

Research Briefing

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## The forthcoming strategic defence review 2025: FAQ

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# 1

## What is the strategic defence review?

The Labour government commissioned a strategic defence review (SDR) shortly after taking office in July 2024.<sup>1</sup> The government said the review will “consider the threats Britain faces, the capabilities needed to meet them, the state of UK armed forces and the resources available.”<sup>2</sup>

The Defence Secretary, John Healey, has described this SDR as the “first of its kind in the UK”.<sup>3</sup> This is because it will be externally led, whereas previous defence reviews have been conducted by the government.

### 1 Defence and security reviews

A defence review enables a government to present a forward-looking assessment of Britain’s strategic interests and requisite military requirements.

The UK Government has conducted at least one review of its defence policy in every decade since the Second World War.

Recent iterations have broadened beyond purely defence considerations and have reflected the government’s assessment of national security, outlined the core values of its foreign policy and set out an overarching strategy to guide international and domestic policy.

In 2021 the previous government published the [integrated review of security, defence, development, and foreign policy](#). The unforeseen pace of geopolitical change, however, necessitated a [refresh of that strategy in 2023](#).

The Labour party pledged in its [general election 2024 manifesto](#) to hold a fresh defence review upon taking office.

Further information on the evolution of defence reviews and a summary of major decisions can be found in Commons Library briefing [A brief guide to previous British defence reviews](#).

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Defence, [New era for defence: government launches root and branch review of UK Armed Forces](#), 16 July 2024

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Defence, [New era for defence: government launches root and branch review of UK Armed Forces](#), 16 July 2024

<sup>3</sup> [HC Deb 18 November 2024 c4](#)

## 2

## Why is a review needed now?

It is not unusual for a new government to want to set out its own priorities for the armed forces; the previous Labour government did so in 1998, as did the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010.

Announcing the review on 16 July 2024, Prime Minister Keir Starmer said:

We live in a more dangerous and volatile world. My government will forge a new clear-eyed approach to our national defences, equipping us to tackle international threats head-on while keeping the British people safe and secure.<sup>4</sup>

The Defence Secretary, John Healey, spoke of the need for a “new era for defence”, stating that “hollowed-out armed forces, procurement waste and neglected morale cannot continue”.<sup>5</sup> Mr Healey elaborated on this theme in a speech at RUSI’s land warfare conference noting that “all three services face very serious challenges”.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the analysis of the state of the UK’s armed forces in recent years has questioned their ability to engage in a sustained fight. Nick Childs and Ben Barry, with the International Institute for Strategic Studies, state “the general consensus is that the UK armed forces have been significantly ‘hollowed out’”.<sup>7</sup> Professor Malcolm Chalmers, deputy director general of the defence think tank RUSI, told the Defence Select Committee in November 2024 that “right now, the MOD is being asked to do a wider range of tasks than it has the resources to fulfil”.<sup>8</sup>

In January 2023, the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee noted each of the three services “face a different set of challenges” and reforming the army “will be a particularly challenging task”.<sup>9</sup> In September 2024, the committee said the UK must learn from, and

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<sup>4</sup> MOD, [New era for defence: government launches root and branch review of UK armed forces](#), 16 July 2024

<sup>5</sup> MOD, [New era for defence: government launches root and branch review of UK armed forces](#), 16 July 2024

<sup>6</sup> MOD, [Defence Secretary speech at RUSI land warfare conference 2024](#), 23 July 2024

<sup>7</sup> Nick Childs and Ben Barry, ‘UK defence: New options for change?’, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 12 July 2024

<sup>8</sup> Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: One-off session on defence spending](#) (PDF), 5 November 2024, HC 327 2024-25

<sup>9</sup> Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, [UK defence policy: from aspiration to reality?](#) (PDF), HL Paper 124 2023-24, 12 January 2023; A summary of the report, and the government’s response, can be found in House of Lords Library briefing, ‘[UK defence policy: International Relations and Defence Committee report](#)’, 14 June 2023

integrate, the lessons learned from the war in Ukraine, saying that conflict has exposed the limitations of the UK's military strength:

We found that the UK's armed forces lack the mass, resilience, and internal coherence necessary to maintain a deterrent effect and respond effectively to prolonged and high-intensity warfare.<sup>10</sup>

The committee called on the government to clearly outline its priorities for UK defence and provide a "realistic roadmap for turning aspirations into reality".<sup>11</sup>

In February 2024, the Defence Select Committee questioned the warfighting readiness of the armed forces after hearing from former senior officials and experts. The committee concluded: "Either the Ministry of Defence must be fully funded to engage in operations whilst also developing warfighting readiness; or the Government must reduce the operational burden on the Armed Forces".<sup>12</sup>

Lord Robertson told Members of the House of Lords that the purpose of the review is: "to make sure UK defence has not only the capabilities required but the new roles and reforms in place to meet the challenges faced by the nation and the world."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, [Ukraine: A wake-up call](#), HL Paper 10 2024-25, 26 September 2024

<sup>11</sup> Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, [Ukraine: A wake-up call](#), HL Paper 10 2024-25, 26 September 2024

