

Demands grow for UK Labour government to massively increase military spending

Robert Stevens
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UK chancellor Rachel Reeves allocated a further £2.9 billion to military spending in last month's Labour government budget, but this has only intensified complaints in ruling circles that this is "nowhere near enough".

Labour, now four months in power, has still not committed to a date when it will meet an election pledge to ramp up military spending from its current level of just above 2 percent of GDP to 2.5 percent. On taking office, Labour said military spending decisions would be taken following a Strategic Defence Review (SDR) to be held next year.

Reeves vaguely said the government would "set a path to spending 2.5 percent of GDP on defence at a future fiscal event."

With the election of US President Donald Trump this week (to take office on January 20), a chorus is growing that all delays must end and that military spending is hiked still further. Annual military spend is around £55 billion but it is being demanded that billions more must be handed over to the Ministry of Defence (MoD)—given Trump's previous insistence that NATO's European members increase military spending—or risk forfeiting US backing.

Reeves was unable to say when military spending would substantially increase because the economic and social impact of an immediate hike to pay for the deeply unpopular wars Britain is embroiled in, which threaten to escalate, would be severe and provoke opposition.

Conservative Party leadership contender Robert Jenrick—with eventual winner Kemi Badenoch saying she has hardly any policy disagreements—made reaching 3 percent military spending central to his campaign.

With a serious chance that Trump could take office, Jenrick agitated last month in the pages of the *Telegraph* that British imperialism would have to fall into line with the US on confronting China—on top of its current backing of wars on two fronts—Ukraine and the Middle East. Jenrick wrote, "To deter a Russian invasion of NATO, we must spend 3 percent of GDP on defence and make that the new NATO standard for all member states... We must prepare for an American pivot to the Indo-Pacific to contain China, which

means the UK and Europe stepping up to defend against Russian belligerence. The age of freeloading has come to an end... We must wake up and urgently prepare for China to invade Taiwan within three years."

More pressure on Labour to get with the programme is being made via debates in the House of Lords since Sir Keir Starmer's party took office. In the first held on October 9—as Labour peer and former NATO head Lord Robertson introduced his planned defence review—crossbench peer and former Chief of the Defence Staff Lord Stirrup insisted, "Investment in defence needs to be above 3 percent of GDP, not the 2.5 percent that the government say that they aspire to but for which they have not so far set out a firm plan."

A debate held last week as demanded by the Tories, to coincide with the budget, saw Viscount Trenchard ask the government, "What progress they have made in laying out the roadmap to spending 2.5 percent of gross domestic product on defence?"

He added, "[Wartime Prime Minister] Churchill was fond of quoting the Latin adage, 'If you want peace, prepare for war'. In 1943 and 1944, more than 40 percent of GDP was spent on defence. If this country should again become directly embroiled in a major military conflict, it is reasonable to assume that the government would again have to spend a huge proportion of our national output on defence to fulfil their first duty."

Labour's reluctance to massively increase military spending meant "we are now placing our ability to provide leadership in military operations at risk because we have in recent years been increasing our defence expenditure at a much slower rate than other nations." Trenchard cited "Germany, which in 2014 was spending only 1.2 percent of its GDP on defence, has committed to spend \$97.7 billion on defence this year, which is an increase of 29.45 percent over 2023. France has increased its defence budget by 6.05 percent, and the United States by 7.21 percent. Against that, we have managed to provide an uplift of only 1.73 percent after adjustment for the implementation of the new accounting standard."

Tory Lord Bilimoria said, “I am like a stuck record: in 2019... I first said that we should be spending 3 percent of our GDP on defence—not 2.5 percent but 3 percent. That was five years ago. Five years ago, there was no sign of Putin invading Ukraine, or of 7 October and the tragic situation in the Middle East since. Since the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, we are closer to global conflict than ever before, and then 3 percent will be nowhere near enough.”

