

Perverse Priorities: Cut Public Spending, Keep Nuclear Arms and Warplanes

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Chancellor Jeremy Hunt is considering billions worth of cuts in public spending while the Ministry of Defence, with Labour's support, plans to spend vast sums on just two hugely expensive military projects.

We are in the midst of an extraordinary, indeed perverse, new round of austerity cuts.

The chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, is [reported](#) to be looking for £35 billion across government in cuts. While vital services will continue to be deprived of urgently-needed resources, the government seems set to give the military a budget rise in cash terms from £47.9bn this year to £48bn in 2023 and £48.6bn in 2024.

Liz Truss, backed by defence secretary Ben Wallace, wanted to award the armed forces even more – an increase close to £200bn by 2030, the biggest rise in the military budget since the start of the Cold War. By then UK military spending would have doubled to £100bn a [year](#).

Rishi Sunak and Hunt have [realised](#) that such increases would be so unjustified and extravagant that they are reportedly ditching promises in the Conservatives 2019 manifesto and will actually cut the defence budget in real terms, that is with inflation taken into account.

However, the government's spending on the military means that it will still be wasting vast resources on weapons systems that are unuseable in any foreseeable conflict.

Its planned public spending cuts are a small percentage of the amount the Ministry of Defence will be spending, with Labour's enthusiastic support, on just two hugely expensive projects – the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons arsenal and a fleet of 48 American F35B fighter jets for the navy's two large aircraft carriers.

‘Persistent engagement overseas’

The government had set out Britain’s role and military posture in an ‘Integrated [Review](#) of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy’ and a [report called ‘Defence in a Competitive Age’](#).

The documents are full of platitudes, vague promises and hollow claims. The review says Britain will be a “force for good”, “defending human rights”, avoiding any reference to Britain’s biggest market for arms sales – the Gulf states that are among the world’s worst abusers of human rights.

The refusal of the government to account to parliament about arms exports was sharply [criticised](#) by a cross-party Commons committee.

The defence report states that Britain will conduct “persistent engagement overseas”, including “further investment in Oman” demonstrating Britain’s “long-term commitment to the Gulf’s stability and prosperity, in addition to our presence in the British Indian Ocean Territory”.

This is an unstated reference to the US bomber base on Diego Garcia on the Chagos archipelago whose entire indigenous population was expelled by Britain.

The report refers to Britain’s “long standing relationships with Saudi Arabia...in support of shared security and prosperity objectives”. Saudi Arabia recently demonstrated its own priorities by siding with Vladimir Putin at the expense of consumers in the west by capping oil production.

‘Soft power superpower’

Ironically, the “integrated review” emphasises Britain’s potential role as a “soft power superpower” referring to the BBC and development aid, both of which are the victims of government cuts.

It emphasises the importance of the need to defend British interests against cyber attacks and to invest in unmanned drones. Yet the potential threat posed by cyber warfare and the opportunities presented by unmanned drones were ignored for many years by the Ministry of Defence.

The defence paper promises more investment in “autonomous platforms including swarming drones”, and says “Special Forces are at the heart of our approach to modernisation”.

The recognition of the importance of relatively cheap drones and special forces units is in marked contrast to the much more expensive and more vulnerable weapons systems including aircraft carriers and tanks.

There is no mention in the review or defence paper of how to make special forces and drone warfare more accountable.

Indeed, Britain’s special forces are protected even more than the security and intelligence agencies by official secrecy. Their operations, and the use of drones, also raise unacknowledged questions about rules of engagement and the laws of armed conflict.

Wasted billions

The lack of effective scrutiny of the armed forces and their expenditure has allowed the Ministry of Defence to waste tens of billions of pounds of public money on extravagant weapons systems irrelevant to modern conflict.

The results of infighting between cabinet ministers will be announced at the delayed and long-awaited “fiscal event” – or budget, as they used to be called – scheduled for 17 November.

Threatening to resign – along with his boss, defence secretary Ben Wallace – if the armed forces did not get the huge increases they are demanding, defence minister James Heappey [says](#): “There is no prosperity without security”.

The reverse is true; there is no security without prosperity. Influence in today’s world, as one of Britain’s most senior diplomats has [said](#), is composed of many things, notably a strong economy. And nuclear weapons are among the least relevant.

If Jeremy Hunt wants to seek “efficiency savings” in government, he does not have far to look. I have estimated, taking into account National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee reports that at least £300bn over the past 20 years has been wasted on disastrous defence and military decisions, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The figures below do not take into account the hidden costs of a skilled workforce diverted from military projects to more sustainable and useful products that benefit civil society. Nor do they take into account direct government support for arms exports and exporters – or bribery.

The MOD’s £300bn wasteful spending

Trident renewal	£200bn
*Cost of delays/overruns in new projects, including frigates, Eurofighter/Typhoon aircraft, Bowman radios, A400M military transport aircraft	£18+bn
F-35s for aircraft carriers	£13bn
Aircraft carriers	£6.2bn
*Nimrod aircraft (subsequently destroyed)	£4bn
*Rental costs of privatised housing previously owned by MOD	£4bn
*Ajax armoured vehicle	at least £3.5bn
Military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq	£48.5bn

(* Source: National Audit Office)

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