

Briefing

Force for Good?: The Politics of Military Spending

One year after a decisive election and on the verge of a definitive break with the EU, there is still little substance to the government's Global Britain slogan. The three big political parties are talking about the UK's future role in the world, says Richard Reeve, but do any have a compelling vision for how the country can work collaboratively for sustainable global change?

It is a year since the snap general election of 2019 returned a Conservative government with the largest majority in the House of Commons in 14 years. The tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic, the reassertion of historical injustices and the closing act of the Brexit pantomime have all-consumed political life in this strangest of years. Yet as the year closes, the main parties have begun to talk again of defence, development and diplomacy.

Anticipation about the long-delayed release of the government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy stirred the three largest parties in parliament to start talking about these issues in November. While Prime Minister Boris Johnson claimed almost all the headlines with his unexpected commitment of an additional £16.5 billion over four years for the Ministry of Defence, frontbenchers from the Labour and Scottish National Parties have also been busy publicising their views. It is worth pausing to take stock of their positions and what they think their supporters want to hear.

From crisis, a political opportunity

The Prime Minister's [statement of 19 November](#) on defence spending was big on pledges, short on detail but succeeded in winning the acclaim of his party, [one-in-nine of whose MPs](#) are reserve or former military personnel. It was also [immediately endorsed](#) by many on the opposition benches, including most Liberal Democrat respondents and several Labour MPs. In playing the Conservative's traditionally strong card of military patriotism, Johnson demonstrated how difficult MPs of almost all parties find it to argue against militarism, even in peace time and in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic and economic recession.

This was doubly striking as the PM was announcing spending plans ahead of the strategy ([the Integrated Review](#)) that is supposed to inform and justify such spending. The following week the Chancellor also [announced a 30% cut](#) to the UK's international development budget. Like the merger of the Department for International Development into the Foreign Office this summer, this will happen in the midst of a global crisis of human security and while the review is still ostensibly setting a national strategy. So while Johnson spoke loosely of terrorists and hostile states, we don't yet know what threats the government believes it is responding to, or why.

While several notable backbench Conservative MPs have threatened to rebel against the government over the proposal to slash the international development budget, Johnson can be reasonably sure that he is on safe ground with Conservative voters on both defence and development spending. [Opinion polls](#) suggest that cutting the aid budget and increasing defence spending is widely supported by Conservative voters, especially those in the North and Midlands

[former 'red wall' constituencies](#) key to both major parties' future electoral strategies. It was to its credit that the party [made the case](#) for development assistance throughout the 2010s, despite it being a difficult sell to traditional Conservative voters.

The Labour Party: Friend of the Forces?

Just as the Conservatives are sure that talking tough on military spending will recapture them the political agenda, Labour Party politicians have convinced themselves that any challenge to orthodox thinking on defence and foreign policy will guarantee their place in perpetual opposition. In public meetings in mid-November, shadow defence secretary [John Healey](#) and shadow foreign secretary [Lisa Nandy](#) both repeated the mantra that defence and foreign policy "will not win Labour an election, but they certainly will lose it one."

That the party leadership has so evidently accepted this view begs the question of what evidence underpins the assumption. Certainly, former leader Jeremy Corbyn was a uniquely controversial figure in his critical approach to UK security policy, from military interventions to nuclear weapons. He also made a significant political error in his [seemingly equivocal response](#) to the 2018 Salisbury Novichok poisonings and a longer term reluctance to criticise anti-Western states, however authoritarian their reality. Yet, when Corbyn [talked directly about security](#) during the [2017 general election campaign](#), noting that the UK had become less safe due to its involvement in the 'War on Terror', the party's rise in the polls continued. Labour's 2019 electoral disaster was in the context of a Brexit-dominated campaign in which [defence and security issues barely registered](#).

Three other things are striking in Labour's new willingness to talk about international security. All of them are omissions.