<sup>12</sup> Defence Committee, [Ready for war?](#), HC 26 2023-24, 4 February 2024

<sup>13</sup> [HL Deb 9 October 2024 c219GC](#)

### 3

## When will the SDR be published?

The government has not committed to an exact date. When first announced, the MOD indicated Lord Robertson would report in the first half of 2025.<sup>14</sup>

John Healey subsequently told the Defence Select Committee he expects the reviewers to produce their final report in the spring:

I expect the reviewers to complete their reports and deliver them in spring. I expect to be able to publish a version of that report, and I will report that strategic defence review to Parliament.<sup>15</sup>

On 25 February 2025, upon announcing plans to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP from 2027 (see section 8), Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the SDR is still being finalised:

The SDR is well under way, and as soon it has been completed I will put it before the House, but what is most important is for us to get it right rather than meeting a timeline. I am not seeking to delay it, but I am absolutely clear in my own mind that we need to ensure that we understand the challenges we face, and the capability.<sup>16</sup>

On 5 March, Armed Forces Minister Luke Pollard said, “the reviewers will make their final report in the Spring and the Defence Secretary will subsequently report to Parliament”.<sup>17</sup> The Minister also said “the SDR will feed into the national security strategy which brings together the reviews already commissioned across Government”.<sup>18</sup>

However, on 11 March, the Times reported discussions within government over whether Lord Robertson’s review should be published. According to the Times, Jonathan Powell, the UK’s national security adviser, is “lobbying for the review to be wrapped into a wider cross-government assessment of threats and is arguing the final version should not be published”. The Times also reported that according to MOD sources, the review would be published in the spring and the document is being finalised.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Defence, [New era for defence: government launches root and branch review of UK Armed Forces](#), 16 July 2024

<sup>15</sup> Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: Introductory session with the Secretary of State for Defence](#), 21 November 2024, HC 345 2024-25, q9; See also [HC Deb 18 November 2024 c5](#)

<sup>16</sup> [HC Deb 25 February 2025 c656](#)

<sup>17</sup> PQ33400 [[Strategic defence review](#)], 5 March 2025

<sup>18</sup> PQ33513 [[Strategic defence review](#)], 5 March 2025

<sup>19</sup> [British army must spend billions to prepare for war, ministers told](#), The Times, 11 March 2025

## 2 The Australian precedent

In August 2022 the Australian government [commissioned an independent defence strategic review](#) led by former Defence Minister Sir Stephen Smith (who has, since January 2023, been Australia's Ambassador to the UK).

In April 2023 the [government released the public version of the defence strategic review](#), the Government's response to the review, and the National Defence Statement 2023, all of which were contained in one document. The structure of the document was:

1. A national defence statement, written by the Minister for Defence
2. The defence strategic review
3. The Albanese government's response to the defence strategic review's recommendations (individual responses to each recommendation)

In 2024, the [government subsequently published a National Defence Strategy and Integrated Investment Program](#), setting out the changes to the force structure. A short account can be found in Australia's Parliamentary Library briefing [Defence changes course to implement national defence strategy](#).



## 4

# Is this separate to the National Security Review?

Yes.

On 25 February 2025, Prime Minister Keir Starmer [announced plans to publish a new national security strategy](#) (NSS) before the [NATO summit on 24 to 26 June 2025](#).<sup>20</sup>

The Prime Minister also said that the NSS will pull together a number of reviews currently underway across government.

More information on the forthcoming national security strategy, and a list of ongoing reviews and strategies in development, can be found in Commons Library briefing The [forthcoming national security strategy 2025: FAQ](#).

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<sup>20</sup> [HC Deb 25 February 2025 c631](#)

## 5 Who is leading the review?

The SDR is being led by Lord Robertson, a former Defence Secretary, who conducted the Labour party's last major defence review in 1998. He also served as Secretary General of NATO (1999 to 2003).<sup>21</sup>

Lord Robertson is supported by two other external reviewers:

- Dr Fiona Hill, who was deputy assistant to the US President and senior director for European and Russian affairs on the U.S. National Security Council from 2017 to 2019.<sup>22</sup>
- General Sir Richard Barrons, a former Commander Joint Forces Command and former Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff.

Additional external members of the defence review team include Angus Lapsley, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Defence Policy and Planning, Sir Jeremy Quin, a former Conservative Minister for Defence Procurement and chair of the Defence Select Committee, and others with industry, technology and HM Treasury expertise.<sup>23</sup>

Lord Robertson said the inclusion of these experts, including a former Conservative Defence Minister, shows that the SDR is “emphatically not a Labour defence review; it is the British effort to ensure that the United Kingdom is secure at home and strong abroad”.<sup>24</sup>

The Defence Secretary said the review has “set up 26 review and challenge panels and is drawing in almost 150 external experts from the whole range of defence”.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Defence, [New era for defence: government launches root and branch review of UK Armed Forces](#), 16 July 2024

<sup>22</sup> Brookings Institution, [Expert: Fiona Hill](#), accessed 22 November 2024

<sup>23</sup> MOD, [Decades of defence and international experience added to review team](#), 1 September 2024

<sup>24</sup> [HL Deb 9 October 2024 c219GC](#)

<sup>25</sup> [HC Deb 18 November 2024 c20](#)

## 6 Is there a public consultation?

The MOD described the SDR as “Britain’s review” which will consult “serving military, veterans, MPs of all parties, industry, and academia”.<sup>26</sup>

A [call for evidence](#) was opened on 28 August and closed on 30 September 2024.<sup>27</sup>

Lord Robertson opened a debate in the House of Lords on the SDR on 9 October 2024. He said this was to give Members of the Lords “the opportunity to offer a view on what should be in that review and how Members of the House might want it to conclude”.<sup>28</sup> He also said the review had received 14,500 submissions so far.

