

British ruling class to vastly increase military spending

Robert Stevens
10 March 2022

NATO's long-planned conflict with Russia over Ukraine has triggered an explosion of imperialist militarism. British capitalism is fighting to keep its place as lead dog in the US war drive.

After Brexit, the UK based its foreign policy on cleaving as closely as possible to US imperialism. It sought to strengthen its naval power in the Asia-Pacific, targeting China, while carrying on as America's chief anti-Russian sabre rattler in Europe.

The run up to and aftermath of the Ukraine war have been touted by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government and its supporters as proof of the success of this policy, proclaiming Britain's ability to marshal Europe behind the US even from outside the EU, by leveraging its military credentials.

However, Russia's invasion has been used to justify a massive rearmament of the UK's European rivals. This is led by Germany, now planning a €100 billion "German Army Special Fund" and at least an additional €24 billion a year for the defence budget, meeting NATO's minimum 2 percent of GDP mandate.

An open discussion has begun on the transformation of Europe into an independent military bloc. The *Telegraph* writes that the "war in Ukraine has supercharged efforts to build an EU [European Union] army". Leading member of the European Parliament Guy Verhofstadt told the Austrian newspaper *Wiener Zeitung*, "We need a united EU military. The member states were always against it, now hopefully they are waking up."

These moves, especially by the much larger economy of Germany, threaten to crowd Britain out of its coveted position as the premier military power in Europe. It has so far attempted to carry out its foreign policy objectives while maintaining defence spending at just over 2 percent GDP. Its two new multi-billion-

pound aircraft carriers have been built as troop numbers have been steadily cut, from 24,940 in 2010 to a planned 19,400 by 2024/5.

Europe's military ambitions prompted the *Guardian* to argue in an editorial for the UK to seek a more balanced relationship with the EU and the US-dominated NATO. Declaring "Putin's military aggression" a threat to both, the editors concluded, "For the foreseeable future, British interests will require institutional partnership with the EU on the level of foreign and security policy."

The Tory Brexiteers counter that there must now be a massive increase in UK military spending to maintain Britain's standing on the world stage.

On Tuesday, former Thatcher aide Nile Gardiner argued in the *Daily Express*, "Defence spending should double from two percent to four percent in the coming years if Britain is serious about being a world power again that can stand up to the likes of Russia and China.

"Britain has demonstrated tremendous political leadership on so many fronts with regards to Ukraine but the reality is, we need to be able to fight and win a ground war against the Russians in Europe."

"We have to have that capability we had generations ago."

UK military spending was almost 8 percent of GDP in the mid-1950's, a decade after World War Two, and was still 4 percent in 1980.

Gardiner's call is echoed in the highest echelons of the military and government.

Sir Michael Fallon, defence minister under prime ministers David Cameron and Theresa May, told the *Sunday Telegraph* that the case for more spending was now "unanswerable". He called for an immediate 25 percent increase "building beyond 2.5 percent by the end of the Parliament. That's the kind of ambition we

need.”

General Lord Dannatt, former Chief of the General Staff intervened to demand an end to “cutting the size of the army any further”. Lord West, formerly a Labour government minister responsible for security and an adviser to Prime Minister Gordon Brown, demanded, “we should be looking at a minimum of 3 percent of GDP for defence”.

Tobias Ellwood, the Tory chair of the House of Commons defence select committee, argued for “a minimum of 3 percent of gross domestic product if Britain wants not only to defend its interests but play an enhanced leadership role on the international stage in these uncertain times”.

The first mammoth increase will be announced in Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s March 23 spring statement. *Sky News* reported Sunday that the “Treasury received almost £9bn more in tax receipts in January 2022” and that two sources told the broadcaster most of this windfall was earmarked for military spending.

This is only a down payment. Far more will come from savage cuts to social spending.

Ben Zaranko, a senior research economist at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, penned a revealing article for *The Conversation* on Monday, “Defence cuts effectively paid for UK welfare state for 60 years—but that looks impossible after Ukraine”.

He writes, “The ‘peace dividend’ from lower spending on defence has, in effect, allowed successive governments to pay for a growing welfare state without having to increase the overall size of the state. In other words, more healthcare without a higher tax burden. That’s been a handy trick—but you can only repeat it for so long.”

Zaranko explains, “If Germany succeeds in meeting its 2% of GDP target, the UK would need to boost its own spending by around 20% to retain its number two spot within Nato.”

Healthcare, pensions, welfare and education currently account for nearly 60 percent of all government spending. Total military spending, including military defence, civil defence, foreign military, foreign economic aid, and defence R&D, consumes 5 percent. Making resources available for a stepped-up military confrontation with Russia means radically shifting this balance.

Within days of the outbreak of war in Ukraine, all

social spending is being spoken of as an unaffordable luxury to be done away with.

Sunday Telegraph editor Allister Heath spelled out how brutal the offensive will be: “The post-Blairite era of social-democratic largesse must end: the state needs to refocus on its core function of defending lives, liberty and property. We require less redistribution, and enhanced resilience. This implies large spending cuts. The social care plan will need to be abandoned, the pensions triple-lock axed, the NHS reformed and numerous wasteful subsidies, pseudo-levelling-up policies and other programmes and handouts ended.”

The Blairite Labour Party has no differences with this agenda. Party leader Sir Keir Starmer was calling on Johnson even before the Russian invasion to “reverse the government’s plans to axe 9,000 soldiers and 79 tanks from the army after a ‘decade of decline’ in the armed forces,” in the words of the *Times*. Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey said yesterday he expects a “big boost to defence” in the Chancellor’s spring statement.

Workers must be warned: This devastating onslaught on the living standards of millions is not being readied for the future. The offensive is underway, with the ruling class on a war footing abroad and at home.

The government has already funnelled hundreds of millions of pounds to Ukraine’s government in the first weeks of the war and on Wednesday Defence Minister Ben Wallace vowed to step up its supply of arms, with the UK now sending anti-aircraft missiles. It has already sent over 3,600 anti-tank weapons as well as other small arms and ammunition. The cost of every one of these weapons will be clawed out of the backs of the working class.



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