UK government announces £21.5 billion increase in military spending

Thomas Scripps
20 November 2020

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced an additional £16.5 billion in military spending over the next four years—a 10 percent annual increase, and the largest boost in real terms in 30 years.

The funding is in addition to the Conservative Party's manifesto pledge to increase defence spending by 0.5 percentage points above inflation each year. Combined, the two measures will lift the UK's defence budget by £21.5 billion by March 2025, to £63 billion.

Johnson's announcement is the starkest confirmation that the ruling elite are stepping up their plans for military confrontations in pursuit of their geo-strategic aims.

The promised billions will be used to create a National Cyber Force and Space Command, establish a military artificial intelligence agency, and develop the UK's next-generation fighter jet and drone programmes. The Royal Navy will take the bulk of the money "to restore Britain's position as the foremost naval power in Europe," said Johnson. This would allow plans for 13 new frigates and replace support ships for Britain's new aircraft carriers.

Introducing the increased spending, Johnson revelled in the death and destruction enabled by "technologies that will revolutionise warfare". Artificial intelligence would be able to offer "a soldier in hostile territory" an "array of options, from summoning an air strike to ordering a swarm attack, by drones or paralysing the enemy with cyber weapons." "Our warships and combat vehicles would "carry 'directed energy weapons', destroying targets with inexhaustible lasers." For the military "the phrase 'out of ammunition' will become redundant."

Summarising the militarist agenda behind his statement, Johnson told Parliament, "Reviving our armed forces is one pillar of the government's ambition to safeguard Britain's interests and values by strengthening our global influence, and reinforcing our ability to join the United States and our other allies to defend free and open societies.

"The international situation is more perilous and more intensely competitive than at any time since the Cold War and Britain must be true to our history and stand alongside our allies. To achieve this we need to upgrade our capabilities across the board."

The timing of the move is significant, coming shortly after the US presidential elections. Johnson is trying to extricate his government from its foreign policy crisis over Brexit—with just a few weeks remaining before Britain's Brexit "transition" period expires on December 31 and no agreement yet reached with the European Union on a trade deal. The crisis is intensified by the US election victory of the anti-Brexit Joe Biden.

The *Financial Times* notes, "The new financial deal comes just a week after Mr Johnson promised US president-elect Joe Biden that Britain was determined to remain a valuable military ally." According to Sky News, former Tory defence and foreign office minister Tobias Ellwood "said the news would not be lost on the incoming [Biden] administration..."

The *Guardian* reports that details of the defence spending were "put together at breakneck speed" as Downing Street sought "to reassert control after last week's No 10 meltdown, which led to the departure of chief aide Dominic Cummings and his ally Lee Cain." Cummings and Cain were leading figures in the Brexit campaign.

Johnson's decision was also made with an eye on the Scottish National Party's loudening calls for Scottish independence in the wake of Brexit. Defence Secretary Ben Wallace commented Wednesday, "It plays a very strong role—defence—in the Union… The United Kingdom, as the United Kingdom, is the only scale big enough to support such a broad and deep group of defence forces."

At the same time, the spending announcement leaves open the door to a continuing alliance with Donald Trump's administration, if he is able to remain in office as part of his ongoing coup operation. Trump's fascistic appointee to the position of US defence secretary, Christopher Miller, responded to the news by saying, "The UK is our most stalwart and capable ally, and this increase in spending is indicative of their commitment to NATO and our shared security. With this increase, the UK military will continue to be one of the finest fighting forces in the world."

© World Socialist Web Site

Johnson intends to salvage the UK's global position post-Brexit through a slavish embrace of American imperialism, centred on escalating aggression towards Russia and China. Coupled with transforming the UK into a low-wage, "Singapore-on-Thames" platform, militarism is pivotal to his "Global Britain" agenda.

The Conservatives' *Daily Telegraph* house organ crowed yesterday, "Johnson has set his sights on transforming the UK into Europe's leading military power, an aspiration that will have a significant bearing on post-Brexit Britain's global standing…

"With a military equipped for the warfare of the future, Britain will be a prized ally throughout the world."

Setting the tone for much of the British ruling class following the US elections, Dr Robin Niblett CMG, the Director and Chief Executive of the influential Chatham House foreign affairs think tank, called on the Johnson government to join a Biden administration in "defending democracy" and countering "the authoritarian alternative". He cited the UK's cynical and provocative offer of citizenship to Hong Kong residents—used to up the ante against China—and the introduction of the largely anti-Russian "Magnitsky provisions" into the UK Sanctions Act as positive examples.

"These steps," Niblett said, "can now serve as the foundation for a more modern, 21st century 'special relationship' between the UK and the US…"

Britain already has troops deployed as part of NATO formations across much of Russia's western border and in the Middle East against Russia's ally, Syria. Next year, the UK's new £3 billion HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier will make its maiden voyage to the Far East, at the head of a nuclear-armed strike group, to take part in US-Japanese military exercises against China. Johnson's spending announcement, and the proposed new US-UK "special relationship", are preparations for even more aggressive manoeuvres. The carrier, announced Johnson, "[W]ill lead a British and allied task group on our most ambitious deployment for two decades, encompassing the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and East Asia."

These criminal adventures will be paid for with the lives and livelihoods of the working class. Besides the casualties of any military operations, the expansion of British militarism must bring with it an assault on living standards. The government is refusing to consider extending a miserly £20-a-week increase in Universal Credit welfare payments beyond next April—at a cost of £9 billion. Even more significant, it emerged just hours after Johnson's announcement that Chancellor Rishi Sunak plans to freeze public sector workers pay for another three years in next weeks' spending review. It is no coincidence that the projected £23 billion saving from the pay freeze is almost exactly the same as the military budget increase (£21.5 billion).

Johnson revealed his £20 billion-plus injection for the military just days after plans emerged to cut foreign aid spending from 0.7 to 0.5 percent of GDP.

In its Wednesday editorial, "This welcome boost to military spending will strengthen the UK's post-Brexit global role", the *Telegraph* intoned. "If, as a nation, we want to spend more on defence then savings must be made in other programmes." A spokesman for the Institute for Fiscal Studies warned that the commitment "will make funding health, pensions and social care in face of [an] ageing population even harder."

The Labour Party warmly endorsed Johnson's "long overdue" expansion of British militarism, seeking to outflank the Tory government on the right.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer responded in parliament, "We welcome this additional funding for our defence and security forces and we agree that it is vital to end what the prime minister calls…an 'era of retreat'." Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey attacked the Tories for their decade in power, during which "the size of the armed forces has been cut by a quarter, defence spending was cut by over £7 billion".

The cross-party enthusiasm for a surge in British militarism is a mark of the explosive geopolitical tensions building up under the pressure of the pandemic and its economic fallout. Just two weeks ago, the UK's most senior military commander, General Sir Nick Carter, made the extraordinary warning that a third world war was "a risk". Describing the world as "a very uncertain and anxious place", he continued, "you could see escalation lead to miscalculation.

"We have to remember that history might not repeat itself but it has a rhythm and if you look back at the last century, before both world wars, I think it was unarguable that there was escalation which led to the miscalculation which ultimately led to war."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site