

Times letters: Defence spending and the Regeneration of Territorial Defence Forces

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Letters to the Editor



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Tory infighting

Sir, I admit to being one of the disillusioned mass of voters who have turned their backs on the Conservative Party. However, while Rishi Sunak may have been guilty of judgment errors and failed tactics, there is no single person responsible for the Conservatives' catastrophic downfall. It has been a slow and painful demise for almost a decade accelerated by the shenanigans of previous incumbents such as Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, the absence of integrity and indeed honesty by its most senior members, a lack of direction and indecision on key policies. Most of all, though, it's the continual bickering and infighting and pursuit of personal gain and status rather than getting on with the business of government.

Could I suggest that Kemi Badenoch should take a good look in the mirror before hurling stones at those outside her glass house ("Badenoch takes swipe at Sunak over election decisions", July 10). She is one of the most serious offenders and is synonymous with the malaise that has infected the Conservative hierarchy in recent years.

Defence spending and bolstering the forces

Sir, Having listened to Luke Pollard, the junior defence minister, on Times Radio (July 10), I was interested in his comments about how UK industry is to be supported in the awarding of new defence contracts.

Our UK company has been designing and manufacturing military equipment for the MoD for many years, winning numerous tenders. Defence procurement seeks the highest quality equipment, at the most economical price for taxpayers, but this does not necessarily mean that the contract will be awarded to a UK company. Many factors in the tender process are taken into account and the winner is the company that offers the "most economically advantageous tender".

MoD competitive tendering from initial prequalification through to contract award in no way provides more support for a British company than they would a European supplier. The new government is going to have to focus on this area if it truly wants to support UK industry in the awarding of defence contracts.

Andrew Phillips
Group technical director,
MST Group

Sir, It is inevitable that a new government will seek to conduct a strategic defence review, partly to address the substantial failings in our strategic ambitions and existing

defence forces described in your leading article ("Potemkin Defence", July 10), and partly in the hope that it can postpone significant extra expenditure. But whatever the review's outcome, we know that our existing forces are desperately lacking in manpower, ammunition and all forms of logistic support. We are in no position to respond adequately to a major crisis in a very dangerous world. These failings need repair irrespective of any review if we are to have any prospect of confronting an unexpected threat. Wars must be fought with what you have, not what you aspire to. A more productive approach would start immediately to remedy these serious shortfalls in our capability while the defence review considered the wider strategic demands of the future. None of this would be wasted expenditure and it would greatly strengthen our defences.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon
Vice-Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham
London SE13

Sir, The legitimate concerns of retired high-ranking military commanders about the weakness of the UK's home defences ("Starmar 'is playing with fire on defence spending'", July 10) conceal a grand irony. This was the generation of senior officers whose careers progressed with silent public acquiescence through the diminishing

of the volunteer territorial forces over the past two decades.

For all their limitations, the Territorial Army, the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and the RAF Volunteer Reserve were the bedrock of force regeneration and national survival through the 20th century.

The lessons from Ukraine indicate that a New Model Territorial Force with legions of specialist drone and air defence units is the minimum needed to sustain the national infrastructure when the hordes of precision missiles and drones arrive on day one of any conventional future European conflict.

To defend is to choose. Resources could be freed to underwrite the birth of a nationally unifying citizens' militia. The Scandinavians are showing us the way.

David Rew
Former Colonel, Territorial, Regular and Army Reserve

Sir, Further to your coverage of the Russian missile strike on the children's hospital in Kyiv (news, July 9 & 10) and our prime minister's reluctance to commit himself to an immediate increase in defence spending, he might find it useful to reflect on his reaction if the headline had read: "Russian missile strike on Great Ormond Street children's hospital".

