

UK “competitive age” defence review to create “an army that will be genuinely lethal”

Robert Stevens
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The Ministry of Defence (MoD) review “Defence in a Competitive Age” follows the publication last week of the Integrated Review of foreign and defence policy, based on naked warmongering against Russia and China and centred on increasing nuclear warhead capacity by 40 percent.

Trailing the review last Friday, Conservative government Defence Minister Ben Wallace said to be “better equipped for a more competitive age” requires “Britain’s soft and hard power to be better integrated... a ‘Global Britain’ has no choice but to step up...”

The armed forces had to be on a constant war footing. “The notion of war and peace as binary states has given way to a continuum of conflict, requiring us to prepare our forces for more persistent global engagement and constant campaigning, moving seamlessly from operating to war fighting.”

Wallace announced that the armed forces “will no longer be held as a force of last resort, but become more present and active around the world, operating below the threshold of open conflict to uphold our values and secure our interests, partner our friends and enable our allies, whether they are in the Euro-Atlantic, the Indo-Pacific, or beyond.”

Changes in the make-up of the armed forces are conceived of as the basis for securing the global position of British capital having left the European Union. “We will ensure Defence is threat-focused, modernised, and financially sustainable, ready to confront future challenges, seize new opportunities for Global Britain,” said Wallace.

Vast sums are to be handed over to the military, with Wallace pointing to the “Prime Minister’s commitment to spending £188-billion on defence over the coming four years—an increase of £24-billion or fourteen percent...”

The Defence Review proposes to cut army numbers by 9,500 to a force of 72,500 over the next four years. The size of the current force is already closer to 76,000 as a recruitment target of 82,000 set in the 2015 defence review was not met, meaning that the government is already more than half way to meeting reduction levels.

While confirmation that infantry numbers would be cut

took all the headlines—centred on opposition from retired generals and including across the board newspaper editorials—these reductions are being made in order to utilise technological developments to vastly strengthen the war machine. The review states that “warfighting capability remains the cornerstone of deterrence and the bedrock of a world-class British Army.”

The fleet of more than 700 Warrior infantry fighting vehicles will be axed and a third of the Challenger II tanks. But nearly 150 Challengers will be retained and upgraded at a cost of 1.3 billion. More than 100 aging aircraft are being phased out. The Royal Navy will lose several frigates, and destroyers will be reduced temporarily later this decade from 19 to 17, after which, however, new warships come into service.

The review includes £3-billion in new Army equipment on top of the more than £20-billion planned. This would fund “Investment in new vehicles modernised long-range precision fires (including multiple launched rocket systems and Apache); new air defences; tactical surveillance drones; and new electronic warfare and cyberspace capabilities...”

A new “Ranger regiment” modelled on the US army’s elite Green Berets as a “special operations-capable force” will focus on counter-insurgency operations at a cost of £120 million. The first 1,000-strong regiment of four battalions will be established early next year.

The Royal Navy is being significantly strengthened, with Wallace announcing, “At sea we will have more ships, submarines, sailors and Future Commando Force deployed on an enduring basis, to contribute to security, protect shipping lanes and uphold freedom of navigation.”

The review pledges that the navy will spend “£40m more over the next four years to develop our Future Commando Force as part of the transformation of our amphibious forces, as well as more than £50m in converting a Bay class support ship to deliver a more agile and lethal littoral strike capability. Forward deployed to respond rapidly to crises, this special operations-capable force will operate alongside our allies and partners in areas of UK interest, ready to strike

from the sea, pre-empt and deter sub-threshold activity, and counter state threats.” The *Daily Telegraph* reported, “The Bay-class ship, which carry a standard load of around 400 troops but can take up to 700 in an emergency, will be fitted out with secure communications and converted to operate airborne, surface and underwater drones.”