The first omission is the lack of any vision that might differentiate the party from Conservative policy. Labour wishes to be the party [of the armed forces](#), of the [trans-Atlantic alliance](#), and of [militarised patriotism](#); it equates this with higher military spending, procurement and headcount. Most striking is the reiteration by Healey, Nandy and party leader Keir Starmer that British military might must be a 'Force for Good in the World'. There are more frequent nods to international law, human rights and UN peacekeeping, but this is otherwise exactly the refrain that Johnson's team uses. For all that Labour rightly criticises the government's [Global Britain](#) slogan as content-free mantra, it has not yet articulated any alternative vision of its own.

The second omission is that there is no acknowledgement of Labour's culpability in the Iraq War and Afghanistan campaigns. Despite the vast majority of current Labour MPs not being in parliament in 2003 and Starmer having been a [vocal opponent](#) of that year's Iraq invasion, the issue has disappeared. Many service personnel and veterans [deeply resent](#) the Blair and Brown governments' commitment to the 'War on Terror'. For [millions of voters](#) this is the reason that Labour is not trusted on national security. Labour acts tough because it fears looking weak, both to UK voters and its key foreign ally. This pathology needs to be recognised and confronted.

The third omission is on nuclear weapons, the renewal of which is probably the [largest driver of budget inflation](#) at the MOD. The party likes to act as if this is settled policy. Indeed, the commitment to renewing the Trident weapons system (although not to its continuous deployment at sea) was consistent in the party's [2017](#) and [2019](#) election manifestos, despite Corbyn's deep personal opposition. And yet [nearly 40% of Labour MPs](#) did not back Trident renewal in a July 2016 parliamentary vote. New intakes of younger, more left-wing Labour MPs in 2017 and 2019 has likely increased the parliamentary party's opposition to nuclear weapons since then. [Opinion polling](#) also suggests that Labour voters are more divided on the issue than those of any other party, including the highest rate of respondents who have not decided for or against nuclear weapons.

Proportionately more Liberal Democrat MPs (4 of 11) have so far signed an [early day motion](#) in favour of the Commons debating UK engagement with the new Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear

Weapons (TPNW) than have Labour MPs (14 of 200). With the exception of these few MPs, it seems that the Labour leadership and parliamentary party have decided to keep quiet on the nuclear issue.

The Scottish politics of military spending

Not so the SNP. Its recent [submission to the Integrated Review](#) remains clear that it opposes the renewal of Trident and the presence of nuclear weapons on Scottish territory and welcomes collective European ratification of the TPNW. That the SNP can be overt in this intention reflects the much more negative attitude to nuclear weapons of [SNP supporters](#) and [Scottish voters](#) more broadly. This [divergent political culture](#), along with a conscious effort to imitate the security policies of its Scandinavian neighbours, allows the SNP to take alternative stances on a range of issues, from child soldiers to climate justice, and to align itself more comfortably with the idea of the UK as a progressive, post-imperial regional power.

Yet defence policy is also a thorn in the SNP's flesh. UK military shipbuilding is very much concentrated in urban industrial Scottish constituencies closely contested between SNP and Labour. Thousands of [Scottish jobs](#) do depend on these industries, and thousands more depend on the huge Royal Navy and RAF bases at Faslane (nuclear submarines) and Lossiemouth (fighter aircraft). Sentiment towards Scottish regiments like [the Black Watch](#) remains strong and service personnel and veterans are often seen to be among the sturdiest supporters of the Union. This conditioned the SNP's muted response to the PM's spending announcement.

In particular, as long as Scotland remains within the UK, the SNP will be [fighting for a bigger share](#) of UK military expenditure. Its international stance might therefore be characterised as a rather parochial internationalism. Acknowledging criticism of the party's position on military industries, SNP foreign affairs spokesman Alyn Smith has [proposed legislation](#), backed by Plaid Cymru and the Green Party, to properly regulate UK arms exports and ban development of autonomous weapons.

