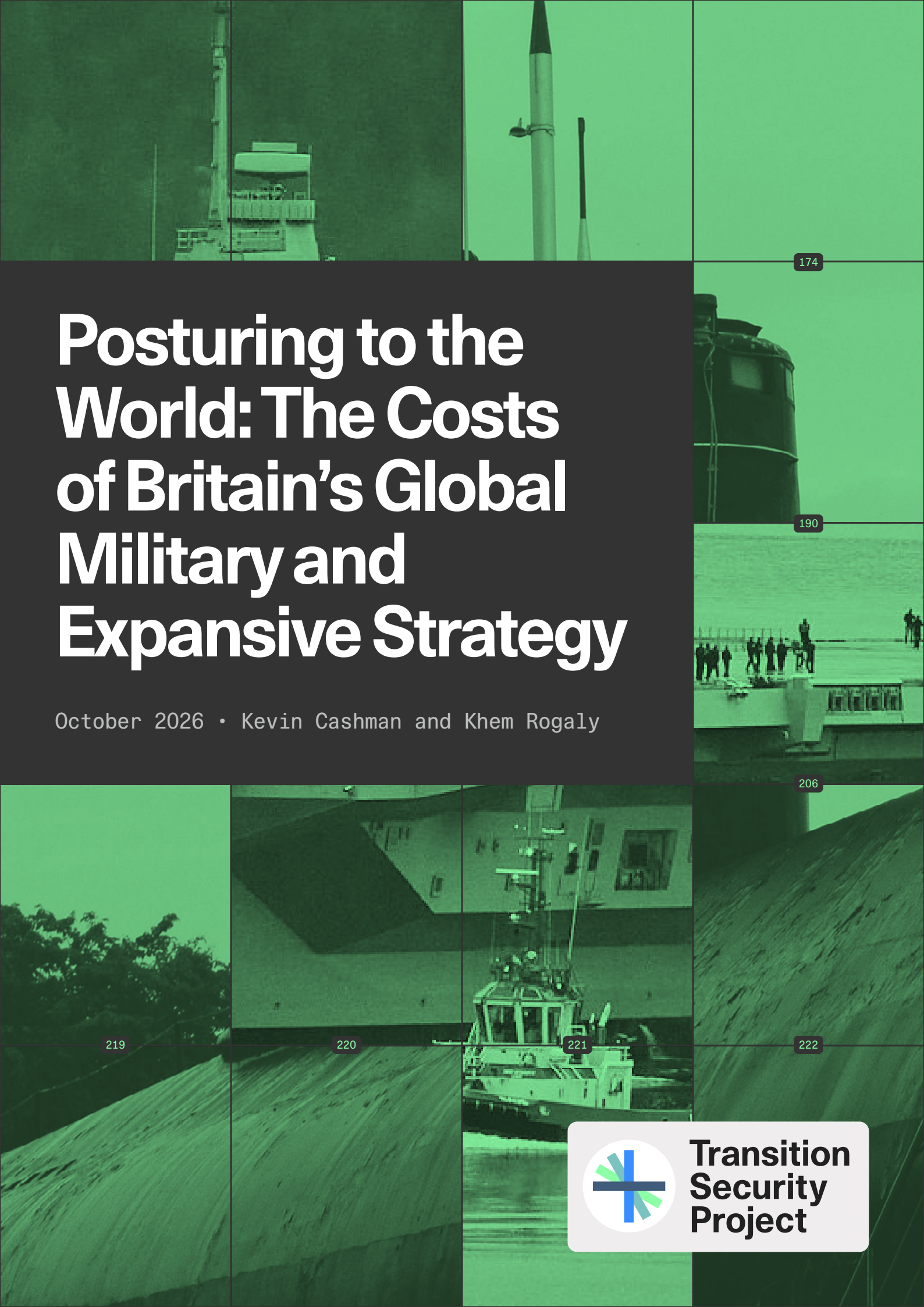




# Posturing to the World: The Costs of Britain's Global Military and Expansive Strategy

October 2026 • Kevin Cashman and Khem Rogaly

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# Contents

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Executive Summary                   | 3  |
| Introduction: The Missing Billions? | 5  |
| Force Projection                    | 11 |
| The Nuclear Arsenal                 | 24 |
| Waste                               | 28 |
| Conclusion: Defensive Principles    | 32 |
| Methodological Appendix             | 33 |
| Acknowledgements                    | 38 |

# Executive Summary

In February 2025, as the government announced the first of several commitments to increase military spending, Keir Starmer declared “we have had a peace dividend for many years, but that has come to an end”.<sup>1</sup>

Trumpeted across Westminster, the “peace dividend” is based on the myth that, since the end of the Cold War, Britain has reduced its military spending and focused public investment on other priorities. In reality, no such dividend exists: Britain’s military budget is larger in real terms today than it was in 1980.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, the idea that the British military lacks financial resources is used relentlessly to justify expanding its budget, which is presented as a necessary measure to “keep the country safe”.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, as explored in this report, Britain’s military wastes billions of pounds each year on offensive operations across the world, a maximal nuclear programme and a dysfunctional procurement system.

Britain’s military strategy is designed to support global troop deployments, including a network of overseas bases spanning five continents, costing billions of pounds each year to sustain. This is a policy of global force projection — the retained capacity to deploy military force in operations that extend beyond either territorial defence or contributions to regional security. In addition, the Ministry of Defence is committed to an expansive nuclear weapons policy, requiring the permanent patrol of nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed submarines — a posture that, as explained below, is projected to cost about £116 billion between now and 2040.

Due to dysfunction in the military procurement system, billions of pounds more have been wasted over the past sixteen years on cancelled contracts — while private contractors continue to profit.

Rather than change its military strategy, the government has committed to doubling the military budget over the next decade. This spending plan is not designed to develop specific defensive capabilities. Instead, as detailed below, it is to ensure that military spending occupies an arbitrary percentage of Britain’s national income. Rather than pursuing this artificial spending target, the government should review its military

1. “Defence and Security”, House of Commons Debate, 25 February 2025. [Available here](#).

2. “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2026. [Available here](#).

3. “Defence and Security”, House of Commons Debate. [Available here](#).

posture, prioritising defence over the global projection of military force. Taking this approach will allow the government to focus on identifying and developing the capabilities needed to defend the country, reviewing the scope of the nuclear programme and reducing waste within the procurement system. Defining military strategy as a question of defence would give the government greater capacity to invest in the everyday security of the British public.

## Key Findings

- Britain has the most globally oriented military of NATO member states in Europe, according to a new index of military force projection produced for this report. Measured by global military deployments outside of other NATO states and NATO naval missions, Britain is second to France.
- Britain has spent more than £51 billion on its participation in the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, as well as related military operations in West Asia and North Africa since 2001.<sup>4</sup>
- In the 2024/25 financial year, Britain spent around £2.8 billion on sustaining its global military deployments (those beyond Europe or those used to project force beyond the continent, such as Britain's bases on Cyprus).
- By a separate, conservative estimate, Britain spent £14.1 billion in maintaining its ability to project military force globally, equivalent to 23 per cent of the military budget that year. Both estimates exclude costs related to Britain's nuclear weapons programme.
- Since 2010, the Ministry of Defence has wasted an estimated £14 billion on cancelled procurement projects.

4. This is a measure of net additional operational costs, excluding costs that would have been incurred without these operations, such as regular pay and the routine upkeep of equipment and bases. The estimate also excludes related spending on pensions for veterans. See "MOD departmental resources: 2025", Ministry of Defence, 2026, section 10. [Available here](#).

# Introduction: The Missing Billions?

Over the next decade, Britain plans to more than double its military budget in nominal terms — from £70 billion in the 2025/26 financial year to £151 billion in 2035/36.<sup>5</sup> This extraordinary plan is not designed around an assessment of the military capabilities Britain lacks or their role in national defence. Instead, it is a plan for the military budget to reach an arbitrary share of Britain's GDP, tying it to the size of the national economy.

Despite the artificial foundations of Britain's military spending plan, it is conventionally presented as necessary to address the underfunding of the British military.<sup>6</sup> As explained below, the alleged funding crisis for Britain's military does not withstand scrutiny. Britain already has the world's sixth-largest military budget, supporting permanent overseas bases on five continents.<sup>7</sup> By pursuing a policy of global force projection, it retains the capacity to deploy and use military force anywhere in the world, extending its role far beyond territorial defence, contributions to regional security or humanitarian missions. Our model conservatively estimates the annual cost of maintaining this capacity at £14.1 billion for 2024/25. In parallel, the Ministry of Defence spends billions more each year on a maximal nuclear posture and wastes billions on a dysfunctional procurement system.

Over the next decade, the government plans to spend an extra £279 billion cumulatively on the military.<sup>8</sup> Rather than bowing to endless pressure to increase military spending, an honest, defensive strategy would focus on reconstituting British military capabilities around national defence, reviewing Britain's nuclear force posture and curbing procurement waste. Pursuing this approach would direct military capability towards genuine defence, such as through investments in air defence and cybersecurity, but also give the government greater capacity to invest in the everyday security of the public in response to the environmental and cost of living crises.

5. Kevin Cashman and Khem Rogaly, "Buying the Dip: The Defence Investment Plan Will Lead to Domestic Unemployment", Transition Security Project, 2026. [Available here](#). The £70 billion figure is NATO-qualifying spending for financial year 2025/26, in current prices.

6. Kiran Stacey, Dan Sabbagh, Peter Walker and Alexandra Topping, "Trio of Senior Defence Figures Accuse Starmer of Underfunding Military", *The Guardian*, 16 June 2026. [Available here](#).

7. "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database", SIPRI. [Available here](#); Louisa Brooke-Holland, "UK armed forces operational commitments", House of Commons Library, 2025. [Available here](#).

8. Cashman and Rogaly, "Buying the Dip: The Defence Investment Plan Will Lead to Domestic Unemployment", Transition Security Project. [Available here](#).

The subsequent sections of this report present new data on the costs of Britain's military force projection, its nuclear posture and its wasteful procurement system. The remainder of this introduction contextualises the scale of rising military spending across NATO and in Britain.

## NATO's arbitrary spending target

Britain's military spending plans are designed to meet the latest GDP-based target established by NATO in June 2025, when NATO members agreed, under intense pressure from the United States, to spend 3.5 per cent of GDP on their military budgets by 2035, with a further 1.5 per cent allocated to national security.<sup>9</sup> This is an enormous transfer of resources from the public to military contractors, many of them located in the United States.<sup>10</sup> By 2035, NATO members will have added an estimated \$1.4 trillion to their annual military budgets compared to 2024. Including the full national security target, they will spend \$2.7 trillion more each year.<sup>11</sup>

Although this target was accepted by every alliance member bar Spain, the basis for it was never defined.<sup>12</sup> This is because military spending targets pegged to GDP are not developed through an assessment of what militaries need but instead are based on tying military spending to an arbitrary share of national income. The previous NATO target was for military budgets to account for at least two per cent of GDP; it was similarly never defined in military terms.

NATO does conduct a separate defence planning process which assigns the military capabilities that member states are expected to develop based on their geography and role within the alliance.<sup>13</sup> However, these assessments are classified and based on separate criteria. They do not relate to military spending reaching an arbitrary share of GDP. NATO's latest target instead simply means that military budgets must occupy a larger relative share of

9. The NATO agreement directs the core 3.5 per cent of GDP towards military spending, but the scope of the additional 1.5 per cent is not strictly defined. See "The Hague Summit Declaration", NATO, 25 June 2025, paragraphs 2–3. [Available here](#).

10. As European NATO members have increased their military spending over the past decade, their weapons imports from the US have surged. European NATO members more than doubled their arms imports from the US in the period 2021–2025 compared to 2016–2020. See Mathew George, Katarina Djokic, Zain Hussain, Pieter D. Wezeman and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2025", SIPRI, 2026. [Available here](#).

11. Nan Tian, Lorenzo Scarazzato and Jade Guiberteau Ricard, "NATO's new spending target: challenges and risks associated with a political signal", SIPRI, 2025. [Available here](#).