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<sup>26</sup> MOD, [Strategic Defence Review 2024-2025: Call for evidence](#), 28 August 2024

<sup>27</sup> MOD, [Strategic Defence Review 2024-2025: Call for evidence](#), 28 August 2024

<sup>28</sup> [HL Deb 9 October 2024 c219GC](#)

## 7

# What will the review look at?

The Defence Secretary has said the review will have a “NATO-first policy” because NATO is the “cornerstone of UK and Euro-Atlantic security”.<sup>29</sup>

The MOD has set out clear parameters in which the review will work. The terms of reference for the review said that, within these parameters, the review “will consider the need for prioritisation of objectives, and therefore investments and activity, to set out a deliverable and affordable plan for Defence.”<sup>30</sup> The parameters are:

- a total commitment to the UK’s nuclear deterrent
- a ‘NATO-first’ defence policy
- options to reinforce homeland security
- ongoing support for Ukraine
- the centrality of personnel to defence plans
- maintaining defence ties with the Indo-Pacific region, the Gulf and the Middle East
- a commitment to AUKUS, the partnership with Australia and the US to deliver new submarines and collaborate on emerging technologies

The terms of reference also identified key issues the review should consider:

- The strategic and operational context, including the threat picture and the current baseline state of UK Defence.
- The major features of the force structure needed to create the necessary integrated multi-domain Defence capability of the future.
- The opportunities for modernisation and transformation, and greater productivity, including through the rapid and consistent application of Digital Age technologies.
- The UK’s international partnerships and alliances, and how these can be strengthened in the cause of collective security and deterrence.

<sup>29</sup> [HC Deb 18 November 2024 c8](#); MOD, [Defence Secretary speech at RUSI Land Warfare Conference 2024](#), 23 July 2024

<sup>30</sup> MOD, [Strategic Defence Review 2024-2025: Terms of reference](#), 17 July 2024

- The approach to be taken to acquisition and support in order to deliver the required capabilities in a timely way, and how to secure the best possible value for money and rapidly changing technology.
- The approach to recruiting, educating, training and retaining the people needed for One Defence, including Regular, Reserve, Civil Service and industry. This is to include how Service life can be improved for those who commit to serve their country in uniform.
- The Defence Estate including how it can be modernised and streamlined to support both defence outputs and wider HMG objectives on housebuilding and net zero.
- The state of the defence technological and industrial base, and the contribution of Defence to the government's Growth Mission.<sup>31</sup>

The terms of reference explicitly state that “other areas of national security policy are outside the scope of the Review”.<sup>32</sup>

## 7.1 “Four lenses”: NATO, homeland security, global responsibilities and hybrid warfare

Lt General Sir Rob Magowan, the deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Military Capability), told the Defence Committee that the MOD is looking at the review through “four lenses”, and are “trying to balance resources against these lenses”.<sup>33</sup> He described the four lenses as:

- NATO-first, which will “run through the heart of any outcome of the review”
- Global responsibilities
- Homeland defence
- Hybrid grey zone activity (such as attacks on critical national infrastructure, Russian aircraft nearing UK airspace, cyber-attacks)

Lt Gen Magowan said “we have to ensure that we have the capability to fight the fight today, as well as deter for warfighting”, going on to explain:

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<sup>31</sup> MOD, [Strategic Defence Review 2024-2025: Terms of reference](#), 17 July 2024

<sup>32</sup> MOD, [Strategic Defence Review 2024-2025: Terms of reference](#), 17 July 2024

<sup>33</sup> Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: Introductory session with the Secretary of State for Defence](#), 21 November 2024, HC 345 2024-25, q15

That is why there is such an integrated and intense review to ensure that we can offer, through the independent team, a range of options to the Secretary of State that he can choose from in due course.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: Introductory session with the Secretary of State for Defence](#), 21 November 2024, HC 345 2024-25, q15

## 8 Will there be changes to current and planned capabilities?

The review's terms of reference said it will examine current and planned capabilities:

The Review will identify where reprioritisation of roles, capabilities, activities, and support may be made in the current Defence programme, to allow new investment, achieve better value for money, and secure greater economic gain for the UK, and will make recommendations.<sup>35</sup>

The review will also assess whether defence has the “right balance between high-end and conventional weapons”.<sup>36</sup>

The government announced some reductions to capabilities in November 2024.