He summed up the dilemma facing the British ruling class over Ukraine, stating that it was correct to say that the UK couldn’t afford Ukraine to lose the war with Russia, “But the defence of Ukraine is possible only if the United States continues its support. It has provided over \$100 billion of support; if it pulls out its support, that war is over. The election in America is next week; the repercussions will be very serious indeed and we must be prepared for that.”

Another Tory peer Lord Shinkwin castigated the government, saying “Ultimately, it is not a future fiscal event that is going to determine UK defence spending—it is a future military event, orchestrated by Putin and his allies.”

Hereditary Peer Lord Mountevans stated that recent Tory and Labour military spending—as with Reeves £2.9 billion—was of a one-off nature and represented “sticking plasters rather than a serious attempt to bring the forces to the level that is required in the current international and geopolitical condition.” There was no guarantee of continued “American support for NATO, especially if the Republican candidate were to succeed in the US presidential election next week. More generally, it has to be faced that attention in the United States is turning towards the Indo-Pacific. Europe will be expected to take greater responsibility for its own defence.”

The major problem was that “if the US is to continue to regard the UK as a key ally, we must maintain the fabric and capabilities of our Armed Forces. If not, they will regard us differently, as having less value as an ally.”

The scale of the war against the conditions of the working class needed to secure the tens and hundreds of billions required for imperialist war was spelt out by Baroness Buscombe. Making a “cursory comparison with our welfare spending alone”, she stated, “Taxpayers’ money is there but the priorities for government expenditure are just wrong... In April this year, the Government’s forecast for our total defence budget in 2024-25 was £55.6 billion. At the Department for Work and Pensions, figures for the same period forecast a spend of £315.8 billion on our social security system. Working-age benefits go to 9.3 million people, a huge proportion of whom are capable of working.”

Buscombe complained that “in contrast with our brilliant Armed Forces, benefit claimants receive a Christmas bonus

[a £10 pittance] for doing nothing.” The opportunity wasn’t missed to scapegoat immigrants. It was “scandalous” that soldiers had to rely on charities to provide basic needs for their wardrobes and messes “given our current expenditure on fully serviced hotels and weekly cash payments given to illegal migrants”.

The *Times* plays a major role in demands for more military spending and leapt on comments by Labour Defence Minister John Healey that the Tories had underfunded the armed forces to such an extent that the UK was “ready to conduct military operations” but “What we’ve not been ready to do is to fight.” The *Times* noted, “It is understood that senior military chiefs inside the Ministry of Defence (MoD) share Healey’s view that if the armed forces were forced into combat any time soon [against Russia] they could lose in a fight.”

The *Times* editorialised that while Healey “has identified the problem... his government’s cure is inadequate... Slowly but surely, Britain’s capacity to fight a peer adversary was whittled away as defence ceded ground to more politically pressing concerns like health and welfare.

“It is crystal clear that this country should be spending 3 percent of GDP on defence. The international situation is the most perilous of modern times, with the Middle East in chaos, China menacing Taiwan, and Russia threatening to overwhelm Ukraine. Yet Labour, and the Conservatives before them, have failed to commit to 3 percent.”

While the government was talking about “charting a path” to higher military spending, “General Sir Roland Walker, the head of the army, says he needs to double his warfighting capability by 2028 and triple it by 2030. Planners, he warned recently, must work on the assumption of war with Russia in three years.”

At the Commonwealth Summit in Samoa (October 21-26), Starmer—with an eye to a Trump victory, announced that next year the Royal Navy would join patrols with Pacific island nations and the aircraft carrier HMS Prince of Wales will visit Singapore in 2025. The *Times* editorial was scathing commenting, “The Royal Navy... is sinking into insignificance. Its destroyer and frigate force could soon drop to 13 as ageing ships fall apart and replacements lag. Next year’s long-range deployment of a carrier will require a Norwegian stores ship because the UK’s sole example is inoperable.”



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