12. "Spain reaches agreement with NATO to allocate 2.1% of GDP to Defence", La Moncloa, 22 June 2025. [Available here](#); Mark Rutte, "Pre-summit press conference", NATO, 23 June 2025. [Available here](#).

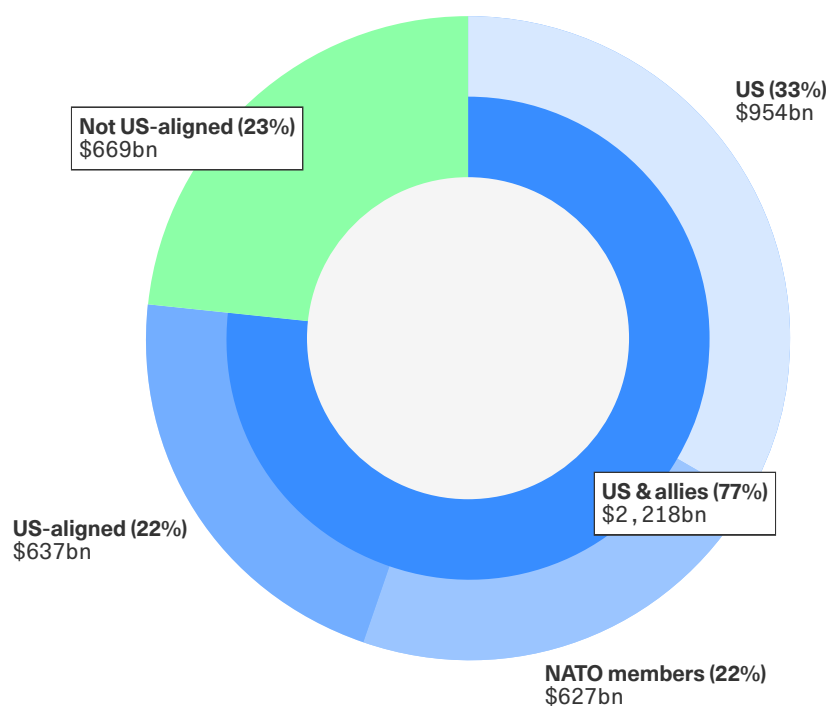
13. "NATO Defence Planning Process", NATO, 2025. [Available here](#).

their national economies. Incidentally, the target chosen is just above the share of US GDP devoted to military expenditure.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, NATO's spending plan conceals a fundamental imbalance in global military expenditure, more than half of which is already accounted for by the alliance. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the US, NATO and their global allies account for four fifths of the world's military expenditure. Even excluding the US, the rest of NATO spends almost as much as all states not aligned with the US combined.

**Figure 1: The US and Its Allies Make Up Almost 80% of Global Military Spending**

Global military expenditure by geopolitical alignment, 2025



Source: Authors' analysis and SIPRI.

Notes: US-aligned covers NATO members, US major non-NATO allies, Shield of the Americas members and US security partners, and includes EU-level expenditure. The US-aligned grouping is 80 entities; 76 countries are classified as not US-aligned. Classification is as of September 2026.

Moreover, NATO's exorbitant spending plans have been agreed in an era in which technological and strategic developments mean that the scale of military spending is less linked to the actual ability to exert military power. Despite the Pentagon's trillion-dollar budget, which accounts for a third of the world's military spending, the US has been exposed militarily by adversaries with financial resources many orders of magnitude smaller. In the US and Israel's 2026 war against Iran, for instance, the technological

14. Xiao Liang, Nan Tian, Diego Lopes da Silva, Lorenzo Scarazzato, Zubaida A. Karim and Jade Guiberteau Ricard, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2025", SIPRI, 2026. [Available here](#).

complexity of the US military industrial base proved a liability. American missile interceptors were far more expensive than the Iranian drones they targeted, making sustained defence against mass drone attacks costly.<sup>15</sup>

While NATO members in Europe pour resources into their military budgets, the coalition justifies its strategy through the perception that Russia seeks a wider war with the alliance.<sup>16</sup> Yet this rationale conceals a mismatch in military budgets and in many expensive capabilities: European NATO members spend more than three times as much as Russia on their militaries and have more than quadruple the helicopters, triple the tanks and armoured personnel carriers, double the artillery and nearly double the fighter jets.<sup>17</sup> In other areas, such as cruise and ballistic missiles and several types of drone, Russia produces more military equipment than Europe.<sup>18</sup> This underlines the limits of using overall military spending as a measure of productive capacity. Notwithstanding that heightened military competition does not serve collective safety on the European continent, the pursuit of the NATO target does not relate to a defensive project or specific capability requirements. Instead, an arbitrary spending target set by the US is directing European states to rewire their economies around militarism.

## Britain's pursuit of the NATO target

Since the start of the second Trump administration, the British government has committed to a series of military spending increases to demonstrate its dedication to the transatlantic alliance. These commitments have tied the government to doubling the military budget in nominal terms over the next decade, even while proponents of higher spending continue to claim that the military faces a “black hole” in its finances.<sup>19</sup>

In February 2025, the government announced that it would cut its international aid programmes to fund an annual £6 billion increase in the military budget by 2027. The announcement set a path for the military

15. Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, “Drones Like Bicycles”, *Phenomenal World*, 11 March 2026. [Available here](#).

16. Frank Gardner and Paulin Kola, “Russia could attack Nato within five years, says alliance chief in stark new warning”, *BBC*, 11 December 2025. [Available here](#).

17. “Visualising Military Capabilities”, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, [undated]. [Available here](#). Equipment data are for 2023.

18. Andrius Kubilius, “Keynote speech by Commissioner Kubilius at the event ‘European Union Defence Initiatives: The Eastern Flank within a 360° Security Approach’”, European Commission, 13 May 2026. [Available here](#).

19. Paul Seddon, “UK facing £28bn defence spending gap claims”, *BBC*, 9 January 2026. [Available here](#).

budget to reach 2.5 per cent of GDP in 2027 and ultimately means an extra £48 billion in military spending by 2030.<sup>20</sup> This plan was confirmed as part of the June 2025 Strategic Defence Review, written in a “budgetary context of a transition to 2.5% of GDP”.<sup>21</sup> Later that month, the government agreed to meet NATO’s 3.5 per cent target over the next decade, locking in an enormous further commitment to military spending.

Despite these rapid increases in military spending, the Ministry of Defence and the authors of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review soon resumed their campaign for additional funding. The Ministry of Defence briefed the press that it faced a £28 billion deficit without publishing any evidence to support this.<sup>22</sup> The relentless lobbying around these claims led the government to increase military spending by another £15 billion in June 2026, part funded by cutting capital spending across all government departments by one per cent. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Transport paid a higher price, facing deeper cuts of £2.3 billion and £1.2 billion, respectively.<sup>23</sup> Despite the elevation of military spending as the government’s number one investment priority, the Defence Secretary still resigned, claiming that more money should have been committed and faster.<sup>24</sup>

As a result of the government’s agreement to NATO’s 3.5 per cent pathway, Britain will spend an extra £279 billion on its military over the coming decade. This is more than seven times what it will spend on the decade-long Social and Affordable Homes Programme.

As detailed in the sections below, these plans mean that Britain will pour hundreds of billions into a military that already spends billions each year on global deployments, the global projection of military force and a maximalist nuclear posture. It also means that tens of billions of pounds will flow into a broken procurement system plagued by cancelled contracts and fraud. By pursuing an artificial military spending target, the government is set to waste public resources on a massive scale.

20. Cashman and Rogaly, “Buying the Dip: The Defence Investment Plan Will Lead to Domestic Unemployment”, Transition Security Project. [Available here](#); “Defence and Security”, House of Commons Debate. [Available here](#).

21. George Robertson, Richard Barrons and Fiona Hill, “Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad”, Ministry of Defence, 2025, p. 10. [Available here](#).

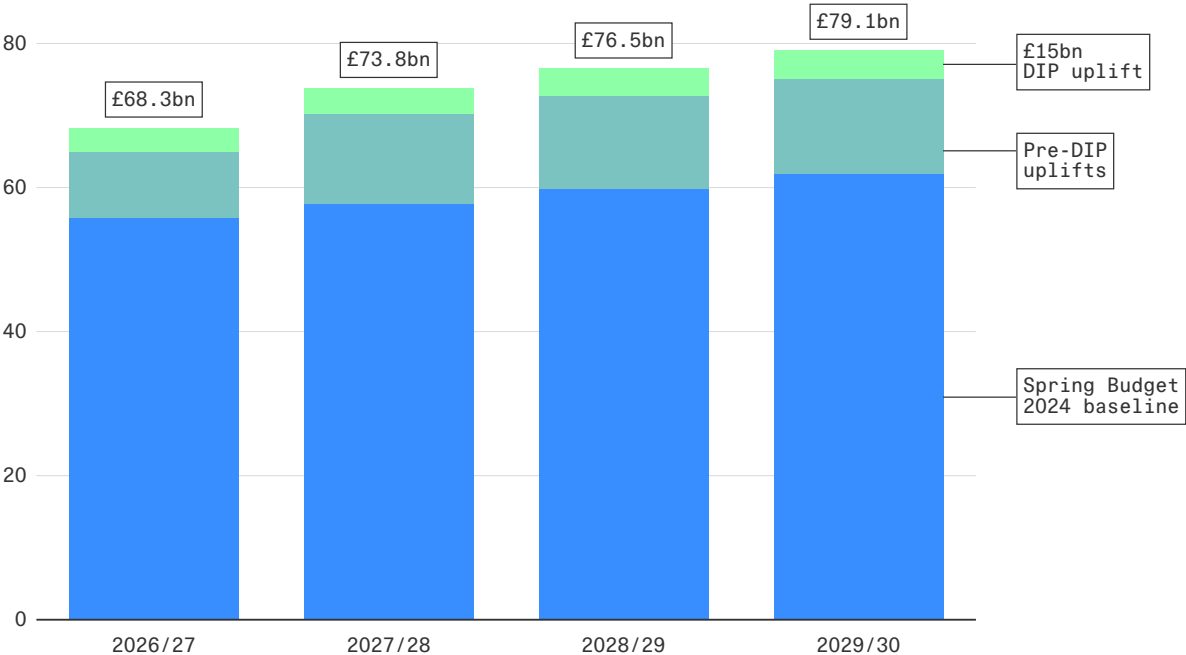
22. Larisa Brown, “Senior military chiefs warn Keir Starmer of £28bn defence shortfall”, *The Times*, 8 January 2026. [Available here](#).

23. “The Defence Investment Plan Funding Explainer”, Ministry of Defence and HM Treasury, 2026. [Available here](#).

24. Keir Starmer, “PM speech announcing the Defence Investment Plan: 30 June 2026”, Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, 30 June 2026. [Available here](#); Stacey, Sabbagh, Walker and Topping, “Trio of Senior Defence Figures Accuse Starmer of Underfunding Military”, *The Guardian*. [Available here](#).