### 8.1 Announced cuts to capabilities

On 20 November 2024, the Defence Secretary announced that six “outdated military capabilities”, including helicopters, ships and drones, will be taken out of service.<sup>37</sup> John Healey said this will save the MOD £150 million over the next two years and up to £500 million over five years. Mr Healey also said that the “decisions are all backed by our Military Chiefs and taken in consultation with those leading the Strategic Defence Review”.<sup>38</sup>

The Defence Secretary identified the capabilities to be cut in oral and written statements.<sup>39</sup> The capabilities to be withdrawn are:

- HMS Northumberland, a type 23 frigate which will be retired in March 2025. The Defence Secretary said the ship has sustained structural damage “as a result of service well beyond” its original out of service date which “makes her uneconomical to repair”. The ship's company

<sup>35</sup> MOD, [Strategic Defence Review 2024-2025: Terms of reference](#), 17 July 2024

<sup>36</sup> Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, [Government Response to the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee's Report 'Ukraine: a wake-up call'](#), 27 November 2024

<sup>37</sup> [HC Deb 20 November 2024 c288](#); HCWS239 [[Defence Programmes Development](#)], 20 November 2024

<sup>38</sup> HCWS239 [[Defence Programmes Development](#)], 20 November 2024

<sup>39</sup> [HC Deb 20 November 2024 c288](#); HCWS239 [[Defence Programmes Development](#)], 20 November 2024

has already been assigned elsewhere. The Type 23 frigates are being retired throughout the 2020s and will be replaced by the new type 26 and 31 class of frigates, both of which are under construction.

- 46 Watchkeeper mark 1s, an army operated remotely piloted aircraft (or drone), which will be withdrawn from service from March 2025. The National Audit Office has previously criticised the programme for extensive delays.<sup>40</sup> The Defence Secretary said the army will be able to invest in new advanced drone capabilities.
- HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, the Royal Navy's two amphibious assault ships, will be retired in March 2025. They have been held at lower readiness and have not been to sea since 2023 and 2017 respectively. The Defence Secretary said they were not planned to return to sea before their planned out of service dates of 2023 and 2024, meaning they had, in effect, "been mothballed". Withdrawing them will save £9 million per year. Most crew have been reassigned. They will be replaced by the planned multi-role support ships, and the Royal Marines will be supported by the three Bay class auxiliary landing ship docks and by RFA Argus.
- Two tankers, the Wave class auxiliary oilers RFA Wave Knight and RFA Wave Ruler, will be retired by March 2025. They have been held in extended readiness for some time and have not been at sea since 2017 and 2022 respectively. They were not due to return to sea before their planned out of service date in 2028. All crew have been reassigned. They have been replaced by new Tide class auxiliary oilers.
- The retirement of 14 of the oldest Chinook helicopters will be accelerated, ahead of their replacement by 14 more modern Chinook helicopters from 2027.
- Puma helicopters will be retired in March 2025 when the current support contract expires. Puma currently operates in Cyprus and Brunei and will be replaced from 2026 by the new Airbus H-145. A commercial or military solution will be used in the meantime to provide a firefighting capability in Cyprus, and alternatives will be used in Brunei to support jungle training.

John Healey indicated that no decision has yet been made as to what to do with the capabilities: "the decommissioning decisions have been taken, but what we do with the kit as it comes out of service has not yet been settled".<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> National Audit Office, [Defence capabilities – delivering what was promised](#), 18 March 2020, HC 106 2019-21

<sup>41</sup> [HC Deb 20 November 2024 c297](#)



## Commitment to future capabilities

The Defence Secretary was questioned by the Defence Select Committee about these cuts and what else might be at risk. When asked about the aircraft carriers, Mr Healey said they are “under scrutiny but not in jeopardy”.<sup>42</sup> Mr Healey also said the government is committed to GCAP, the [global combat air programme](#) to replace the RAF’s Typhoon combat aircraft from the 2030s, being developed with Japan and Italy.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: Introductory session with the Secretary of State for Defence](#), 21 November 2024, HC 345 2024-25, q8

<sup>43</sup> Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: Introductory session with the Secretary of State for Defence](#), 21 November 2024, HC 345 2024-25, q58

## 9

# How much is the government spending on defence?

On 25 February 2025, Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced plans to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP from 2027 and for the remainder of the current parliament.<sup>44</sup>

Speaking on the third anniversary of the Ukraine war, in a speech discussing “the international situation and the implications for Britain’s national security”, the Prime Minister said, “starting today, this Government will begin the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war”.<sup>45</sup>

The government said the increase will be funded by a [decrease in international aid spending, from 0.5% of GNI to 0.3% from 2027](#).<sup>46</sup>

The Prime Minister also indicated plans to further increase spending to 3%:

Subject to economic and fiscal conditions, and aligned with our strategic and operational needs, we will also set a clear ambition for defence spending to rise to 3% of GDP in the next Parliament.<sup>47</sup>

Further information on UK defence spending, the NATO target, and comparisons with NATO allies, can be found in Commons Library briefing [UK defence spending](#).

Further information on revised spending plans for 2024/25 for the Ministry of Defence can be found in Commons Library briefing [Revised government spending plans for 2024/25](#).

