

UK Labour Party outlines its agenda for nuclear warfare targeting Russia

Chris Marsden
4 March 2021

Shadow Secretary of State for Defence John Healey used a February 26 speech to Britain's premier military think-tank to reposition the Labour Party as an unwavering advocate for the NATO alliance and nuclear weapons.

Healey spoke to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) regarding Labour's response to the Conservative government's Integrated Review of the UK's Defence and Security Policy.

Announced last February by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the repeatedly delayed review is to set out a post-Brexit foreign and defence policy for the next five years. Its delays point to the difficulties facing British imperialism in fashioning a military strategy, when its use value for US imperialism was its position within the European Union (EU), as a counter to Germany and France's plans for a European military policy more independent from NATO.

When the review was first announced, Professor Malcolm Chalmers from RUSI said of the UK's dilemma, "What they have to deal with is an increased uncertainty about our long-term relationship with Europe on one hand, and whether we can rely on Donald Trump's United States on the other."

The election of the Democrats under President Joe Biden has done nothing to lessen this dilemma, given that they are far less keen than Trump for the UK to pursue a go-it-alone strategy and thereby lose a pro-NATO US ally within Europe.

Healey was tasked with advancing a strategic arc to bridge the gulf between the US and Europe. But before doing so he had to put to bed the false accusations that Labour's loyalty to NATO, nuclear weapons and the strategic interests of British imperialism had been brought into question by the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn.

Corbyn had come to lead the party in September 2015 due to a dramatic leftward shift within the working class, which led hundreds of thousands to join the party and vote for him based on his long record as a "left". This included his declared opposition to NATO, support for nuclear disarmament, criticism of British military interventions, his striking an anti-imperialist pose through relations with nationalist movements on Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Ireland, and his refusal to commit to launching a nuclear strike against Russia.

The campaign to oust Corbyn waged by the Blairite right-wing, the Conservatives, Zionists and the media centred on the claim that he could not be trusted on questions of national security, more even than his advocacy of minimal social reforms. The most sinister element of the anti-Corbyn campaign was when, in November 2015, the then head of the UK's armed forces, Chief of the Defence Staff Sir Nicholas Houghton, when asked by the BBC's Andrew Marr about Corbyn's statement that he would never authorise the use of nuclear weapons, replied, "Well, it would worry me if that thought was translated into power."

A spokeswoman for then Prime Minister David Cameron stated that "as the principal military adviser to the Government," it was "reasonable" for Houghton "to talk about how we maintain the credibility of one of the

most important tools in our armoury."

In September, within days of Corbyn taking the leadership, the *Sunday Times* had carried comments from a "senior serving general" that, in the event of Corbyn becoming prime minister, there would be "the very real prospect" of "a mutiny." Elements within the military would be prepared to use "whatever means possible, fair or foul," the officer declared. He went on to say: "You would see a major break in convention with senior generals directly and publicly challenging Corbyn over vital important policy decisions such as Trident, pulling out of NATO and any plans to emasculate and shrink the size of the armed forces."

In February 2017, RUSI reported that it was "delighted to announce the appointment of His Grace the Duke of Wellington OBE DL and General Sir Nicholas Houghton GCB CBE ADC as new trustees."

Corbyn's retreat in the face of this offensive was total and saw him give a free vote to Labour MPs on the bombing of Syria in December 2015 and reaffirming Labour's commitment to NATO and the Trident nuclear submarine missile system, telling Labour's conference, "We're not going to divide and ruin ourselves as a party over this". He mounted the 2017 general election campaign on a manifesto committed to spending at least two percent of GDP on the military, NATO membership, and maintaining the UK's nuclear weapons arsenal.

Having refused to wage any struggle against the right-wing during his five years in office, Corbyn gifted leadership of the party to Sir Keir Starmer last April. He left Labour as he found it, a pro-capitalist, anti-working class and anti-socialist representative of British imperialism.

Nevertheless, Starmer is now expected to reassure the British ruling class, including the military, that Labour can be trusted to do as it is told without hesitation.