The Scottish politics of defence thus poses both challenge and opportunity to Labour, which has [little hope of regaining a parliamentary majority](#) unless it can win back dozens of the seats it lost to the centre-left SNP in 2015. Talking up military production might win it a few seats in Glasgow (shipbuilding) and Fife (ships and missiles) but its pro-nuclear stance may lose it more voters across more of the country. Moreover, unless it can articulate a compelling, positive vision for Scotland and the UK in the world, it risks being further squeezed by all its main rivals there.

The Conservatives have fewer aspirations to gain seats from the SNP. Nor do they need the support of Scottish MPs in the short term. But Johnson does need to reverse the swing in [support for Scottish independence](#) (via the SNP) ahead of the Scottish parliamentary election in May and thus to reduce the legitimacy of calls for a new independence referendum thereafter. Promising more investment and jobs in industries like military shipbuilding thus has a clear political calculus north of the border.

The international politics of UK military spending

For the Conservatives in particular, the geopolitical context of increased military spending is Brexit and the necessity to fill in the hazy content of 'Global Britain'. The [original intention](#) was that the Integrated Review would begin with setting out the principles defining UK foreign policy and use these to determine long-term objectives and how the UK mitigates security threats. This has not happened in what is now a quite back-to-front process.

Political opportunism amidst the confusion of Brexit is very much the reason for this apparent disorder. A mighty, global military is the default response of Britain signalling its relevance to the world. This includes Europe, where the government seeks to reassert itself as the [pre-eminent Western European military actor](#), and the potential markets of Asia, where Johnson is keen that the UK [re-establishes a military presence](#) half-a-century after it left its bases in Singapore and Malaysia.

European states, it is assumed, will be grateful for the UK as a bulwark against Russia, while Asian states will presumably be [reassured](#) by a more assertive British stance against China.

More than this, for both Conservatives and Labour, it is a signal to the United States of their desire to maintain the 'special relationship'. Ironically, the victory of liberal internationalist Joe Biden over authoritarian nationalist Donald Trump has created a cross-party consensus in Westminster that the UK needs to knuckle down as the United States' most dependable and capable military ally. That Biden and his team are actually deeply rooted in the [American imperial tradition](#) of interventionism makes this problematic for UK politics. There is an international order in which the 'liberal' superpower plays an [exceptional role](#) in setting and enforcing the rules. The UK now seems bound to spend more on its armed forces and deploy them in more risky contexts. Both major parties see this as an opportunity to curry favour with the incoming administration.

Conclusion: Making Britain Matter

The Shadow Defence Secretary [believes](#) that the government's unexpected splurge on military equipment is - like the notorious Overseas Operations Bill and the Covert Human Intelligence Sources Bill, both of which seek to decriminalise illegal acts by UK security actors – a political trap set for Labour. It is. But Labour falls into the same trap repeatedly through its belief that it must convince voters it is the party of 'hard' national security. It is its lack of a positive, alternative vision of a better world with a different kind of security based on cooperation rather than confrontation that condemns it to be outmanoeuvred on all sides by its party political rivals.

Whatever one thinks of Tony Blair in [1997](#) and Jeremy Corbyn in [2017](#), or how their leaderships ended, their relative electoral gains against the Conservatives were built on clear articulations of the UK conducting a different kind of foreign policy. Because, for better or worse, if there is one idea that really dominates mainstream political discussion of foreign and security policy in the UK, it is that Britain needs to be seen (at home as much as abroad) to matter to the rest of the world.

If the UK really is to matter and be a force for good in the world – and there is a [vast amount more](#) it [could be doing](#) in tackling climate collapse, health crises, poverty and inequality, and militarised confrontation – it needs to project and resource itself as something very different to Britannia ruling the waves. It needs to recognise that being a force for good in the world is a collaborative endeavour not something exceptional that Britain must achieve alone, above and against the world.

Rethinking Security looks forward to 2021 and working with people across the UK, their political representatives and their peers around the world to develop a more compelling vision for security that puts peace and human wellbeing at the centre of a sustainable national strategy.

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