

UK Prime Minister Sunak pledges 2.5 percent GDP military spending to place economy on a “war footing”

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Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced Tuesday that Britain is to increase military spending to 2.5 percent of GDP in “the biggest strengthening of our national defence for a generation”.

Spending will increase to 2.5 percent of GDP by 2030, up from 2.3 percent, including new funding for Ukraine, this year. “Over the next six years, we’ll invest an additional £75 billion in our defence,” said Sunak. Downing Street said military spending will reach £87 billion annually by 2030, “ensuring the UK remains by far the second largest defence spender in NATO after the US.”

The Ministry of Defence’s budget covers the ongoing renewal of Britain’s nuclear-armed submarine fleet, and the build and maintenance costs of several hundred nuclear warheads. The upper estimate on nuclear weapons spending alone over the next decades is between £170-£200 billion.

Sunak made his announcement at a military base in front of armoured vehicles and alongside NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in Warsaw, Poland: the first stop on a tour of Europe which included meeting German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin Wednesday.

Sunak said the increase in military spending “is a turning point for European security and a landmark moment in the defence of the United Kingdom.” Speaking at the base of the Warsaw Armoured Brigade, he addressed a regiment of the Queen’s Dragoon Guards: “I want to talk to you about how we equip you to do your duty in an increasingly dangerous world,” with Britain and NATO confronting an “axis of authoritarian states.” Sunak named “Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China.”

Declaring the move to 2.5 percent the equivalent of Winston Churchill’s demands that Britain re-arm in the years leading to the Second World War, the prime

minister said it required placing the “UK’s own defence industry on a war footing... One of the central lessons of the war in Ukraine is that we need deeper stockpiles of munitions and for industry to be able to replenish them more quickly. So today, we’re giving £10 billion in munitions to give industry long-term funding certainty.”

On the heels of the Biden administration announcing the release of \$60 billion to fight Russia in Ukraine, Sunak pledged, “We will send Ukraine an additional half a billion pounds, hitting £3 billion of support this year. And we’ll provide them with the largest-ever package of UK military equipment. This will include more than 400 vehicles, 4 million rounds of ammunition, 60 boats and offshore raiding craft, vital air defences, and long-range precision-guided Storm Shadow missiles.”

Sunak said defeating Russia meant “we must support Ukraine for the long term”. Britain would now “move past this stop-start, piecemeal way of backing Ukraine.” Therefore, “we are today providing a long-term funding guarantee of at least the current level of military support to Ukraine, for every year it is needed.”

Projecting ahead to the possible election of Donald Trump as US President later this year—who has demanded that all NATO members meet the 2 percent of GDP threshold for military spending—Sunak said, “We cannot keep expecting America to pay any price or bear any burden if we ourselves are unwilling to make greater sacrifices for our own security... And at this turning point in European security, if 2.5 percent becomes a new benchmark for all NATO partners to reach, allied defence spending would increase by over £140 billion.”

The uplift in military spending came days after Stockholm International Peace Research Institute announced that the world’s powers spent \$2.4 trillion (£1,970 billion) on military forces last year, the highest

figure ever recorded. The 6.8 percent increase between 2022 and 2023 was the steepest since 2009. A developing global conflagration, with wars raging in Europe and the Middle East, saw for the first time ever an increase in military spend in all five geographical regions analysed: Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania and the Americas.

It is only a few weeks ago that Sunak was still maintaining that the 2.5 percent mark would be reached, “as soon as economic conditions allow”. But he has faced constant demands from the most hawkish Conservative MPs and military top brass to move faster. Last month three former Tory defence secretaries, Michael Fallon, Gavin Williamson and Ben Wallace, called on Sunak to pledge an increase in spending to 3 percent of GDP. Other political and military figures and commentators have called for an increase to 5 or 6 percent or higher.

Within minutes of Sunak’s announcement, economists and other commentators were pointing out that Sunak was still engaging in imperialism “on the cheap” and that the real-terms cash increase announced for the military was nearer £20 billion than £75 billion. Leading the charge was Labour’s Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey, who posted on X, “As [party leader] Keir Starmer recently set out, Labour wants to see a fully funded plan to reach 2.5 percent, but the Tories have shown time and time again that they cannot be trusted on defence and we will examine the detail of their announcement closely.”

This was the opening shot of an election arms race in which Labour, as the “party of NATO” and having declared its preparedness to use nuclear weapons, will ensure that its election manifesto is in line with the war requirements of British imperialism.

Making military spending the premier concern will be Britain’s war-crazed media. A flavour of this was seen in the questions put to Sunak at the press conference. The *Daily Mail*: “You mentioned NATO’s Article Five. Just to be clear, you’re ready to take Britain to war if Russian troops set one boot in this country [Poland] or any other NATO ally, is that right?”; the *Telegraph*: “You had some very strong words about the threat from China at the start of your speech, and you link those directly to this extra money that you’re putting into defence and protecting Britain. Is it now time, as a lot of your MPs want, to designate China officially as a threat?”; *Sky News*: “You talk about Europe being at a turning point and this spending putting the UK on a war footing. Have we entered a pre-war era?”

Six national newspapers led their front pages on the

military being handed further tens of billions, with the *Express*’s banner headline reading, “About Time Too!”

The massive attacks being primed to make the working class pay for the vast financial resources of the military are indicated by the fact that the initial tranche of funding is to come from slashing 72,000 jobs in the civil service. Shapps told *LBC Radio*, referring to the civil service cuts, “We’re simply saying that defence of the realm is the absolute number one priority; it comes before everything else and if we don’t defend the nation, then everything else becomes slightly less of an issue.”

Sunak himself at the press conference spoke of the need to cut the welfare budget to fund the tens of billions of pounds announced in new arms spending. “Last week I outlined a significant set of reforms to the welfare system overall, to tackle what we’re seeing, which is a significant increase in claims and bills. Spending on ill health and disability benefits is forecast to be around £69 billion pounds. That is an extraordinary amount of money. We’re talking about defence spending here today... The PIP [disability benefit] budget alone is forecast to increase by 50 percent in the next four years, unless we do something differently.”

Also making clear it was the working class who had to pay in far deeper austerity cuts than anything seen since the Second World War, the *Telegraph* editorialised, “These [increases in arms spending] are all welcome developments which reflect the worsening international situation, probably the most dangerous since the end of the Cold War when at least 3 per cent of GDP went to the military. The defeat of the Soviet Union was an excuse to cut spending and cash in the so-called ‘peace dividend’, used by successive governments to boost social and welfare programmes. Are these now to be cut back in order to fund defence and, if not, why not?”



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