On June 27 last year, RUSI commissioned Mike Gapes, a former MP and anti-Corbyn plotter who quit the party in 2019 to write, "The UK's Labour Party: The Long March to Regaining Trust and Electability on Security Policy."

Gapes instructed Starmer to end his "muted beginnings" to "repositioning the party."

He complained that "many people who supported Corbyn's so-called 'anti-imperialist', 'pro-peace' approach are still active in the Labour Party at all levels, including some on Starmer's front bench". In Labour's policy review consultation document, "Championing internationalism in a Post-Coronavirus World", he added, "There is, incredibly, no mention of NATO at all, no reference to levels of defence spending, no reference to Trident or nuclear deterrence, and no direct reference to the defence industry or to arms exports, apart from: 'we must find a way to better utilise... the expertise of our worker forces (sic), trades unions, and British defence manufacturers for the benefit of partners around the world'."

Starmer must remedy these failings, including managing a "transition to a more nuanced and balanced view of the world," i.e., withdrawing support from the Palestinians, supporting Israel, a continued military presence in Iraq and Bahrain, arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and support for

hostilities against Iran led by the US.

Gapes told Starmer to recognise, “Throughout its history, Labour always had tension between its trade union affiliates and left-wing anti-military activists. But the Attlee government established NATO and introduced nuclear weapons, which were maintained and updated under the governments of Labour prime ministers Wilson, Callaghan, Blair and Brown... So, the new leadership will be expected to answer the question of the role of the UK’s nuclear deterrent, as well as what should be the UK’s stance towards the NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] Review and in any future arms control process.”

He demanded to know “how Labour will react to the Integrated [defence] Review,” to “maintaining a commitment to the two-percent of GDP NATO spending target”, and the “thorny questions about Labour’s support for the UK’s post-Brexit foreign policy and defence and security cooperation with the EU... It was relatively easy for Labour to take an anti-Trump position on foreign policy and to criticise Theresa May and Boris Johnson, but a Biden presidency could pose challenges for both government and opposition.”

Gapes’ message to Starmer on behalf of the Generals provided the model for Healey’s address to RUSI.

If further proof were needed of the impact of Corbyn’s political cowardice, this is provided by the choice of Healey as Starmer’s messenger. Healey, an adviser to former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, was brought into Corbyn’s shadow cabinet, from which he then resigned in June 2016 as part of the Blairite plot to remove Corbyn.

The shadow defence secretary gave a brief preamble citing the “proliferating” threats to national security, before restating “Labour’s core principles on national defence and security, so that voters, service personnel and the defence industry can see where we, the new leadership of the Labour Party, are coming from.”

These were:

- “Labour’s commitment to NATO is unshakeable. And mutual defence through Article V is the cornerstone of Labour’s commitment on Britain’s security, which Attlee’s foreign secretary Ernest Bevin fought for at NATO’s foundation.”

- “Labour’s support for nuclear deterrence is non-negotiable. The matter is settled. From Kinnock to Corbyn—with Blair, Brown and Miliband in between—this has been, and will remain, Labour policy.”

- “Labour’s commitment to international law, to universal human rights and to the multilateral treaties and organisations that uphold them is total.”

- “Labour’s determination to see British investment directed first to British industry is fundamental, not just to our thinking on defence, but to our vision of the kind of society we want to build.”

A “non-negotiable” commitment to a “nuclear deterrence” marks a break with the pretence of “multilateral” disarmament strategies, and a profession that nuclear weapons are here to stay and there to be used. But Healey did not stop there. He positioned Labour to the right of the Tories on military aggression against China and especially Russia, saying the party had a more viable strategy for addressing potentially conflicting relations with the US and EU, and above all as a more consistent defender of imperialist national interests.

The COVID-19 pandemic, he insisted, “has exposed a lack of homeland resilience, as well as the changing nature of the threats we’re facing,” followed by the obligatory claim that Russian “disinformation” was responsible for sowing “division into our communities.”

Healey urged a strategy of “full spectrum society resilience,” a blueprint for the militarisation of all aspects of social life with the government working with “private industry, local agencies and the public.”