James Servaes
Hambledon, Surrey

Source of a cuppa

Sir, Your article "Tea drinkers face strain of price rise" (July 9) is misleading in implying that the UK still buys a large amount of its black tea from northeast India. This is no longer the case. Out of the 83,554 metric tonnes of black tea consumed last year (a modern low figure) about 50 per cent was sourced from Kenya, where there is now a massive oversupply of tea and historically low prices. Forty-plus years ago we in the Brooke Bond blending room went three months with no Indian tea following an export ban. Not one consumer wrote in to complain about (or praise) the change in flavour.

Alan Carmichael
Nairobi

Museum priorities

Sir, David Childs (letter, July 9) is correct: we certainly lack a Museum of Britain in spite of spectacular advances in our knowledge of the past. Some years ago I pointed this out to a British Museum working party. However, the members seemed more concerned to emphasise their international role and thus justify the retention of the Parthenon marbles.

David Miles
Former chief archaeologist, English Heritage, Cuxton, Kent

Lesson in accents

Sir, Graham Read's letter on Welsh

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For all their limitations, the Territorial Army, the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and the RAF Volunteer Reserve were the bedrock of force regeneration and national survival through the 20th century. The lessons from Ukraine indicate that a New Model Territorial Force with legions of specialist drone and air defence units is the minimum needed to sustain the national infrastructure when the hordes of precision missiles and drones arrive on day one of any conventional future European conflict.

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Background

This letter is self-explanatory. I write this note in a week when Iranian drones and missiles are blitzing Israel and the Gulf states. As of February 2026, there has still been no public discussion of the regeneration of the territorial defence forces; or the creation or equipping of drone regiments of a Royal Observer Corps of reservists who can be funded and equipped at the fraction of the cost of 5th generation fighter jets or other exquisite bespoke equipment. I have subsequently returned to this theme on a number of occasions in public and through private military channels.

I have reproduced the Times article which prompted this letter on the following page.

Keir Starmer is ‘playing with fire’ on defence spending

Former military leaders have voiced alarm over Labour’s commitment to an increase as the prime minister flies to US for a Nato summit

Larisa Brown , Defence Editor, Aubrey Allegretti , Washington DC
Tuesday 9th July 2024

Sir Keir Starmer has been accused of “playing with fire” after putting off a decision on increasing Britain’s defence spending until after a major review of the country’s armed forces.

The prime minister will arrive in Washington for a Nato summit facing pressure to set out a timeline for raising defence spending from 2.3 per cent to 2.5 per cent of GDP.

However, [Starmer](#) insisted on Tuesday that while he was “committed” to increasing spending, no decision on a timescale would be made until after the government had carried out a strategic defence review that could take months.

“That strategic review needs to come first,” he said.

The move has been met with [dismay by former senior military leaders](#), who warned that a decision could not wait given the gravity of the threats facing the UK.

Philip Ingram, a former colonel in British military intelligence, said the government was “playing with fire” because the “threat is now and it will take years to fix the army, our ammunition stocks, get the RAF and navy ready”.

Admiral Lord West, a former head of the navy who was a security minister under a previous Labour government, said Labour should outline a timeline during the summit to “set an example to all European countries” and to answer American concerns about the fact European countries do not spend enough on defence.

He said that instead the new government was “delaying spending money” by not setting out a plan, which meant “there is no money” for the Ministry of Defence.

“There is no doubt we have got hollowed out forces. There are severe doubts on whether the armed forces are capable of doing what is expected of them by the nation and we need to spend some money urgently,” he said.

The review will be launched by John Healey, the defence secretary, next week and Starmer said it would “secure Britain’s defences for the future”. He also made an “ironclad” guarantee that the 2.5 per cent goal would still be reached.

“There is no more important duty for me as prime minister than keeping the people of our country safe,” he added. “At a time when we face multiple threats at home and abroad, we must make sure we are ready to defend ourselves.”

The prime minister said Britain's message to adversaries trying to undermine peace and democracy was "you will not succeed". Starmer will hold talks with [President Biden](#) on Wednesday and others in his first foreign trip since becoming prime minister.

