopter blade. It's electrical and mechanical engineering."

However, history shows that it is at a macro-economic level where arms conversion really occurs.<sup>10</sup> As military/ defence spending is reduced by government, finance – both public and private – becomes available to support other areas of the economy. This happened to some extent as the Cold War drew to a close. Employment in the UK's military industrial sector shrank by 150,000 jobs in the ten years from 1985,<sup>11</sup> while jobs were created elsewhere in the economy. Employment in this sector is now only 215,000<sup>12</sup> – less than a quarter of the low carbon and environmental sectors – and set to fall further. Meanwhile, the coalition government has signalled that it sees the 'green' economy as highly important to economic recovery.

So, can it be true that the Cameron government will be a champion of arms conversion for a sustainable

society? Hardly – Cameron has stated that he wants UK military spending to remain high in order to support the use of armed force to defend national interests.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, he is battling against a major change in British public opinion, which has resulted from the failure of policies that have prioritised military force to combat international terrorism. There is also acknowledgement within the new National Security Strategy that the UK's security priorities are shifting (see p.7). Finally, there is the realisation that a move to a 'greener' economy is overwhelmingly in the country's best interests.

There is still a long way to go, but the changes underway in the military and industrial sectors are major. Scientists and engineers need to work with peace campaigners and others to make these changes go further and become more permanent.

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*This article is based on presentations given in Sheffield (17 November 2010) and Lancaster (2 December 2010).*

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(web links correct as of 1 December 2010)

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