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<sup>44</sup> [HC Deb 25 February 2025 c631](#)

<sup>45</sup> [HC Deb 25 February 2025 c631](#)

<sup>46</sup> [HC Deb 25 February 2025 c631](#)

<sup>47</sup> [HC Deb 25 February 2025 c631](#)

## 10

# What changes have been announced about how defence is managed?

In October 2024, the Defence Secretary announced what he described as the “biggest reform of the Ministry of Defence in over 50 years”.<sup>48</sup> This includes the launch of a new Military Strategic Headquarters in the MOD, new powers for the Chief of the Defence Staff to formally command the individual Service Chiefs, and the appointment of a new National Armaments Director. The new headquarters (MSHQ) is expected to be fully functioning by the end of 2024.

Questioned by the chair of the Defence Committee about announcing these internal reforms before the SDR has been completed, the Defence Secretary said they needed to be in place to deliver the recommendations and strategy expected to be set out in the SDR.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> MOD, [Major defence reforms launched, with new National Armaments Director to tackle waste and boost industry](#), 25 October 2024

<sup>49</sup> Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: Introductory session with the Secretary of State for Defence](#), 21 November 2024, HC 345 2024-25, q3

## 11

# Will there be reductions to the civilian workforce?

David Williams, the Permanent Secretary for the MOD, told the Defence Committee that he expects to reduce the number of civil servants by 10% over the lifetime of this Parliament, saying the MOD needs to get back to 2019 levels “as a net position”.<sup>50</sup>

He said the MOD has reduced the civilian headcount by 1,000 over the previous 12 months to full-time equivalents of 56,800. This total includes around 6,000 police officers and guards, 1,500 healthcare professionals and over 3,000 scientists. He said there are no plans for specific redundancy programmes.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: Introductory session with the Secretary of State for Defence](#), 21 November 2024, HC 345 2024-25, q28 and 29

<sup>51</sup> Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: Introductory session with the Secretary of State for Defence](#), 21 November 2024, HC 345 2024-25, q28

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## 12 Are there any other MOD-led reviews underway?

Yes. The MOD is conducting reviews into its cadet and reserve forces, updating its veterans' strategy and developing a defence industrial strategy.

### 12.1 Cadets and reserve forces

The Minister for Veterans and People, Al Carns, is undertaking a review of cadets and reserves in November 2024.<sup>52</sup> He said it will be “linked to the strategic defence review”.

### 12.2 Defence industrial strategy

The Labour party's election manifesto pledged to bring forward a “defence industrial strategy aligning our security and economic priorities”.<sup>53</sup> In October, the Department for Business and Trade published an industrial strategy green paper, identifying defence as one of eight “growth-driving sectors”.<sup>54</sup> The green paper said the Defence Secretary will commission a defence industrial strategy which “will be the sector plan for defence in the industrial strategy”.

A consultation on the industrial strategy closed on 24 November 2024 and the government said it expects to publish the final industrial strategy in spring 2025, alongside the multi-year spending review.<sup>55</sup>

On 2 December, the MOD published a statement of intent which “outlines the approach and process the Ministry of Defence will follow in developing this new Defence Industrial Strategy”.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> [HC Deb 18 November 2024 c21](#)

<sup>53</sup> Labour party, [Change](#), June 2024

<sup>54</sup> Department for Business and Trade, [Invest 2035: the UK's modern industrial strategy](#), 14 October 2024

<sup>55</sup> Department for Business and Trade, [Invest 2035: the UK's modern industrial strategy](#), 14 October 2024

<sup>56</sup> MOD, [Defence industrial strategy – statement of intent](#), 2 December 2024

The MOD has said the defence industrial strategy will be separate to the SDR:

The Defence Industrial Strategy will be developed at pace. It will be informed by, but remain separate from, the Strategic Defence Review and will be published in late Spring 2025, with a remit extending to 2035. It will be a sector plan as part of the wider Government's Industrial Strategy.<sup>57</sup>

## 12.3 AUKUS review

AUKUS is name of the defence and security partnership between Australia, the UK and the United States working on new submarines and emerging technologies.

In September 2024, the Defence Secretary announced Sir Stephen Lovegrove, a former Permanent Secretary at the MOD and National Security Advisor, has been appointed as the government's AUKUS advisor, to "assess UK progress against AUKUS goals".<sup>58</sup> John Healey said the "AUKUS report will be completed rapidly" and its conclusions "reflected in the broader Strategic Defence Review already underway".<sup>59</sup> In December, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) said an unclassified version of Sir Stephen's report will be published in due course.<sup>60</sup>

For further details see Commons Library briefings [AUKUS submarine \(SSN-A\) programme](#) and [AUKUS pillar 2: Advanced capabilities](#).

## 12.4 Continuing reviews

The Ministry of Defence is continuing to implement the recommendations of reviews undertaken by the previous government. These include the Haythornthwaite review into terms and conditions of service, and the review into the treatment of LGBT personnel who served prior to 2000.