**Figure 2: The Ministry of Defence Plans to Spend £298 Billion over the Next Four Years**

Decomposition of the Ministry of Defence's FY2026/27–2029/30 budget

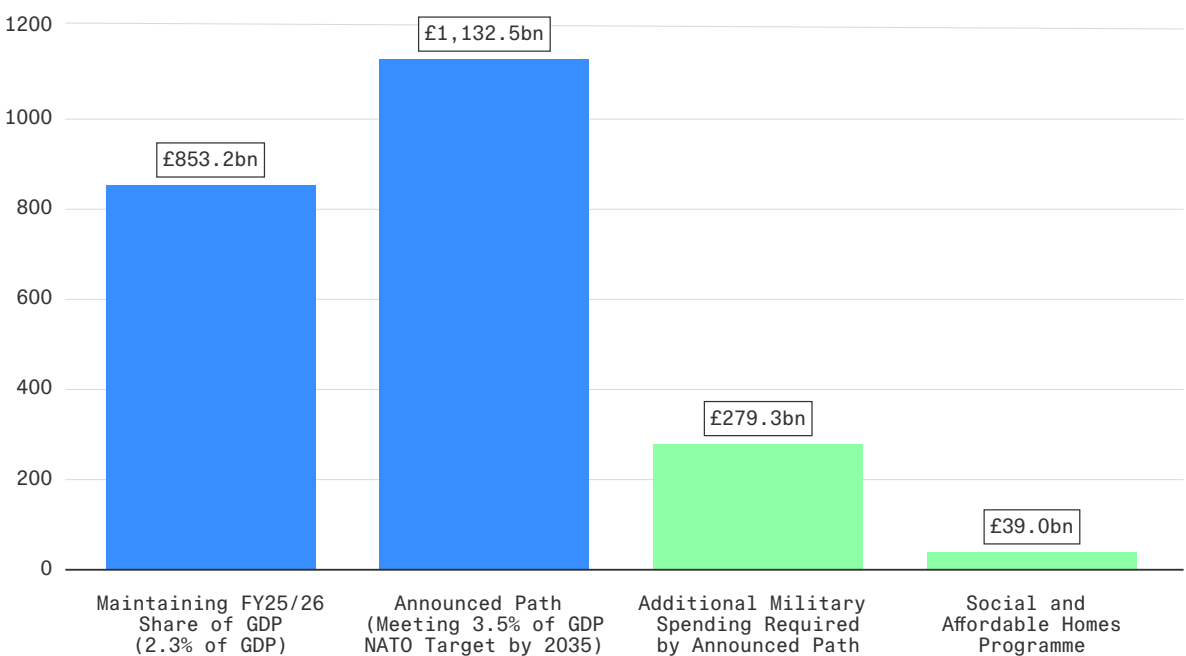


Source: Authors' analysis, Defence Investment Plan, OBR and PESA.

Notes: Decomposed based on details from the Defence Investment Plan (DIP). The baseline uses the MOD's planned FY2024/25 budget at Spring Budget 2024, maintained at a constant share of GDP in subsequent years.

**Figure 3: The Government Has Committed to an Extra £279 Billion in Military Spending to Meet the NATO Target in 2035**

Cumulative NATO-qualifying military spending vs. comparisons, FY2025/26–2035/36



Source: Authors' analysis, Defence Investment Plan, OBR, NATO and National Housing Federation.

Notes: NATO-qualifying military spending is broader than the Ministry of Defence's departmental budget. The baseline allows spending to rise with nominal GDP. The model assumes spending reaches 3% of GDP by 2030 and 3.5% by 2035, with spending interpolated between these targets. The £279.3 billion represents the cumulative difference between these scenarios.

# Force Projection

The 2025 Strategic Defence Review set out three core roles for the British military: to “defend, protect and enhance the resilience of the UK, its overseas territories and crown dependencies”; to “deter and defend in the Euro-Atlantic” and to “shape the global security environment”.<sup>25</sup> The third of these objectives captures a fundamental strategic priority of the British military: to retain the capacity to deploy and use military force globally. Among the European NATO militaries analysed in this report, Britain has developed this capacity to a greater extent than any other bar France.<sup>26</sup> Britain’s military strategy commits it to sustained global deployments, including a network of military bases spanning five continents, and the retained capacity to project its military force across the world.<sup>27</sup> These commitments extend far beyond either the defence of Britain’s home territory or a contribution to regional security.

Far from facing an urgent funding black hole to support national defence, the British military devotes substantial resources to global force projection.

Table 3 puts the annual costs of sustaining Britain’s global deployments at £2.8 billion for 2024/25, with a broader estimate of £14.1 billion for maintaining the capability to project military force across the world.<sup>28</sup>

This expensive doctrine is a relic of the British empire, with Britain retaining several major overseas military bases that occupy territories on former colonies. Over the past three decades, Britain has used these bases to collaborate with the US military in a series of brutal wars and bombing campaigns. Forward deployments and bombing campaigns in West Asia have relied on British territories on Cyprus and the Chagos Islands, for instance.

Even after the end of the most intense phases of the so-called global “war on terror”, these overseas deployments form a central part of the Defence Investment Plan for the next decade. In fact, over recent years, rather than drawing down its bases, Britain has invested heavily to make them

25. Robertson, Barrons and Hill, “Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad”, Ministry of Defence, p. 15. [Available here](#).

26. See the Methodological Appendix for the force projection index.

27. Brooke-Holland, “UK armed forces operational commitments”, House of Commons Library. [Available here](#).

28. See the Methodological Appendix for details.

strategic hubs from which to launch offensive military operations across the world.

Below, we detail how Britain's military was reconstituted around a renewed emphasis on global force in the wake of the Cold War, before we explain how this strategy of force projection continues to cost billions today. Global force projection was central to the brutal overseas interventions that defined the first part of this century. In recent years, Britain has continued to extend its projection of military power overseas.

## Expeditionary force

In the wake of the Cold War, the British military establishment struggled to justify its military budget, then the fifth largest in the world.<sup>29</sup> George Robertson, incidentally co-author of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review, noted in the drafting of the 1998 defence review that “there is no longer a direct threat to Western Europe or the United Kingdom”.<sup>30</sup> This assessment led the government to reconstitute the focus of the military on the projection of force globally, a costly and destructive endeavour.

Robertson's 1998 review positioned the British military as a force designed for expeditions across the world: “in the post-Cold War world, we must be prepared to go to the crisis, rather than have the crisis come to us”.<sup>31</sup> This was an expensive, multi-decade project centring on the commitment to develop two new aircraft carriers that took twenty years to deliver. The carriers were to be part of broader “strike groups” — groups of warships centred on an aircraft carrier — that could deploy British military force, including air power, to any part of the world.<sup>32</sup>

Building the carriers cost at least £6.4 billion, although they were not fully operational until 2025. The F-35B fighter jets carried by the strike groups cost £6 billion by April 2020, while Britain's wider F-35 programme is estimated to cost £71 billion over its lifetime.<sup>33</sup> Maintaining the carriers

29. SIPRI Yearbook 1999: *Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Oxford University Press, 1999. [Available here](#).

30. “Strategic Defence Review”, Ministry of Defence, 1998, p. 12. [Available here](#).

31. Ibid., p. 5.

32. Tom Dodd and Mark Oakes, “The Strategic Defence Review White Paper”, House of Commons Library, 1998, p. 36. [Available here](#); “Carrier Strike – Preparing for deployment”, National Audit Office, 2020. [Available here](#).

33. “Carrier Strike – Preparing for deployment”, National Audit Office. [Available here](#); “The UK's F-35 capability”, National Audit Office, 2025. [Available here](#); “UK ‘steps up for European security’ as Carrier Strike Group declared fully mission ready”, *Royal Navy News*, 17 November 2025. [Available here](#).

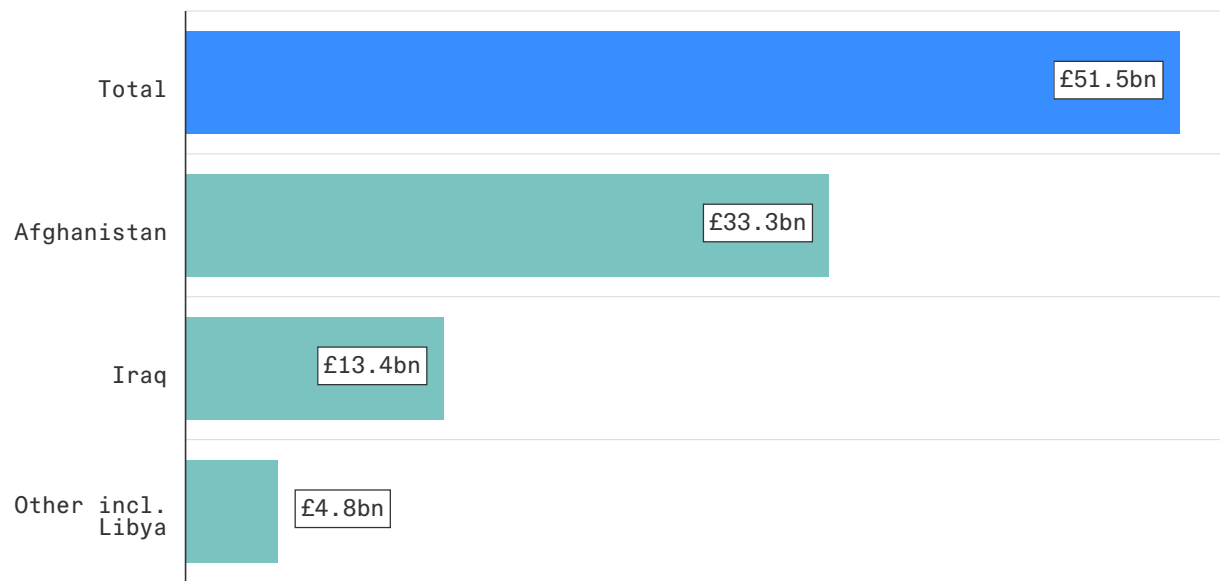
and the jets they carry costs hundreds of millions each year.<sup>34</sup> Preserving the British military’s ability to project power abroad has demanded huge investment. This global strategy was not designed for defensive purposes.

The financial costs and waste involved in Britain’s policy of fighting and supporting wars overseas cannot be compared to the devastating human cost the policy has exacted. Using the capabilities developed for its expeditionary strategy, Britain joined US-led wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya in the years following Robertson’s review and later collaborated in wars led by US allies elsewhere. After 9/11, US-led wars in West Asia caused an estimated 4.5–4.7 million deaths through direct violence and the wider effects of war.<sup>35</sup> The result of “going to the crisis” was total destruction.

The financial costs of pursuing this destructive strategy have also been substantial. As Figure 4 shows, Britain has spent more than £51 billion on its participation in wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, and its related military activities across West Asia since 2001.

**Figure 4: The Ministry of Defence Incurred over £51 Billion in Additional Costs in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Related Theatres since 2001**

Selected net additional operational costs, FY2001/02–2024/25, at 2024/25 prices



Source: Authors' analysis, National Audit Office and MOD.

Notes: “Other, incl. Libya” covers the following categories used by the Ministry of Defence: Wider Gulf; Counter-Daesh; Iraq and Middle East; Libya; Earlier Gulf; Israel Conflict and the separate SHADER support supplement. The groupings contain West Asia and North Africa force projection operations. These are identified additional costs, which do not include most standing military costs nor the full economic cost of operations.

34. This was calculated as part of our estimate of the costs of Britain’s global military deployments.

35. Stephanie Savell, “How Death Outlives War: The Reverberating Impact of the Post-9/11 Wars on Human Health”, Costs of War, Brown University, 2023. [Available here](#).

# East of Suez

Despite the catastrophe of its interventions during the so-called global “war on terror”, the British military extended its global strategy after partial withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan. Speaking in Bahrain in 2016, the then foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, declared that “Britain is back East of Suez”.<sup>36</sup> Despite Johnson’s rhetorical focus on historical government debates, Britain’s military had never withdrawn from “East of Suez”.<sup>37</sup> Yet, after 2016, with its deepened role in the Persian Gulf and East Asia, the British military would sustain its force projection, continue to fight and support wars overseas and invest in its ability to project force.

Johnson’s speech celebrated the development of new military bases in Oman and Bahrain that had begun under the coalition government, the latest additions to its global network of overseas bases. These bases formed part of a wider strategy of military collaboration with Gulf dictatorships that led Britain to supply thousands of military contractors to support the Saudi-led war effort in Yemen between 2015 and 2022.<sup>38</sup> Over these seven years and beyond, the war has had devastating human costs. The Saudi-led blockade of Yemen was the central cause of a humanitarian crisis that had resulted in an estimated 377,000 deaths by 2021.<sup>39</sup>

Beyond Britain’s relentless use of military force and support for wars in West Asia, Johnson also sought to expand Britain’s global strategy through a relatively brief “Indo-Pacific tilt” — an attempt to match the US focus on competition with China. The 2025 Strategic Defence Review suggested that the Indo-Pacific tilt is no longer a top priority. Yet attempts to project power in the region have already produced long-term commitments like the AUKUS submarine deal — between Australia, the UK and the US. The deal will extend to the 2050s and involve submarine deployments to Western Australia and deeper military collaboration with Canberra.<sup>40</sup> The full costs of AUKUS have not been disclosed, although

36. Boris Johnson, “Foreign Secretary speech: ‘Britain is back East of Suez’”, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 9 December 2016. [Available here](#).