Russia represents the premier “menace of state-based threats,” but the threat from China had been ignored by the Tories who were busy “glowing about economic collaboration with China, lauding Chinese investment in Hinkley Point [nuclear power plant] as part of the Government’s new ‘golden era’.” What was published said nothing about the national security risk arising from China’s involvement in our 5G infrastructure and when it mentioned Xinjiang it spoke of Islamist terror, not the threat of mass persecution against the Uighur population.”

The too heavy focus on “economic ties to other countries” must end, he said. National defence planning must in future be based ‘on the threats we’re facing, not the economic interests we’re trying to pursue.’

“Global Britain” was “a beguiling phrase” behind which the government “opened our 5G infrastructure to Huawei, while the Chinese state was challenging maritime freedoms in the South China Seas.”

Within a general escalation of militarism, Labour would focus attention on “Europe, the North Atlantic and the high North—our NATO area—where Russia’s growing arsenal of longer-range missiles, together with modernised land and sea forces and intensified greyzone activity, pose the greatest threats to our vital national interests.”

This was a necessary division of labour, as the US focused on China, its “principal strategic competitor” in a “big powers contest” involving “trade war, espionage, cyber operations and soft power being deployed with increasing intensity.”

“As the USA pivots to meet the long-term challenge of China, Britain’s military leadership in Europe will become more essential,” Healey argued, even claiming that a central role of Russian “disinformation” was “to undermine the political and public will to have British troops deployed in Estonia doing their duty in defence of our allies.”

Healey reiterates complaints that Brexit has undermined not only relations with the EU, but the basis for Britain’s political and military alliance with Washington that depended on London’s ability to thwart the development of a European military capability independent of NATO.

“Britain’s never been signed up to the more ambitious aims some allies have set for the EU’s common security and defence policy but Brexit has also now ended our British veto over its development,” he complained. His answer was to act as a “partner—not a part”, i.e., to police, “the EU drive for greater defence cooperation, especially if we aim to remain the major bridge between Europe and the US.”

Committing to NATO’s two percent spending threshold “is no longer enough”. Cuts to Britain’s armed forces of almost 45,000 full-time soldiers must be reversed, as well as the outsourcing of “our ability to monitor Russian submarines in our own coastal waters” and other cuts that leave the UK without a “minimum credible force” and with “new ships but no new sailors.”

“Size matters,” he exclaimed.

Healey then points to the necessity for the Integrated Review to focus on “growing our sovereign capacity to regenerate equipment and platforms if they are degraded in conflict,” through “a long-term plan to boost Britain’s foundation industries in steel, shipbuilding, aerospace and cyber security as national assets.”

In his appeal for acceptance at RUSI, Healey gave naked expression to Labour’s insane warmongering—outlining a de facto plan for military aggression against Russia and China, up to and including nuclear weapons. This is the true character of the party Corbyn led and the bureaucracy he shielded from a popular rebellion that should have swept them into the political gutter. His speech confirms the insistence of the Socialist Equality Party that Labour could never be refashioned as a vehicle for defending the working class, as was claimed by Corbyn and his cheerleaders in the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party and other

pseudo-left groups.

The Socialist Equality Party warned on August 15, 2015, at the beginning of what some called the “Corbyn insurgency,” that no change of leader, nor even an influx of left-leaning members could change the historically and programmatically determined character of the Labour Party. We insisted that “Labour is a right-wing bourgeois party. It is complicit in all the crimes of British imperialism and has functioned as the principal political opponent of socialism for more than a century.”

When Starmer took over as leader last year, we wrote, on April 6, “Almost five years after Corbyn was elected party leader in 2015 promising to end Labour’s pro-business, pro-austerity, pro-war agenda, the Blairites are back in the saddle and contemplating moves that even Tony Blair would have considered political suicide... The Labour Party is dead as far as the working class is concerned. Workers and youth must now strike out on a new path—class struggle and the fight for socialism.”

Workers and young people who agree with this conclusion must now join the SEP.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)