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<sup>57</sup> MOD, [Defence industrial strategy – statement of intent](#), 2 December 2024

<sup>58</sup> HCWS92 [[Recent developments in the AUKUS strategic partnership](#)], 12 September 2024

<sup>59</sup> HCWS92 [[Recent developments in the AUKUS strategic partnership](#)], 12 September 2024

<sup>60</sup> PQ17120 [[AUKUS](#)], 9 December 2024

## Commentary: What are the expectations for the review?

Much of the response to the announcement of the SDR has focused on the challenges for the government in balancing the current and potential financial envelope with the state of the armed forces, current and planned for capabilities, and the potential future demands on the armed forces, up to and including a peer-on-peer conflict. Some have also questioned the purely defence focus of the review at the expense of a statement of the new government's view of the UK in the world.

Nick Childs and Ben Barry, with the International Institute for Strategic Studies, argue that while in many ways the new government's diagnosis of the threats and challenges hardly differs from its predecessor Conservative administrations "the difference is that it is now up to this administration to deliver on this". They suggest that while resources are a critical issue "getting value and effect from them is also vital". They also suggest financial constraints will likely drive some "stark choices" on capability priorities, adding "such decisions have been ducked up to now, but probably cannot be delayed for very long".<sup>61</sup>

Philip Stevens, writing in the Financial Times, argues the government has to persuade voters of the need to pay for a new national security framework that is appropriate for the current geopolitical landscape.<sup>62</sup> He criticised previous reviews for failing to do so:

The hallowed tradition of such reviews is that they pretend to reconcile grandiose ambitions with economic austerity. The result is that Britain has a Potemkin village military retaining the emblems of a pocket superpower, but without the necessary hard capabilities.<sup>63</sup>

The defence think tank RUSI has published several commentaries on the SDR.

Malcolm Chalmers, deputy director general of RUSI, says the government needs to be clear on what it wants to do: "a clear focus on a small number of force-driving objectives can help improve the effectiveness with which the

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<sup>61</sup> Nick Childs and Ben Barry, '[UK defence: New options for change?](#)', International Institute for Strategic Studies, 12 July 2024

<sup>62</sup> Philip Stevens, Britain's national security demands more than a defence review, Financial Times, 22 November 2024

<sup>63</sup> Philip Stevens, Britain's national security demands more than a defence review, Financial Times, 22 November 2024

Ministry of Defence achieves its goals”.<sup>64</sup> He suggests “a deepened focus on homeland defence and NATO could be the most appropriate yardstick against which to determine priorities”. Mr Chalmers also briefed the Defence Select Committee on the defence budget and financial considerations on 5 November 2024.<sup>65</sup>

Three former senior MOD officials, Will Jessett, Tom McKane and Peter Watkins, articulate one way to assess the forthcoming SDR is by applying five tests they first outlined in anticipation of the 2021 integrated review. These five tests are<sup>66</sup>:

- Accurately assessing the geopolitical space and the UK’s response, for example, how the SDR sets out the balance between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions.
- Clearly setting out capability/force structure planning, noting the terms of reference mention “integrated multi-domain defence capability”.
- The choices on capabilities and force structure, so how to balance the capabilities needed today and what the UK needs in the future.
- Budgetary considerations and whether the SDR will be able to achieve its goals. The authors urge the reviewers to “resist optimism that significant financial ‘efficiencies’ can be created and that new capabilities can be developed and fielded at bargain basement prices”.
- The redesign of the organisation, including already known plans to create a military strategic headquarters within the MOD, to give greater authority for the Chief of Defence Staff and appoint a new National Armaments Director.

Paul O’Neill, a senior associate fellow at RUSI, calls on the reviewers to ensure training is at the heart of the review, with personnel able to access realistic, demanding and predictably funded training.<sup>67</sup>

Nick Chaffey, the CEO of Northrop Grumman UK, writing in the *New Statesman*, says “the SDR must urgently set out how the UK will achieve the capability needed to counter threats to the UK’s security, and that of our allies”. Welcoming the engagement with industry, he also calls for a clear statement of the government’s vision for what he calls a “new era of

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<sup>64</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, [What does ‘NATO first’ mean for UK defence?](#), 7 October 2024

<sup>65</sup> Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: One-off session on defence spending](#) (PDF), 5 November 2024, HC 327 2024-25

<sup>66</sup> Will Jessett, Tom McKane and Peter Watkins, [The new approach to the UK strategic defence review: tests for success](#), 9 October 2024

<sup>67</sup> Paul O’Neill, [The strategic defence review must put training at its heart](#), 13 August 2024



industrial partnership” and provide the private sector with long-term certainty.<sup>68</sup>

Dr Emma Salisbury and James Rogers, at the Council on Geostrategy, argue the UK “should place sea power at the heart of its agenda”. They explain “sea power is not only naval power; it also encompasses a country’s ability to project and further its political and economic interests by sea”. They examine the recent evolution of sea power in government reviews and argue sea power is central to delivering economic growth and national security. This means, they concluded, the SDR should “prioritise a larger and more potent navy” and that sea power should be at the “nucleus” of whatever form a future integrated force takes.<sup>69</sup>