37. William D. James, “Global Britain’s Strategic Problem East of Suez”, *European Journal of International Security*, 2021, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 171–189.

38. Sam Perlo-Freeman, David Wearing and Khem Rogaly, “Reparations for Yemen: A Proposal for a Windfall Tax on British Arms Companies That Enabled Saudi War Crimes”, Campaign Against Arms Trade and Transition Security Project, 2026. [Available here](#).

39. “Yemen UNCT Annual Report 2021”, United Nations in Yemen, 2022. [Available here](#).

40. James Tobin, “AUKUS Security Partnership”, House of Lords Library, 2024. [Available here](#); Richard Marles, “AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine pathway”, House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra ACT”, Australian Government, 2023. [Available here](#); Robertson, Barrons and Hill, “Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad”, Ministry of Defence, p. 78. [Available here](#).

the British government reports that it has already placed contracts worth approximately £4 billion for the programme.<sup>41</sup>

In recent years, Britain has continued to conduct bombing and surveillance operations and to support wars in West Asia. Between 2023 and 2025, Britain operated daily surveillance flights over Gaza, supplying intelligence to the Israeli military as it undertook its genocidal offensive.<sup>42</sup> In parallel, British military bases on Cyprus were fundamental to the resupply of the Israeli military during its assault on Gaza and were used to launch bombing raids on Yemen in 2024 and 2025, killing an estimated ninety civilians.<sup>43</sup> During the 2026 US-Israeli war on Iran, British military bases in Gloucestershire and the Chagos Islands were essential to US bombing campaigns. Despite public opposition, the British government repeatedly authorised US forces to launch bombing raids from RAF bases.<sup>44</sup>

While Britain's military bases have been used to launch attacks and support wars overseas over recent years, they have formed part of a new strategy to develop an "Integrated Global Defence Network", designed to give the military "greater agility and reach".<sup>45</sup> As part of this, military bases on Cyprus and in Gibraltar, Germany, Oman and Kenya have been designated as "strategic hubs" to support the projection of British naval, air and land forces across the world.<sup>46</sup> While British forces have been reconstituted at these bases, the bases have also received major investments in both facilities management and long-term infrastructure

41. "Defence Nuclear Enterprise 2026 Annual Update to Parliament", Ministry of Defence, 15 September 2026. [Available here](#).

42. Iain Overton, "RAF surveillance flights over Gaza reach 577: AOAV update", Action on Armed Violence, 2025. [Available here](#); "UK military activity in the Eastern Mediterranean", Ministry of Defence, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and Home Office, 2023. [Available here](#); "Israel has committed genocide in the Gaza Strip, UN Commission of Inquiry finds", United Nations, 2025. [Available here](#).

43. "US-UK Coalition Strikes, Jan. 2024–Jan. 2025" [Operation Poseidon Archer dataset], Yemen Data Project, [undated]. [Available here](#).

44. "Do you support or oppose the government allowing the US to use UK airbases specifically to launch attacks against missile bases in Iran?", *YouGov*, 22 July 2026. [Available here](#); Keir Starmer, "PM statement on Iran: 1 March 2026", Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 1 March 2026. [Available here](#); "Statement on the conflict in the Middle East: 20 March 2026", Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 20 March 2026. [Available here](#); John Healey, "Middle East: Defence", House of Commons, 9 March 2026. [Available here](#).

45. Robertson, Barrons and Hill, "Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad", Ministry of Defence, pp. 78–79. [Available here](#).

46. *Ibid.*

upgrades, forming part of the multibillion annual costs of sustaining Britain's force projection strategy.<sup>47</sup>

Although lobbyists for higher military spending constantly invoke Britain's defensive needs, its military strategy remains committed to force projection. The Defence Investment Plan which governs Britain's military expenditure over the next decade reaffirmed commitments to what it termed military engagement in the Middle East, Indo-Pacific, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>48</sup> This is not a policy for national defence, but an expensive addiction to the projection of force.

## The force projection index

Britain's commitment to force projection has led it to develop a global force posture that makes it one of the world's most interventionist military powers. Britain and France operate the most globally oriented militaries among the European NATO members analysed in this report, based on both the military equipment they procure and their deployments of military forces overseas. These global military commitments and the capacity to launch offensive operations cost Britain billions each year to sustain.

To uncover the relative extent of Britain's force projection strategy, this report built an index comparing the military capabilities of sixteen European NATO members, excluding those with less than 20,000 active personnel and Türkiye.<sup>49</sup> The index groups selected military capabilities and force characteristics according to their contribution to global operations or territorial defence. These categories reflect analytical judgements: some capabilities serve both roles.<sup>50</sup> The index then measures the balance of selected military capabilities and force characteristics. It does not measure overall military size, readiness, effectiveness or spending shares.

47. Jonathan Bartholomew, "A new start for facilities management on overseas sites", *Inside DIO*, Ministry of Defence, 2 November 2022. [Available here](#); "Defence Secretary opens £70-million British Army facility in Kenya", Defence Infrastructure Organisation and Ministry of Defence, 2021. [Available here](#); "£66 million contract awarded for new terminal at RAF Akrotiri", Ministry of Defence, 2023. [Available here](#).

48. "The Defence Investment Plan: Equipping our forces, defending our future", Ministry of Defence, 2026, p. 22. [Available here](#).

49. See Figures 5 and 6 for the results and the Methodological Appendix for details on method.

50. See the Methodological Appendix for more details. The findings are also comparable with earlier estimates that used similar methods. See, for instance, François Heisbourg, "European Defence: Making it Work", Institute for Security Studies, 2000, p. 99. [Available here](#); Stuart Parkinson, Barnaby Pace and Philip Webber, "Offensive Insecurity: The role of science and technology in UK security strategies", Scientists for Global Responsibility, 2013. [Available here](#).

Table 1 shows an inventory, by NATO member, of the naval vessels and aircraft used to measure force projection in the index.

**Table 1: The UK Is the Only European NATO Military at or near the Top for Every Force Projection Asset**

Naval and air inventories counted in the projection block, 16 European NATO members, 2025

| Country     | Naval assets      |                            |                    |                                   |                           | Air assets              |                   |                     |
|-------------|-------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
|             | Aircraft carriers | Principal amphibious ships | Escort tonnage (t) | Nuclear-powered attack submarines | Fleet replenishment ships | Strategic sealift ships | Strategic tankers | Airlift payload (t) |
| UK          | 2                 | 2                          | 71,800             | 5                                 | 3                         | 4                       | 10                | 1,434               |
| France      | 1                 | 3                          | 100,424            | 5                                 | 3                         | 0                       | 12                | 1,084               |
| Italy       | 1                 | 4                          | 104,910            | 0                                 | 3                         | 0                       | 4                 | 523                 |
| Germany     | 0                 | 0                          | 65,800             | 0                                 | 4                         | 0                       | 0                 | 1,947               |
| Spain       | 0                 | 3                          | 53,367             | 0                                 | 2                         | 2                       | 1                 | 481                 |
| Netherlands | 0                 | 2                          | 21,470             | 0                                 | 1                         | 1                       | 0                 | 76                  |
| Belgium     | 0                 | 0                          | 6,640              | 0                                 | 0                         | 0                       | 0                 | 259                 |
| Portugal    | 0                 | 0                          | 13,040             | 0                                 | 0                         | 0                       | 0                 | 174                 |
| Greece      | 0                 | 0                          | 46,070             | 0                                 | 1                         | 0                       | 0                 | 361                 |
| Romania     | 0                 | 0                          | 15,595             | 0                                 | 0                         | 0                       | 0                 | 200                 |
| Norway      | 0                 | 0                          | 21,160             | 0                                 | 1                         | 0                       | 0                 | 80                  |
| Poland      | 0                 | 0                          | 7,950              | 0                                 | 0                         | 0                       | 0                 | 153                 |
| Bulgaria    | 0                 | 0                          | 4,860              | 0                                 | 0                         | 0                       | 0                 | 34                  |
| Hungary     | 0                 | 0                          | 0                  | 0                                 | 0                         | 0                       | 0                 | 52                  |
| Czech Rep.  | 0                 | 0                          | 0                  | 0                                 | 0                         | 0                       | 0                 | 0                   |
| Finland     | 0                 | 0                          | 0                  | 0                                 | 0                         | 0                       | 0                 | 0                   |

Source: Authors' analysis, IISS Military Balance and supplementary technical sources.

Notes: Aircraft carriers include fleet and helicopter carriers classified as such by IISS. Principal amphibious ships include specified classes and exclude smaller landing ships and craft; aviation-capable amphibious ships, including Spain's Juan Carlos I and Italy's Trieste, count only in this category. Escort tonnage is destroyer and frigate numbers multiplied by full-load displacement in metric tonnes. Nuclear-powered attack submarines include SSN and SSGN, excluding ballistic missile submarines. Fleet replenishment ships require at least 10,000 tonnes full-load displacement and replenishment gear. Strategic sealift covers eligible ocean-going ro-ro or vehicle-cargo ships at least 120 metres long or with gross tonnage of at least 10,000, owned or on long-term charter. Strategic tankers follow the adopted long-range type list, excluding tactical KC-130 tankers. Airlift capacity is heavy and medium fixed-wing transport numbers multiplied by maximum payload in metric tonnes, excluding helicopters, light transports, passenger/VIP and special mission aircraft. See Methodological Appendix for more detail.

As Figure 5 shows, the UK had the strongest force projection orientation among the countries analysed in 2000, 2013 and 2025.

**Figure 5: The British Military Was the Most Oriented Towards Force Projection of European NATO Members in 2000, 2013 and 2025**

Top five countries in 2025, ranked by force projection orientation within a fixed sample of 16 European NATO members

| Country | 2000 | 2013 | 2025 |
|---------|------|------|------|
| UK      | 1st  | 1st  | 1st  |
| France  | 2nd  | 2nd  | 2nd  |
| Italy   | 3rd  | 3rd  | 3rd  |
| Germany | 6th  | 4th  | 4th  |
| Spain   | 4th  | 5th  | 5th  |

Source: Authors' analysis, IISS Military Balance and supplementary technical sources.