Leaders are expected to announce more support for [Ukraine](#), with talks on a new Nato initiative to take over much of the work of a US-led group that has been co-ordinating aid. The push is seen as a bid to "Trump-proof" aid for Kyiv, in the event the Republican former president wins the White House again in November.

Downing Street said Starmer would focus on building constructive and useful relationships with other leaders, at a "turning point for our collective security".

It is understood officials inside the MoD have already been working on the strategic defence review in anticipation of Healey's arrival in the department. Labour insiders could not confirm whether it would be concluded by Christmas, although they said it was possible that a timeline for achieving 2.5 per cent could be laid out during the process.

One Whitehall source described the move to put off the announcement as "amateur hour", and claimed that a review would allow senior armed forces figures to push for more money than allocated by the previous Conservative government. "They don't need to do a review," the source added.

James Cartlidge, the new shadow defence secretary and former minister in the MoD, wrote a letter to Healey on Tuesday to express his concern that the government had not set out a way to fund an increase in defence spending at a time "where the world is at its most dangerous for a generation".

He wrote: "Making such a clear commitment is vital for our national security. Our armed forces need the certainty and clarity on their funding in order to plan and prepare for the future."

Cartlidge said that at the Nato summit allies would be looking to the UK for "certainty and leadership — which can only be provided if our nation is transparent about its defence spending plans".

A Labour source said: "The Conservatives underfunded and hollowed out our armed forces for 14 years. We've entered government with a cast iron commitment to reach 2.5 per cent as soon as possible and we will set out a clear path for it in a responsible way."

Government insiders also denied there had been any delay to plans for defence spending, and left open the possibility that the 2.5 per cent target could be hit before 2030.

Without any new money for the MoD there are concerns that plans for new ships and fighter jets could have to be cancelled because of huge projected overspends in the RAF and Royal Navy.

Earlier this year the Conservatives had set out a timeline for increasing defence spending every year up until 2030, when it planned to reach 2.5 per cent.

Ben Wallace, the former defence secretary, said that for the defence review to be “meaningful” and for the government to reach 2.5 per cent, it must report before a comprehensive spending review.

“If it doesn’t then it will be seen as a Treasury-led delaying tactic and not a process that will put the security of the country at its heart,” he said.

Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, will need to draw up a comprehensive spending review to allocate money to Whitehall’s departments from April 2025. There are fears that it could be published before Healey’s review of defence needs, meaning the size of the MoD’s budget would already have been set.

Labour insiders have raised the possibility of a one-year spending review, to allow them to give Whitehall immediate clarity over their budgets and more time to set multi-year ones from 2026 onwards. However, no final decision has been taken.

A number of former military chiefs have expressed their concern about the state of Britain’s armed forces in recent weeks, with General Sir Nick Carter, the former chief of the defence staff, warning on Tuesday that Britain was not ready to fight a war. In an interview with Times Radio, he said the UK needed to bolster its armed forces if it wanted to deter President Putin of Russia from invading Nato territory in the future.

Speaking at the Future of Britain Conference later in the day, Carter said defence spending might have to almost double to 4 per cent of GDP, depending on the need, adding that the British army was too small and soldiers were underpaid.

He also warned that the Russian leader knew that the Nato alliance was “hollow”, adding: “We don’t have the defence sector we used to have. We don’t have the resilience we used to have. We are all hollow and Mr Putin knows that we are hollow and unless we do something about it we will not be able to re-impose a sense of deterrence.”

Carter said [Donald Trump](#) was right to hammer Nato allies for not spending enough on defence when he was US president. But he warned that Trump would treat the alliance like his Mar-a-Lago beach club if he wins November’s election.

“If you pay the subscription you can join it and stay in it,” Carter said. “And I think that’s worrying.”

In an interview [with The Times on Monday](#), General Sir Patrick Sanders, a former head of the army, warned that Britain’s armed forces were so worn down that they were able to fight only a small war for no longer than a month.

He said the world was facing “as dangerous a moment as any time that we have had since 1945”, adding: “What we’re being asked to do by the government is well beyond what we are funded or capable of doing.”