A patrol ship, HMS Trent, will operate permanently for the first time from Gibraltar. This will support, “NATO operations in the Mediterranean, work with our North African partners and support multinational counter piracy operations in the Gulf of Guinea off the coast of West Africa.”

Defence in a Competitive Age states, “Russia continues to pose the greatest nuclear, conventional military and sub-threshold threat to European security.” As part of “deterring Russian aggression,” said Wallace, the Royal Navy is to deploy a “spy ship” tasked with preventing Russian submarines damaging undersea cables that could potentially sabotage internet connections.

Strengthening the UK’s two aircraft carriers—for which 45 US-made F-35 Lightning jets have already been ordered—a further £1.2 billion is going on the BAE Systems next-generation Tempest combat jet programme, raising total investment to over £2 billion.

Proposals to cut soldier numbers were decried as undermining the geo-political imperatives of British imperialism. Speaking to the *Times Radio*, retired general and crossbench peer Lord Richards said, “We need to get more into hi-tech, cyber, drone technology and so on”, but that could not be “at the expense of conventional capabilities and key to that is numbers”. He warned the cuts in personnel would mean “we would not be able to recapture the Falklands, almost certainly.”

Lord Dannatt, a former Chief of the General Staff who led the Army from 2006 to 2009, said “Our principal ally the US worries in public about our diminished war fighting capability and our principal foe Russia cannot believe its luck.” Pointing to the Gulf wars of 1991 and 2003, he said, “The threshold below which our Army must not fall is our ability to field a single division into a new major conventional conflict... we cannot today. If this remains the case the US will ignore the UK as a land partner in future.”

Richards, who succeeded Dannatt, added, “This is not the time to cut the size of our ground forces yet again. To retain clout militarily and politically, numbers matter. Mass matters.”

Dannatt and Richards were backed by two other senior military figures, Lieutenant-General Jonathon Riley and Major-General Tim Cross who took to the pages of the *Daily Mail* in an appeal to “Save our army!”

Johnson said in his boorish manner that the armed forces

would be made “match fit”, by which he meant that it would be ready to wage war anywhere and be readied to suppress discontent.

Debate in ruling circles centres on an insistence that the Armed Forces must retain a size capable of carrying out major operations globally, while also being able to utilise the latest technology to upgrade its war machine. The opposition Labour Party positioned itself in the same militarist trench as Johnson, while echoing concerns that troop cuts could jeopardize relations with Washington. John Healey, shadow defence secretary, commented, “Further army cuts could seriously limit our forces’ capacity simultaneously to deploy overseas, support allies and maintain strong national defences and resilience.”

Party leader Sir Keir Starmer led off Wednesday’s Prime Ministers Questions not on the near 150,000 deaths from COVID-19 that Johnson’s herd immunity programme is responsible for, but by criticising army number cuts. “You just can’t trust the Conservatives to protect our armed forces,” he said.

The ridiculing of the size of the infantry (that it no longer fills London’s Wembley Stadium and is at its lowest level since 1824) conceals the fact that, including the navy and air force and around 37,000 reservists, the UK’s armed forces personnel is still substantial at just short of 200,000. The International Institute for Strategic Studies lists the UK—one of the five official nuclear weapon states—as the fourth largest defence budget in the world, only behind China, India and the United States.

The positions of Dannatt, Richards, et al, were bluntly opposed by the MoD and current Chief of the Defence Staff General Nick Carter, who told BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme, “What we propose to do is make this into an army that is much more relevant and an army that will be genuinely lethal.”

Backing him was another former Chief of General Staff, Sir Mike Jackson, who pointed to a recent military war games drill in California in which 100 UK Marines defeated a force of 1,500 US troops. The *Sun* reported that “working in eight teams of 12, they outmanoeuvred their rivals and used helicopter drones linked to screens on their chests to pinpoint weak spots.”

Jackson responded, “This has overturned the principles of war. Mass is no longer the asset it once was—it is all about effect. If you concentrate your force, you are vulnerable.”



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