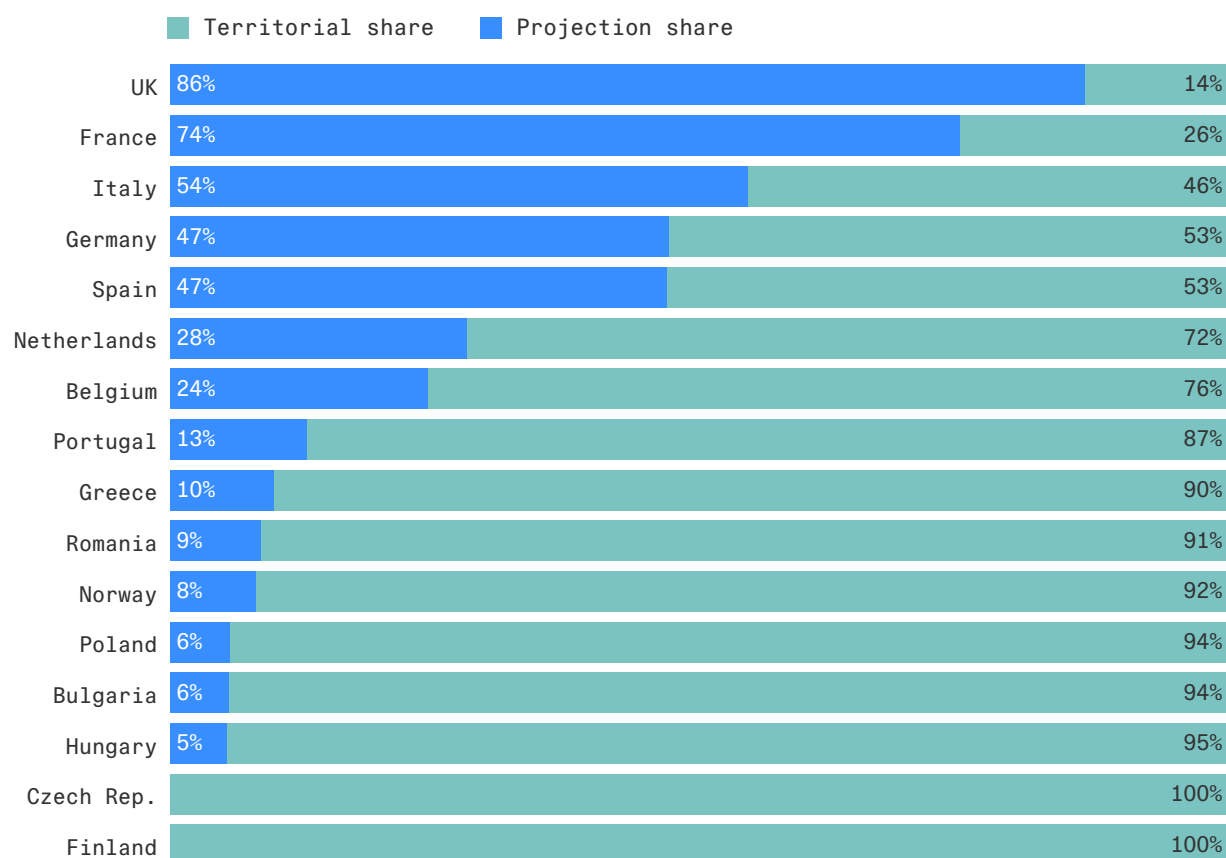
Notes: The index compares military capabilities and force characteristics across 16 European NATO countries with at least 20,000 active personnel, excluding Türkiye. Countries are ranked by their force projection score as a percentage of their combined projection and territorial defence scores. The index measures relative composition, not spending, readiness or absolute military power. See Methodological Appendix for more detail.

As Figure 6 demonstrates, the British military remains the most focused of the countries analysed on the projection of military force, as measured by the index. Britain has assembled these expensive capabilities over several decades. France also has a strong force projection orientation in the index.

These two countries are the outliers in Europe, with military capabilities heavily oriented towards global operations. Britain and France lead in key areas, like aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered attack submarines and strategic refuelling tankers. These expensive assets are the backbone of global operations, providing their militaries the capacity to wage war across the world.

## Figure 6: The UK Military Is Built to Project Force, Not Defend Territory

Projection and territorial components as shares of the military composition index, 16 European NATO members, 2025



Source: Authors' analysis, IISS Military Balance and supplementary technical sources.

Notes: The index uses a fixed sample of 16 European NATO countries with at least 20,000 active personnel in the 2026 IISS edition, excluding Türkiye. Bars show projection and territorial defence scores as percentages of their combined total, summing to 100% before rounding. These are index shares, not shares of spending, total military resources or operational capability. A zero projection share reflects only the selected applicable indicators and does not imply an absence of force projection capability. See Methodological Appendix for more detail.

Deployment data further demonstrates that Britain and France use their militaries for global operations to a greater extent than the other European NATO members analysed.

As shown by Table 2, Britain and France each have more than 4,000 more troops deployed overseas than their closest peers (excluding personnel hosted in other NATO countries or on NATO naval missions). This reflects the extent to which they maintain global networks of military bases, including on their overseas territories.

These bases do not serve a defensive purpose but are staging posts for offensive operations as demonstrated by their role in Britain's interventions in West Asia and France's power projection in the Pacific.

Developing and deploying this military capacity costs both nations billions of pounds each year.

**Table 2: The UK and France Maintain the Largest Overseas Deployments of European NATO Members**

Personnel deployed abroad and deployment locations, 16 European NATO members, 2025

| Country     | Personnel deployed abroad |                 |                                                |                                         | Deployment locations |                                    |
|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|
|             | Total                     | Share of active | Excluding NATO-hosted and NATO naval personnel | After these exclusions, share of active | All                  | Of which, permanent base locations |
| UK          | 10,136                    | 7.2%            | 8,841                                          | 6.3%                                    | 29                   | 11                                 |
| France      | 16,626                    | 8.2%            | 13,506                                         | 6.6%                                    | 27                   | 2                                  |
| Italy       | 5,719                     | 3.6%            | 4,054                                          | 2.5%                                    | 19                   | 1                                  |
| Germany     | 2,880                     | 1.6%            | 820                                            | 0.4%                                    | 13                   | 0                                  |
| Spain       | 3,669                     | 3.0%            | 1,379                                          | 1.1%                                    | 16                   | 0                                  |
| Netherlands | 878                       | 2.6%            | 258                                            | 0.8%                                    | 12                   | 0                                  |
| Belgium     | 554                       | 2.3%            | 4                                              | 0.0%                                    | 6                    | 0                                  |
| Portugal    | 683                       | 2.8%            | 301                                            | 1.2%                                    | 7                    | 0                                  |
| Greece      | 2,102                     | 1.6%            | 1,842                                          | 1.4%                                    | 10                   | 1                                  |
| Romania     | 1,131                     | 1.6%            | 955                                            | 1.4%                                    | 12                   | 0                                  |
| Norway      | 381                       | 1.5%            | 81                                             | 0.3%                                    | 8                    | 0                                  |
| Poland      | 1,249                     | 0.7%            | 669                                            | 0.4%                                    | 10                   | 0                                  |
| Bulgaria    | 309                       | 0.7%            | 309                                            | 0.7%                                    | 3                    | 0                                  |
| Hungary     | 779                       | 2.4%            | 679                                            | 2.1%                                    | 7                    | 0                                  |
| Czech Rep.  | 433                       | 1.4%            | 80                                             | 0.3%                                    | 10                   | 0                                  |
| Finland     | 324                       | 1.4%            | 264                                            | 1.1%                                    | 8                    | 0                                  |

Source: Authors' analysis, IISS Military Balance and supplementary technical sources.

Notes: Personnel abroad combines IISS figures with eligible crew and unit estimates, including those in own overseas territories. The exclusion columns remove personnel hosted in other NATO countries and personnel in NATO naval operations. Deployment locations count distinct source headings, with positive reported or estimated personnel figures. Each heading may cover several facilities; permanent base locations are the subset classified as bases abroad. The Falklands and French own-territory garrisons remain in deployed personnel but fall outside the count of permanent bases. See Methodological Appendix for more detail.

# The costs of force projection

While the Ministry of Defence presents its demands for a larger budget as necessary for defensive purposes, the costs of its strategy of force projection are not made public. As explained below, Britain's global military deployments and the equipment bought and sustained to project military force across the world cost billions of pounds each year. Table 3 presents a conservative estimate for 2024/25, from around £2.8 billion for global military deployments and operations to £14.1 billion for maintaining the capacity to project conventional (i.e. non-nuclear) military force globally.

These two estimates are different in scope. The first estimates the costs of Britain's global deployments during the financial year 2024/25, using the published costs of troops and equipment deployed beyond Europe.<sup>51</sup> As the data relies on what the Ministry of Defence makes public, it is inherently conservative and excludes, for instance, the costs of most munitions deployed overseas as these are not possible to trace.<sup>52</sup> Even following this conservative approach, this analysis suggests the total cost of sustaining the Ministry of Defence's global deployments in 2024/25 was at least £2.8 billion.<sup>53</sup> For context, France spent £4 billion on overseas military deployments in 2024, according to data published by its Ministère des Armées which uses a broader measure.<sup>54</sup>

The second estimate looks at the annual costs of maintaining the British military's ability to project military force globally, beyond its deployments each year. Using the index described previously, this estimate assesses the relative cost of the capabilities designed for force projection in the Ministry of Defence's budget. For instance, in the naval subsection of the Ministry of Defence budget, the estimate draws on the proportionate costs that relate to force projection. In more general areas of spending, a proportionate share is allocated based on the budget areas where data is available. This is to include the areas of the military that play a general, enabling role such as administration. Due to uncertainty, the model intentionally allocates a low share to projection in mixed budget

51. This measures deployments beyond Europe or those with the explicit intent of projecting force beyond Europe such as Britain's bases on Cyprus. The figure also includes the costs of related operations. See the Methodological Appendix.

52. See the Methodological Appendix.

53. See the Methodological Appendix.

54. See "Defence key figures – 2025", Ministère des Armées, 2025, p. 18. [Available here](#). (Currency converted using Bank of England data.)

categories, and it does not include specific categories of spending like those related to the UK's nuclear weapons.<sup>55</sup>

Under its most conservative scenario, the model estimates Ministry of Defence spending on force projection of around £14.1 billion in financial year 2024/25. This corresponds to about 23 per cent of Ministry of Defence spending that year.

Table 3 presents a conservative range for the costs of sustaining global deployments (the global activity model) and force projection, using the global activity estimate as the lower endpoint and the force projection model's low estimate as the upper endpoint. Cumulatively, from financial year 2011/12 to 2024/25, the range runs from £49.6 billion to £189.1 billion in 2024/25 prices. The cumulative estimates also overlap.

There has been a significant decrease in the costs of global activity since 2011/12, which reflects the winddown of major operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Because the capability for force projection is a strategic characteristic of the UK military and only partly related to the actual global activity undertaken, the decline in the estimate for force projection over the same period is, in relative terms, much smaller. This reflects Britain's costly commitment to the global projection of military force.

55. See the Methodological Appendix.

**Table 3: Nearly a Quarter of the UK Military Budget Is Related to Force Projection**

A conservative range of the costs of force projection, FY2011/12–2024/25, £ billions at 2024/25 prices

| Financial year | Global activity model<br>Lower endpoint<br>Bottom-up approach | Force projection model<br>Upper endpoint<br>Top-down low estimate | Range as share of MOD outturn | MOD outturn |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| 2011/12        | £8.5                                                          | £17.7                                                             | 16–33%                        | £52.8       |
| 2012/13        | £6.7                                                          | £15.2                                                             | 14–32%                        | £47.9       |
| 2013/14        | £5.0                                                          | £14.0                                                             | 11–30%                        | £47.3       |
| 2014/15        | £3.1                                                          | £12.9                                                             | 7–28%                         | £46.4       |
| 2015/16        | £2.3                                                          | £12.4                                                             | 5–26%                         | £47.1       |
| 2016/17        | £2.8                                                          | £12.3                                                             | 6–27%                         | £46.4       |
| 2017/18        | £2.6                                                          | £12.7                                                             | 5–27%                         | £47.5       |
| 2018/19        | £2.6                                                          | £12.7                                                             | 5–26%                         | £48.3       |
| 2019/20        | £2.7                                                          | £12.5                                                             | 5–25%                         | £49.3       |
| 2020/21        | £2.4                                                          | £12.6                                                             | 5–25%                         | £49.8       |
| 2021/22        | £2.8                                                          | £13.5                                                             | 5–25%                         | £53.9       |
| 2022/23        | £2.3                                                          | £13.2                                                             | 4–23%                         | £57.9       |
| 2023/24        | £3.0                                                          | £13.4                                                             | 5–24%                         | £56.1       |
| 2024/25        | £2.8                                                          | £14.1                                                             | 5–23%                         | £60.2       |
| Whole period   | £49.6                                                         | £189.1                                                            | 7–27%                         | £710.8      |

Source: Authors' analysis, IISS Military Balance, MOD, HM Treasury and others.