Ben Wallace, the former Defence Secretary (2019 to 2023), criticised the government’s announcement of cuts to certain capabilities in November without announcing what they would be replacing them with, saying “to tell the world we are scaling back our capabilities when our enemies are doing the opposite is pure folly”.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Nick Chaffey, [‘What we need from the strategic defence review’](#), New Statesman, 23 September 2024

<sup>69</sup> Dr Emma Salisbury and James Rodgers, [The strategic defence review, Britain and sea power](#), 5 November 2024

<sup>70</sup> Ben Wallace, Labour is scaling back our defence capabilities while our enemies do the opposite, The Telegraph, 20 November 2024

## Commentary: What might the MOD use the additional spending on?

The Prime Minister's announcement that the UK will spend 2.5% of GDP on defence from 2027, and his earlier comment about potentially deploying the armed forces to Ukraine as part of a peacekeeping force if a peace agreement is reached, led to speculation about the state of the armed forces and what the additional money might fund.<sup>71</sup>

The government has not indicated what the additional money will be spent on. The government's press release accompanying the Prime Minister's statement said it will "accelerate the adoption of cutting-edge capabilities that are vital to retain a decisive edge as threats rapidly evolve".<sup>72</sup> The additional funds will also "reverse the hollowing out of recent decades and rebuild stockpiles, munitions, and enablers depleted after a period focused on international terrorism and global crises".<sup>73</sup>

Matthew Savill, Director of military sciences at the defence think tank RUSI, said the focus on 2.5% or 3% is "obscuring the fact that what NATO and Europe in particular require are credible armed forces capable of fighting and winning, such that they deter an adversary from even attempting to use force".<sup>74</sup>

Savill also suggests that "just standing still", meaning sustaining the current size and capability of the armed forces, is "likely to require a sizable proportion of what might amount to around £6 billion a year in extra spending above the existing budget".<sup>75</sup> Nuclear issues will likely consume a growing proportion of the defence budget, he suggests, and points to gaps in the current equipment plan identified by the National Audit Office. In addition, personnel costs will rise with the 2024 public sector pay announcement.

Savill suggested "there is a case to be made that alongside investment in new technology, AI and experimentation, the foundations of defence must be fixed in ways which are fundamental, if unflashy".<sup>76</sup> These include

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<sup>71</sup> [HC Deb 25 February 2025 c631; Starmer: I am ready and willing to put British troops in Ukraine](#), The Telegraph, 16 February 2025

<sup>72</sup> Prime Minister's Office, [Prime Minister sets out biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the Cold War, protecting British people in new era for national security](#), 25 February 2025

<sup>73</sup> Prime Minister's Office, [Prime Minister sets out biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the Cold War, protecting British people in new era for national security](#), 25 February 2025

<sup>74</sup> Matthew Savill, [Starmer shows his hand on defence spending](#), RUSI, 26 February 2025

<sup>75</sup> Matthew Savill, [Starmer shows his hand on defence spending](#), RUSI, 26 February 2025

<sup>76</sup> Matthew Savill, [Starmer shows his hand on defence spending](#), RUSI, 26 February 2025

investment in personnel, to increase retention, and addressing basing and infrastructure issues. Other areas of concern, he says, are artillery, logistics, medical and intelligence capabilities.

Danielle Sheridan, the Telegraph's defence editor, said money was needed to restock ammunition, missiles, artillery and tanks given to Ukraine, fund pay rises, pay to fix crumbling accommodation, launch recruitment drives, and pay for "less glamorous enterprises" like looking after RAF runways and purchasing vehicle spares and parts. She suggests the military also needs more Typhoon combat aircraft, artillery, tanks and frigates.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> [What it would take to get Britain ready for war with Russia](#), The Telegraph, 1 March 2025

## Parliamentary coverage

This section highlights debates that have focused almost wholly on the SDR.

In addition, the Commons Library collates lists of ministerial statements, urgent questions and parliamentary debates (from both Houses of Parliament) that cover international affairs and defence in parliamentary sessions: [International affairs and defence: Parliamentary debates and statements in the 2024-25 session](#).

### House of Commons debate, July 2024

Some MPs discussed the SDR during the King's Speech debate on foreign affairs and defence on 18 July 2024.

James Cartlidge, the shadow Defence Secretary and former Minister for Defence Procurement, said the Opposition would work with Lord Robertson "in a constructive and collaborative manner".<sup>78</sup> He focused his remarks on the need to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, saying that "without a clear pathway to 2.5%, the Ministry of Defence would have had to make substantial cuts or deferments to programmes in order to afford that necessary replenishment of our munitions".<sup>79</sup> Andrew Mitchell, the former Minister for Development and Africa, also said not committing to increase spending to 2.5% of GDP "gives the wrong signal to our allies and adversaries".<sup>80</sup>

### House of Lords debate, October 2024

Members of the House of Lords, including several former chiefs of staff, debated the strategic defence review on 9 October 2024.