Notes:

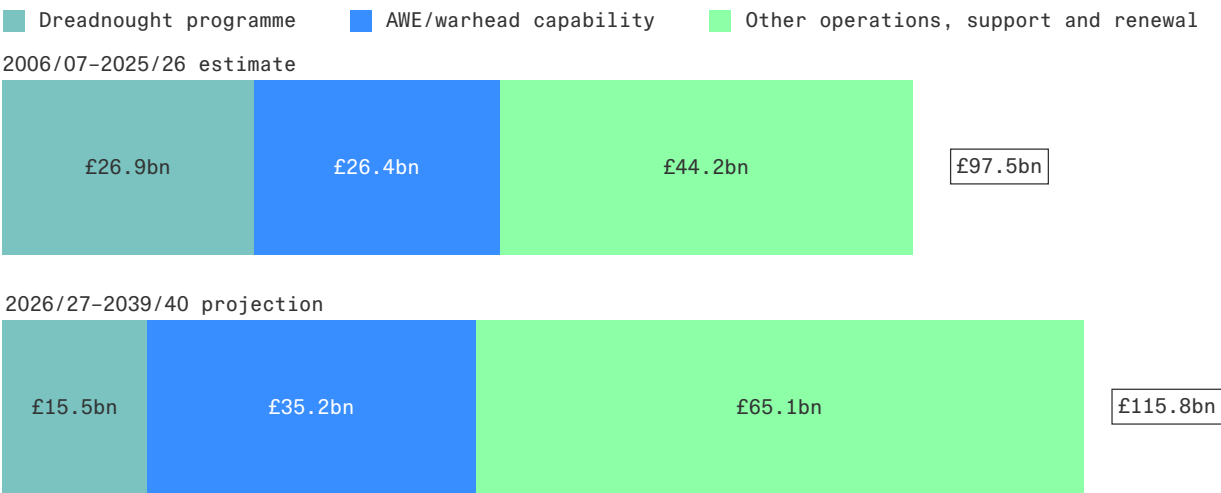
Global activity and force projection estimates overlap and must not be added together. The illustrative range runs from the global activity estimate to the force projection model's low estimate; it compares approaches with different scopes and does not establish lower and upper bounds on actual costs. Totals use unrounded figures, so displayed annual amounts may not sum to totals. See Methodological Appendix for more detail.

# The Nuclear Arsenal

In addition to the billions Britain spends on the projection of conventional military force are the extraordinary costs of its nuclear weapons programme, the third most expensive in the world.<sup>56</sup> The maximal design of Britain’s nuclear strategy exacts an exorbitant price on the public sector. Since 1969, the British government has maintained a permanent patrol of submarines armed with nuclear ballistic missiles.<sup>57</sup> This policy is known as continuous at-sea deterrence (CASD). Our model estimates that maintaining the four-boat CASD posture, including replacement submarines, warheads and support, will cost about £116 billion between 2026/27 and 2039/40, in 2024/25 prices (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Maintaining the UK’s Continuous At-Sea Nuclear Deterrent Is Projected to Cost £116 Billion Between 2026 and 2040**

CASD deterrence posture, historical estimate and forward projection, FY2006/07–2039/40, at 2024/25 prices



Source: Authors' analysis, MOD, AWE and ICAN.

Notes: Figures show undiscounted CASD cost estimates in FY2024/25 prices, covering replacement submarines, warheads, operations and support. Historical figures include reconstructed estimates. Identified attack submarine costs and their allocated shares of shared support and infrastructure are excluded; forward estimates allocate 60% of shared support to attack submarines, following ICAN's assumption. CASD includes all Dreadnought costs, 98% of Atomic Weapons Establishment costs and 95% of other strategic costs, plus a personnel supplement shown under “Other”. See Methodological Appendix for more detail.

This nuclear programme is one of the most extravagant initiatives overseen by the British state. After personnel costs, the most expensive part of the Ministry of Defence budget over the next four years is the

56. “2025 Nuclear Weapons Spending Reaches \$119 Billion”, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, 2026. [Available here](#).

57. “Defence Nuclear Enterprise 2026 Annual Update to Parliament”, Ministry of Defence. [Available here](#).

“Defence Nuclear Enterprise”, at £63.6 billion, more than a fifth of the total military budget. The costs of the Defence Nuclear Enterprise exceed even spending on CASD as they include the nuclear reactors used to power conventionally armed submarines such as the Astute class and AUKUS. The government also plans to purchase F-35A fighter jets to carry US-owned nuclear bombs, adding further nuclear capability — and costs — beyond CASD.<sup>58</sup>

The costs of the Defence Nuclear Enterprise are rising fast. In 2023, the National Audit Office reported that the ten-year equipment costs managed by the Defence Nuclear Organisation had risen by £38.2 billion since the previous year’s forecast.<sup>59</sup> The wider Defence Nuclear Enterprise was forecast to cost £117.8 billion over ten years, averaging about £11.8 billion a year.<sup>60</sup> The forecast annual cost of the programme over the next four years is now 23 per cent higher in real terms at £15.9 billion, equivalent to the entire capital investment budget for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero amid a spiralling environmental crisis.<sup>61</sup>

Ironically, more than a quarter of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero’s planned investment will fund nuclear energy, further subsidising Britain’s nuclear weapons programme. Such civil nuclear investment also supports supply chains and skills used by Britain’s military nuclear programmes.<sup>62</sup> The total cross-subsidy to the military nuclear sector is about £5 billion a year. The government, public institutions such as universities, and the public (through levies on energy bills) provide this subsidy.<sup>63</sup> The multilayered costs of the Ministry of Defence’s nuclear weapons programme are not matched by the capability provided by Britain’s nuclear strategy, centred on CASD.

58. “The Defence Investment Plan: Equipping our forces, defending our future”, Ministry of Defence, pp. 8–10, 25, 80. [Available here](#). The CASD estimates analysed in this report do not separately price the planned F-35A nuclear role nor do they include identified attack submarine costs.

59. “The Equipment Plan 2023–2033”, National Audit Office, 2023. [Available here](#).

60. “The Equipment Plan 2023–2033”, National Audit Office, 2023, pp. 8, 38. [Available here](#).

61. “DESNZ annual report 2025 to 2026: Performance report”, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 2026. [Available here](#); “The Defence Investment Plan: Equipping our forces, defending our future”, Ministry of Defence, pp. 25, 80. [Available here](#). The £15.9 billion annual average is the authors’ calculation of the £63.6 billion four-year Defence Nuclear Enterprise forecast divided by four. The real-terms comparison is the authors’ calculation using this forecast and the earlier National Audit Office forecast cited above.

62. Andy Stirling and Phil Johnstone, “Illuminating the ‘UK Nuclear Complex’”, University of York, 2024, pp. 27–29. [Available here](#); “Spending Review 2025”, HM Treasury, 2025, Table 5.19 and investment allocations. [Available here](#). Stirling and Johnstone discuss shared nuclear supply chains and skills.

63. Stirling and Johnstone, “Illuminating the ‘UK Nuclear Complex’”, University of York. [Available here](#).

Even beyond the question of nuclear disarmament — a policy option which would provide vast savings — the model presented below suggests that choosing a more restrained replacement programme from its outset could have reduced costs by billions. The government opted to renew its maximal nuclear policy in 2016.<sup>64</sup>

Britain uses four ballistic missile-carrying submarines and an arsenal of missiles and nuclear warheads to implement its CASD policy. The given justification for this policy is that unbroken submarine patrols are necessary to retain the guaranteed ability to launch a retaliatory nuclear attack.<sup>65</sup> The alternative scenario examined here assumes that continuous patrols could be maintained with three submarines.<sup>66</sup> It is likely that the government did this for at least seven years while HMS Vanguard undertook refuelling.<sup>67</sup> There are several options to maintain a submarine-launched nuclear weapons programme without the maximalist approach to CASD of operating four nuclear-powered submarines, whether through the use of a different propulsion system, three submarines or near-continuous patrols.<sup>68</sup>

The costs of Britain's maximal posture appear especially egregious given the questionable capability delivered by the programme overall. Britain's nuclear submarines have failed their only two launch tests in the past decade.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, while the government claims that the programme is operationally independent, it is, at minimum, technologically dependent on the US. Trident missiles carried by Britain's nuclear submarines are leased from the US, requiring the submarines to travel periodically to Georgia, where the missiles are maintained and replaced. Private US military contractors develop key components of the missile system, including fire control and navigation.<sup>70</sup> Despite the enormous costs imposed by CASD to supposedly guarantee the ability to launch a retaliatory nuclear attack after a first strike, Britain's nuclear programme

64. "The United Kingdom's future nuclear deterrent: 2016 update to Parliament", Ministry of Defence, 20 December 2016. [Available here](#).

65. Nick Ritchie and Paul Ingram, "A Progressive Nuclear Policy: Rethinking Continuous-At-Sea Deterrence", *The RUSI Journal*, 2010, vol. 155, no. 2, pp. 40–45.

66. Malcolm Chalmers, "Continuous At-Sea Deterrence: Costs and Alternatives", RUSI, 2010. [Available here](#); Hugh Chalmers, "A Disturbance in the Force: Debating Continuous At-Sea Deterrence", RUSI, 2014. [Available here](#).

67. Rob Forsyth, "Extra-Long Trident Patrols: Heightened Risks for Crew Wellbeing and Nuclear Safety?", BASIC, 2022. [Available here](#).

68. Chalmers, "A Disturbance in the Force: Debating Continuous At-Sea Deterrence", RUSI. [Available here](#); Ritchie and Ingram, "A Progressive Nuclear Policy: Rethinking Continuous-At-Sea Deterrence", *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 155, pp. 40–45.

69. Jonathan Beale and Andre Rhoden-Paul, "Trident missile test fails for second time in a row", *BBC News*, 21 February 2024. [Available here](#).

70. Ian Davis, "The Three Myths That Drive the UK's Nuclear Juggernaut", *Rethinking Security Blog*, 7 August 2026. [Available here](#).

does not deliver technological independence from the US or a guaranteed military capability.

Table 4 estimates that, had three nuclear-armed diesel-electric submarines with air-independent propulsion been chosen to replace Vanguard submarines, the total modelled cost would be £38.2 billion lower than the four-boat baseline between 2006/07 and 2039/40. A move away from nuclear-powered submarines would also complement an end to global force projection. Britain’s current Astute-class attack submarines and planned SSN-AUKUS boats are nuclear-powered but conventionally armed, preferred because they can travel further and project military force thousands of miles away. This illustrates the potential for a more restrained nuclear and conventional force posture to reduce costs.

**Table 4: Scaling Back the UK’s Continuous At-Sea Deterrent Could Have Saved Tens of Billions**

Conditional estimates of UK submarine deterrence scenarios, FY2006/07–2039/40, £ billions at 2024/25 prices

| Scenario   | Replacement parameters |                |              | Savings (from status quo) |            |          |
|------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------|---------------------------|------------|----------|
|            | Boats                  | Posture        | Propulsion   | Future                    | Historical | Combined |
| Status quo |                        | 4 Continuous   | Nuclear      | -                         | -          | -        |
| #1         |                        | 3 Continuous   | Nuclear      | £4.6                      | -          | £4.6     |
| #2         |                        | 3 Continuous   | Conventional | £15.2                     | £23.1      | £38.2    |
| #3         |                        | 2 Intermittent | Nuclear      | £10.0                     | -          | £10.0    |
| #4         |                        | 2 Intermittent | Conventional | £17.2                     | £24.0      | £41.2    |

Source: Authors' analysis, MOD, AWE, ICAN and supplementary technical sources.

Notes: Future differences cover FY2026/27–2039/40 against the four-boat baseline; historical programme differences for FY2006/07–2025/26 are hypothetical. All scenarios remain nuclear-armed. Conventional alternatives assume programmes chosen from the outset. Operating changes begin in FY2027/28, with replacement entries assumed in FY2032/33, FY2034/35 and, where applicable, FY2036/37. Nuclear replacement capital costs fall proportionally with boat numbers from FY2026/27. Cancellation, transition, retirement and disposal costs are omitted. A dash indicates no modelled difference. Totals use unrounded figures, so displayed components may not sum to totals. See Methodological Appendix for more detail.

# Waste

As we have seen, the Ministry of Defence wastes billions each year on strategic overreach and it loses billions in parallel through waste within its procurement system. Over the past decade, the Ministry of Defence has overseen a litany of procurement failures, based on expensive purchases of equipment from private contractors. Despite these failures, military contractors have continued to make steady profits from Ministry of Defence programmes.

The department also faces substantial potential losses from fraud. By pursuing GDP-based spending targets without tackling the dysfunctional nature of military procurement, the government risks pouring hundreds of billions of pounds more into a broken system that functions primarily for private contractors.

The Ministry of Defence is notoriously poor at delivering major procurement programmes. Of the 38 major military procurement programmes assessed by the government's National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, 87 per cent are at risk of delay or cost increases.<sup>71</sup> Just three per cent are assessed as on track.<sup>72</sup> This is an order of magnitude worse than any other area of government procurement.

Over the last decade, the Ministry of Defence has overseen a series of catastrophic procurement failures. The Ajax tank programme, funded by a main contract of £5.5 billion, is eight years late and Army personnel have suffered permanent hearing damage from testing.<sup>73</sup> Project Morpheus, the Army communications system developed by General Dynamics, the American contractor also responsible for Ajax, has been discontinued. It had already cost the government about £828 million by December 2024.<sup>74</sup> The Watchkeeper drone, built by Elbit Systems, an Israeli contractor, and Thales, had forecast costs of £1.55 billion by 2024. Its operational deployments were mostly restricted to four weeks in Afghanistan;

71. "Annual Report 2025/2026", National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, 2026. [Available here](#).

72. "NISTA Major Projects Annual Report 2025–26", National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, 2026. [Available here](#); accompanying data. [Available here](#).

73. Louisa Brooke-Holland, "Ajax: The British Army's troubled armoured vehicle programme", House of Commons Library, 2023. [Available here](#).

74. Luke Pollard, "LE TacCIS programme", House of Commons, written answer to question 19180, 2 September 2026. [Available here](#); Maria Eagle, "LE TacCIS Programme", House of Commons, written answer to question 18119, 11 December 2024. [Available here](#).

otherwise, it was largely used for training and testing.<sup>75</sup> Despite this, eight drones had crashed by November 2024.<sup>76</sup> Although Watchkeeper had been scheduled for retirement in March 2025, its service was extended to March 2027 at an anticipated cost of £95.7 million despite its limited capability.<sup>77</sup>

Procurement failures have not prevented major contractors from making substantial shareholder payouts. Between the 2012/13 and 2021/22 financial years, the Ministry of Defence's top five contractors paid £15 billion to their shareholders from their global revenue.<sup>78</sup> The Ministry of Defence's top ten contractors returned a higher share of after-tax profits to their shareholders, predominantly institutional investment firms, than the stock market average.<sup>79</sup>

General Dynamics paid £18 billion to its shareholders from its global revenue in the nine years after the main Ajax production contract was awarded in 2014. Over the same period, it invested only £40 million in UK manufacturing despite receiving a £5.5 billion contract. The private ownership model of British and US-based military contractors motivates them to distribute a greater share of profits to their shareholders than many of their continental European equivalents.<sup>80</sup> Along with Britain's greater dependence on foreign technology, this could help explain why it spent £15.9 billion more on its military than France in 2025, despite having similar capabilities.<sup>81</sup> Overall, the depth and extent of waste within Britain's military procurement system should demonstrate the fallacy of increasing military spending to meet an artificial, GDP-based target.

According to the Ministry of Defence's annual accounts and as detailed in Table 5, Britain lost about £14 billion to military projects that were cancelled or retired early between 2010/11 and 2025/26. This is just one indication of the scale of waste that is endemic within the military procurement system.

75. Chris Cole, "Watchkeeper drones scrapped — but will any lessons be learnt?", Drone Wars UK, 2024. [Available here](#).

76. Ibid.; Luke Pollard, written answer to question 5889, House of Commons, 15 October 2024. [Available here](#).

77. Richard Thomas, "UK throwing good money after bad in Watchkeeper drone retention", *Army Technology*, 27 February 2026. [Available here](#); Luke Pollard, written answer to question 112208, House of Commons, 18 February 2026. [Available here](#).

78. Khem Rogaly, "Welfare to Arms: Shareholder Payouts in the Arms Industry Since 2010", Common Wealth, 2023. [Available here](#).

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid.

81. See "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database", SIPRI. [Available here](#); currency conversion using "Interest & Exchange Rates Data", Bank of England, 2026. [Available here](#).

**Table 5: Since 2010, the Ministry of Defence Has Written off £14 Billion from Cancellations and Early Retirements**

Identified accounting losses, with top 15 ranked, FY2010/11–25/26, £ million at 2024/25 prices

| Programme                                  | Year             | Amount    | Type of loss                                 |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------|----------------------------------------------|
| Nimrod MRA4                                | 2012/13          | £5,236.5  | Programme cancellation                       |
| Harrier fleet                              | 2014/15          | £1,513.5  | Early fleet retirement                       |
| Typhoon Tranche 1 fleet (maximum)*         | 2020/21; 2023/24 | £1,095.0  | Early fleet retirement                       |
| Integrated Review retirements*             | 2020/21; 2022/23 | £971.7    | Early retirement of equipment                |
| Watchkeeper                                | 2024/25          | £734.9    | Loss recognised for planned early retirement |
| Integrated Review equipment cancellations* | 2020/21          | £641.2    | Procurement cancellations                    |
| Four Type 22 frigates                      | 2015/16          | £554.4    | Early retirement of ships                    |
| HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark                 | 2024/25          | £428.5    | Early retirement of ships                    |
| Three Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels        | 2012/13          | £262.1    | Early retirement of ships                    |
| Shadow Mk2                                 | 2025/26          | £245.1    | Programme cancellation                       |
| Project Morpheus                           | 2025/26          | £227.8    | Standalone project discontinued              |
| Additional SDSR settlement costs*          | 2010/11          | £181.3    | Settlement of SDSR-related costs             |
| Chinook Mk3 conversion                     | 2010/11          | £149.6    | Conversion costs and capability shortfall    |
| Warthog protected vehicles*                | 2016/17          | £137.9    | Fleet disposal                               |
| HMS Ark Royal                              | 2013/14          | £128.7    | Early retirement of ship                     |
| All other entries*                         | All              | £1,444.2  |                                              |
| Total (128 entries)                        | All              | £13,952.3 |                                              |

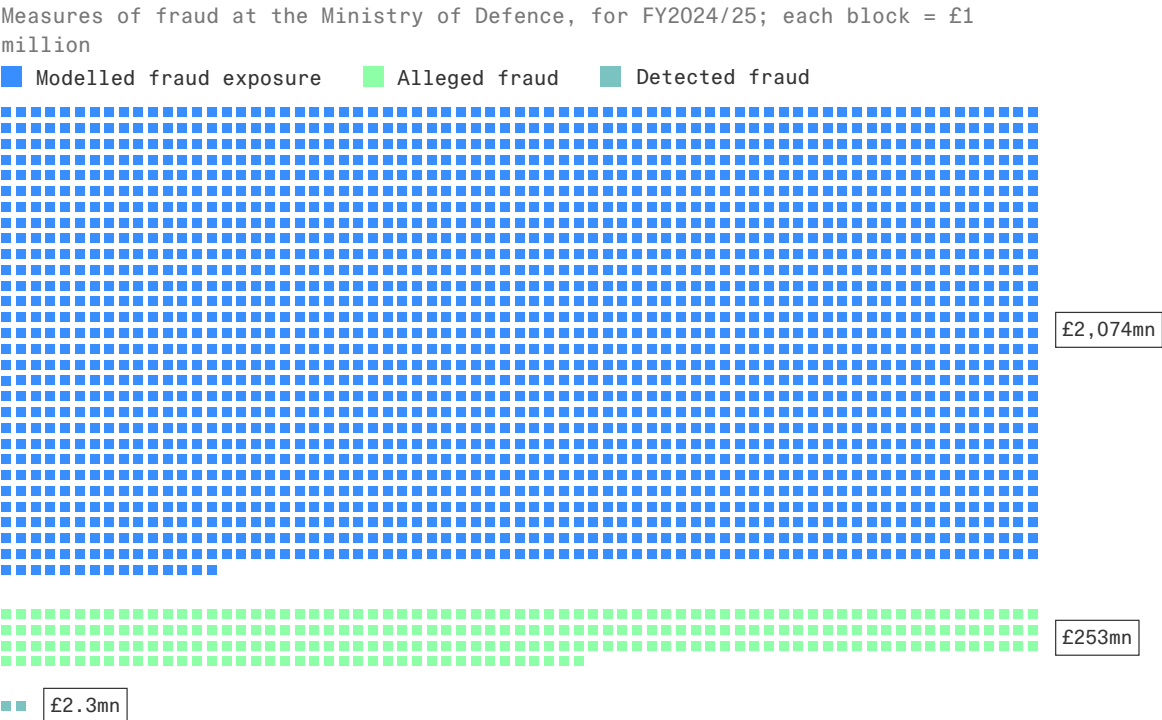
Source: Authors' analysis, National Audit Office and MOD.

Notes: The table ranks the largest 15 selected and identified accounting entries by upper value; the remaining 113 are combined. Years identify accounting or component valuation years, not necessarily decision years. The 2022/23 value for Integrated Review retirements applies only to Fort Austin and Fort Rosalie. Asterisks (\*) mark unclosed estimates or provisional classifications. Exclusions cover estate impairments, inventory and bookkeeping write-offs, stores and accident losses, fines, special payments, partial fleet and stockpile reductions, and facilities. The Integrated Review bundle excludes Chinook and separately listed Typhoon.

Using the Ministry of Defence's method on published procurement and personnel spending, we also estimate potential fraud exposure of about £2.1 billion in the 2024/25 financial year (Figure 8). This illustrative estimate substantially exceeds reported detected fraud. The National

Audit Office also concludes that the department’s fraud losses probably far exceed the amounts addressed by its investigations, recoveries and prevention work.<sup>82</sup> The National Audit Office further notes that the Ministry of Defence achieves a much lower financial return on counter-fraud spending than other departments.<sup>83</sup>

**Figure 8: Each Year, the Ministry of Defence Detects a Fraction of the Fraud It Says It Is Exposed To**



Source: Authors’ analysis, National Audit Office, HM Treasury and MOD.

Notes: Fraud exposure is an illustrative modelled estimate using the MOD-described method: 4.57% of procurement plus 1.7% of payroll. These rates, from the 2023 Annual Fraud Indicator, are broad benchmarks, not measured loss rates. The calculation applies these rates to procurement and personnel costs. Alleged fraud is the amount reported to the Cabinet Office; the separate £1.1 billion allegedly reported to the MOD hotline is a different measure. Detected fraud excludes error.

Together waste and fraud are just two indications of the dysfunctional nature of military procurement. Long development timelines increase the risk that military equipment will already be outdated when it enters service or before the end of its planned service life. Large militaries, like Britain’s, often compound this problem by prioritising expensive, high-tech programmes for their perceived symbolic value.<sup>84</sup> These systemic challenges demonstrate the risk of wasting public resources entailed by increasing military spending to meet an arbitrary GDP-based target.

82. “The Ministry of Defence’s management of its losses from fraud and other economic crime”, National Audit Office, 2026, p. 10 and pp. 17–18. [Available here](#).

83. Ibid., p. 10 and pp. 17–18.

84. For a seminal account of this tendency, see Mary Kaldor, *The Baroque Arsenal*, Hill and Wang, 1981.

# Conclusion: Defensive Principles

The British government has planned a radical increase to military spending over the coming decade. Despite claims that doubling the military budget is necessary for defensive purposes, the military already wastes billions each year on an outdated policy of global force projection. Billions more are spent on an expansive nuclear posture. Meanwhile, billions are wasted through a dysfunctional procurement system.

If the government is serious about deploying military capability for defensive purposes and preserving future economic resilience and sustainability, the terms of the military spending debate must change. The government should not waste hundreds of billions pursuing artificial military spending targets based on percentages of GDP. Instead, it should deliver a review of its military and foreign policy aimed at reconstituting its resources around territorial defence in line with other European countries. This should entail the closure of its global network of military bases as well as an end to the policy of force projection which focuses on retaining the capacity for offensive operations across the world. Moving to this more restrained posture should also encompass a review of Britain's nuclear weapons programme to better understand the options for a more moderate policy and multilateral disarmament.