Lord Stirrup argued the government should be spending 3% of GDP, saying that without a sizeable increase in spending "the current defence review would be like someone deciding whether to buy two or three fire extinguishers while the building is burning around their ears".<sup>81</sup>

Lord West of Spithead spoke of how defence has been "systematically underfunded for many years", noting that while the 1998 SDR set out the

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<sup>78</sup> [HC Deb 18 July 2024 c270](#)

<sup>79</sup> [HC Deb 18 July 2024 c270](#)

<sup>80</sup> [HC Deb 18 July 2024 c222](#)

<sup>81</sup> [HL Deb 9 October 2024 c225GC](#)

required force structure to counter the threats identified at the time, it “quickly ceased being fully funded”.<sup>82</sup>

Lord Houghton of Richmond said recent reviews “were ultimately the product of financial, rather than geostrategic, reality”.<sup>83</sup> He suggested the UK has to decide what role it wants to play and offered two options: the first being to “double down on what we have traditionally aspired to be as a nation – a global leader”. This, he said, would be the more expensive option. A second, more modest option, would involve “coming to terms with a reduced global ambition and accepting that there are limits to where we envisage projecting force”. Making this decision would then dictate choices about capability, Lord Houghton argued, rather than capability choices predetermining the policy aspiration.<sup>84</sup>

Lord De Mauley, chair of the Lords International Relations and Defence Committee which published a report in September 2024 on the implications of the war in Ukraine for defence, said the UK is “underprepared to respond to the worsening global threat environment, and in particular to meet the very real and growing threat from Russia”.<sup>85</sup>

Lord Craig of Radley spoke of the ongoing issues with recruitment and retention and called on the review to “treat this aspect of its work with maximum attention and seriousness”.<sup>86</sup>

## House of Commons debate, November 2024

MPs discussed the review following the Defence Secretary’s announcement of capability cuts. Referring to those cuts, James Cartlidge said he sought and received assurances from the Navy that HMS Bulwark and Albion could have been regenerated to a condition that enabled them to fight in the event of a full-scale warfighting scenario in which the priority for the Navy was littoral capability, and that permanently scrapping the landing ships “means removing that capability entirely”.<sup>87</sup> Mr Cartlidge also questioned why the Defence Secretary did not wait for the SDR before making the decisions he had.

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Lab), the chair of the Defence Select Committee, said the cuts are being implemented “without the full findings of the strategic defence review having been announced”.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> [HL Deb 9 October 2024 c227GC](#)

<sup>83</sup> [HL Deb 9 October 2024 c228GC](#)

<sup>84</sup> [HL Deb 9 October 2024 c230GC](#)

<sup>85</sup> [HL Deb 9 October 2024 c230GC](#)

<sup>86</sup> [HL Deb 9 October 2024 c236GC](#)

<sup>87</sup> [HC Deb 20 November 2024 c290](#)

<sup>88</sup> [HC Deb 20 November 2024 c292](#)

Richard Foord, the former Liberal Democrats spokesman for defence, asked if the cuts had been done in consultation with and supported by the SDR reviewers.<sup>89</sup>

## House of Commons oral statement, 25 February 2025

MPs discussed the SDR and the armed forces following the Prime Minister's statement announcing plans to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP from 2027.<sup>90</sup>

## Select Committees

The Defence Committee published a report into the [readiness of the armed forces](#) in February 2024. Links to previous committee reports, since 2010, can be found in Commons Library briefing [Defence-related parliamentary reports: 2010 to 2024](#).

The Lords International Relations and Defence Committee published its report on the [implications of the war in Ukraine for UK defence](#) in September 2024. The Committee has submitted the report to the SDR for consideration. On 7 November 2024, the committee announced a new inquiry into [the future of UK-US relations](#).

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<sup>89</sup> [HC Deb 20 November 2024 c292](#)

<sup>90</sup> [HC Deb 25 February 2025 c631](#)

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# Further reading: Commons Library briefings

## Strategies and reviews

- [The forthcoming national security strategy 2025: FAQ](#)
- [A brief guide to previous British defence reviews](#)
- [The Integrated Review Refresh 2023: What has changed since 2021?](#)
- [Defence-related Parliamentary reports: 2010 to 2024](#)
- [What is the Armed Forces Act?](#)

## Defence spending and commitments

- [UK defence spending](#)
- [The cost of the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent](#)
- [Defence procurement reform](#)
- [UK armed forces operational commitments](#)
- [Deploying the armed forces in the UK](#)
- [What is the Joint Expeditionary Force?](#)
- [What is NATO?](#)

## Recruiting and equipping the armed forces

- [UK defence personnel statistics](#)
- [Emerging and disruptive defence technologies](#)
- [UK air and missile defences](#)
- [What is the Global Combat Air Programme \(GCAP\)?](#)
- [AUKUS submarine \(SSN-A\) programme](#)

- [AUKUS pillar 2: Advanced capabilities](#)

## Horizon scanning

Since 2024 the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, POST, has published a series of insights on emerging trends and changes. This [horizon scanning](#) exercise included articles on [international affairs and security](#), including:

- [War and the future of war](#)
- [Geopolitical competition in the international system](#)
- [UK foreign policy in a changing world](#)
- [Critical infrastructure: readiness, resilience, and security](#)



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