Ending the pursuit of NATO's arbitrary target would make available £279 billion over the next decade that could be invested in the everyday security of the public — especially for climate adaptation and protection from energy shocks. Prioritising national defence, reducing waste and ending the destructive policy of overseas intervention that has defined British military operations this century would make Britain and the world safer and the British public more secure.

# Methodological Appendix

The report combines a force projection orientation index with four costing models:

- Nuclear expenditure: historical and projected spending on the UK's nuclear weapons.
- Submarine-based nuclear weapons: costs of alternative fleets and patrol patterns.
- Global activity: a bottom-up estimate of costs from selected deployments and operations.
- Force projection: a top-down estimate that allocates Ministry of Defence (MOD) spending to maintaining force projection capability.

## Supporting Analytical Models

### Force projection orientation index

The index compares force projection and territorial defence across selected European NATO countries using capabilities and force characteristics. The index uses equipment and personnel observations from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), supplemented by technical evidence.<sup>85</sup> The snapshots cover 2000, 2013 and 2025.

Eight projection and seven territorial categories are grouped as follows:<sup>86</sup>

- Projection, Naval: aircraft carriers; principal amphibious ships; escort warships (combined full-load tonnage); nuclear-powered attack submarines; fleet replenishment ships; strategic sealift ships.<sup>87</sup>

85. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2000–2001*, Oxford University Press, 2000; International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2014*, Routledge, 2014; International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2026*, Routledge, 2026. [Available here](#).

86. Projection precedents: Iliana Olivié and Manuel Gracia Santos, “The Elcano Global Presence Index: methodology”, Elcano Royal Institute, 2023. [Available here](#); “Long-range maritime force projection”, Lowy Institute, Asia Power Index (2025 data), [undated]. [Available here](#); “Air warfare: Enablers”, Lowy Institute, Asia Power Index (2025 data), [undated]. [Available here](#). Territorial capabilities: “Government’s Defence Report”, Finnish Government, 2021. [Available here](#); “NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence”, NATO, updated 13 February 2025. [Available here](#); “Joint Doctrine Publication 0-10: UK Maritime Power”, sixth edition, Ministry of Defence, 2026. [Available here](#).

87. Tonnage precedent: Brian Benjamin Crisher and Mark Souva, “Power at Sea: A Naval Power Dataset, 1865–2011”, *International Interactions*, 2014, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 602–629.

- Projection, Air: strategic air-to-air tanker aircraft; heavy and medium fixed-wing transport aircraft (combined maximum cargo payload).
- Territorial, Land and air defence: main battle tanks; artillery (towed guns, self-propelled guns and multiple rocket launchers); longest-range category of ground-based surface-to-air missiles.
- Territorial, Coastal forces: conventional patrol and coastal submarines; corvettes and missile craft fitted with anti-ship missiles.
- Territorial, Mobilisation: reserves as a share of active and reserve personnel combined; conscription status.

Each measure is scaled against its largest 2025 value. Measures are averaged with equal weight within each group, and applicable groups are averaged with equal weight within each of the two blocks. Force projection orientation is the projection score as a percentage of the projection and territorial scores combined.<sup>88</sup> The percentages and rankings describe the balance of selected capabilities and force characteristics; they do not measure military size, readiness, overall effectiveness or spending shares. Each category is assigned wholly to one block even where roles overlap in practice.

The index provides qualitative context for the force projection model's allocations; its scores do not determine the allocation percentages. Table 2 provides a separate contextual comparison of overseas personnel and deployment locations in 2025, using reported personnel figures supplemented by estimates.

## Nuclear expenditure

The model combines published spending and estimates for submarines, warheads, support and personnel to estimate past and future UK nuclear weapons costs, including continuous at-sea deterrence (CASD): keeping a nuclear-armed submarine on patrol at all times.<sup>89</sup> The nuclear expenditure

88. Scaling, weighting and robustness: OECD, European Union and European Commission Joint Research Centre, *Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators: Methodology and User Guide*, OECD Publishing, 2008. [Available here](#); Michaela Saisana, Andrea Saltelli and Stefano Tarantola, "Uncertainty and sensitivity analysis techniques as tools for the quality assessment of composite indicators", *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*, 2005, vol. 168, no. 2, pp. 307–323.

89. "MOD annual reports and accounts: index", Ministry of Defence, 2015 (updated 15 July 2026). [Available here](#); "Defence Nuclear Enterprise 2026 Annual Update to Parliament", Ministry of Defence, 2026. [Available here](#); "Annual Report and Accounts 31 March 2025", AWE plc, 2026. [Available here](#).

and submarine-based models do not separately estimate planned UK F-35A costs for NATO's nuclear mission.

CASD estimates cover 2006/07–2025/26, with a projection for 2026/27–2039/40. The model reconstructs some historical annual costs because consistent public figures are unavailable. The CASD estimate forms part of broader nuclear weapons spending, including all Dreadnought costs and assumed shares of warhead and other costs.

Future costs follow assumed delivery and payment schedules. The projection uses the full remaining Dreadnought programme envelope. It assumes that the warhead allowance is phased down by 25 per cent in real terms over the five years 2030/31–2034/35 and then remains at that level, while other running and renewal allowances remain constant in real terms. The main projection ends in 2039/40 to include the model's assumed final Dreadnought handover in 2038/39 and one further year for final programme payments.

The nuclear expenditure model's historical estimates supply the force projection model's nuclear exclusion. Its adopted allocation of shared support costs to nuclear-powered attack submarines also supplies the global activity model's support cost benchmark.

## Submarine-based nuclear weapons

Table 4 shows the conditional cost differences between each alternative fleet and the baseline fleet of four submarines, separating future differences from hypothetical historical procurement differences. The scenarios assume continuous patrols for three-boat fleets and intermittent patrols for two-boat fleets, using either nuclear or conventional propulsion. Conventional alternatives assume replacement programmes chosen from the outset, omitting additional cancellation, transition and disposal costs.

The model spreads conventional procurement costs across historical and future years using Dreadnought's spending profile. The model doubles the Dakar-class package price for three submarines to estimate procurement for three UK boats.<sup>90</sup> This conventionally powered, likely nuclear-armed design is under construction and reported to have air-independent

90. "Israel orders three new submarines from thyssenkrupp Marine Systems", *thyssenkrupp Marine Systems*, 20 January 2022. [Available here](#); Ari Rabinovitch, Jeffrey Heller and Christoph Steitz, "Israel signs \$3.4 bln submarines deal with Germany's Thyssenkrupp", *Reuters*, 20 January 2022. [Available here](#).

propulsion (AIP).<sup>91</sup> The doubling includes a sizeable allowance for initial UK procurement and setup. The model holds 30 per cent of this total fixed and scales the remaining 70 per cent with the number of boats in the programme.

Other running costs are assumed to be 50 per cent shared, 40 per cent boat-related and 10 per cent activity-related. Half the boat-related costs remain fixed when boat numbers change; the other half scales with boat numbers. Both halves and the activity-related costs are adjusted for propulsion: nuclear boats retain a 100 per cent operating-cost factor, while conventional boats use 75 per cent after entering service. Shared costs are retained in full. Intermittent patrols halve only the activity-related costs.

After entering service, conventional boats are assumed to need half the nuclear crew complement at equal cost per person. Only the crew-related half of the separate personnel supplement scales with boat numbers and this complement assumption; the shore and training half remains fixed. The supplement receives no propulsion or intermittence discount. Each scenario retains the baseline annual warhead and renewal allowances.

## Force Projection Costing Models

Global activity and force projection exclude identified nuclear weapons costs, direct Ukraine support, European territorial defence costs and identified costs solely for peacekeeping or humanitarian purposes.

### Global activity

This model starts with the MOD's reported additional costs for selected operations, after allowing for savings elsewhere. The series covers 2001/02–2024/25. Reporting categories and coverage change over time,

91. "TKMS übergibt U-Boot 'INS DRAGON' erfolgreich an die israelische Marine und setzt langjährige Partnerschaft fort", TKMS Group, 2026. [Available here](#); Stuart Casey-Maslen (ed.), "Nuclear Weapons Ban Monitor 2026", Norwegian People's Aid, 2026. [Available here](#); Solène Meyzonnade, "Estimations récentes sur l'arsenal nucléaire israélien", Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, Observatoire de la dissuasion, bulletin no. 95, 2022. [Available here](#); Anna Ahronheim, "New Israeli submarines to have new capabilities", *The Jerusalem Post*, 19 January 2022. [Available here](#). AIP extends submerged endurance, but conventional submarines cannot match nuclear-powered boats' endurance. With current technology, an AIP submarine carrying nuclear-armed ballistic missiles would require changes to strategy, patrol arrangements and missile capacity; a more limited North Atlantic and North Sea posture may be feasible with these changes. See: "2011 Draft SEIS/SOEIS for SURTASS LFA Sonar: Chapters 1–10", United States Department of the Navy, 2011. [Available here](#); Jonathan Mead, "Comments from the Taskforce Chief", Australian Department of Defence, 2021. [Available here](#).

limiting comparisons between years.<sup>92</sup> To estimate wider costs not captured by that series, it matches observations of UK deployments abroad (which exclude any domestic activity), mainly from IISS's *The Military Balance*, to compatible MOD and other public cost evidence.<sup>93</sup>

The model uses benchmark rates — estimated annual costs per person or unit of equipment — for military personnel, MOD civilians and equipment support, then combines the resulting costs with reported operations spending.<sup>94</sup> After removing identified double counting, the model uses eligible equipment support costs to estimate additional costs for procurement and infrastructure using budget figures supplied by the force projection model.

Each observed deployment generally receives a full year's benchmark cost. The estimate labelled 2024/25 uses 2025 deployment observations, including activity from 2025/26. The estimates value the observed deployments. Where direct costs are incomplete, the model uses documented benchmarks or support allowances where possible.

## Force projection

This budget allocation model includes readiness of forces based in the UK, shared support and MOD civilian costs. It starts with annual MOD resource and capital spending, removes specified accounting items and exclusions and divides the remainder into cost groups. The model removes depreciation because it already includes capital purchases.<sup>95</sup> The model excludes nuclear weapons costs using the nuclear expenditure model's historical estimates.

Personnel, equipment and activities often serve a combination of force projection, territorial defence and other purposes. The model therefore uses assumptions to allocate shared costs where necessary. The low estimate used in the report allocates 25 per cent of general mixed-purpose costs, 50 per cent of eligible naval personnel and equipment costs, 50

92. "Defence departmental resources: 2025", Ministry of Defence, 2026. [Available here](#); "MOD departmental resources: 2025", Ministry of Defence, 2026. [Available here](#).

93. IISS, *The Military Balance*, 2000–2001, 2014 and 2026 editions.

94. "Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2024–25", Ministry of Defence, 2025. [Available here](#); "The UK's F-35 capability", National Audit Office, 2025. [Available here](#); Maria Eagle, "UIN 42477–42551", Ministry of Defence, letter to James Cartlidge MP, 2025. [Available here](#).

95. MOD, "Defence departmental resources: 2025". [Available here](#); "MOD departmental resources: 2025". [Available here](#); "Quarterly service personnel statistics: index", Ministry of Defence, 2018 (updated 2 April 2026). [Available here](#); MOD, "Annual reports and accounts: index". [Available here](#); "Defence Nuclear Enterprise 2026". [Available here](#); AWE, "Annual Report and Accounts 31 March 2025". [Available here](#).

per cent of identified airlift and refuelling support costs and all eligible costs of named operations to force projection. This excludes direct Ukraine support, European operations and identified peacekeeping or humanitarian activity. The central and high cases that are not used in the report increase the general share to 50 and 75 per cent and also include higher naval and air support shares. These allocations are reasoned assumptions about capability, informed qualitatively by the force projection orientation index.

The model also supplies the budget figures used for the global activity model's equipment and infrastructure estimates.

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Kevin Cashman and Khem Rogaly

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