

Ukraine, the British left, and the military-industrial complex



*The Corbynist left is isolated in its opposition to defence spending and the supply of military equipment to Ukraine. But the extent of the environmental damage caused by the military industry is becoming increasingly apparent. **Keith Mc Loughlin** writes that, to reduce defence spending, the left will have to win the argument that industrial conversion to a socially useful Green New Deal is possible without a loss to the economy or national security.*

The UK's defence industry is rarely in the news headlines, but it reveals much about our current politics and the interlocking crises we face on the economy, the environment, and global security. The defence economy sits at the intersection of the Conservative government's economic, foreign, and even social policies. But it also represents Labour's lurch to the centre ground and Keir Starmer's interpretation of centrist social-democratic statecraft. For its detractors on the left, an increase in defence today will lead to a carbon-intensive military-industrial complex tomorrow, one that will exacerbate, not ameliorate, conflicts in Ukraine and elsewhere. Whatever one's stance on this dispute, it is worth considering what Thucydides deduced: that 'war is a matter not so much of arms as of money, which makes arms of use'.

Last February, the Stop the War coalition issued a [statement](#) in response to the crisis in Ukraine. It opposed 'any war over Ukraine' and believed 'the crisis should be settled on a basis which recognises the right of the Ukrainian people to self-determination and addresses Russia's security concerns'. But it went further by rejecting the view that NATO was a 'defensive alliance' and criticised the UK's supply of arms to Ukraine and its stationing of further troops to Eastern Europe; moves that it felt served 'no purpose other than inflaming tensions and indicating disdain for Russian concerns'. Eleven Labour MPs signed the petition including Diane Abbott, John McDonnell, and Richard

Burton, politicians who are allies of the former Labour leader and Stop the War chairman, Jeremy Corbyn. In response, the party leadership took a firm line, accusing Stop the War of [providing support to Putin](#) and threatening to suspend the MPs if they did not fall into line.

This incident reveals much about the current climate within the Labour party and the left more broadly. For a start, it shows how Starmer has stamped his centrist credentials on policy. He toured NATO's headquarters in Brussels shortly before the invasion, stating that Labour's support for the alliance was '[unshakeable](#)'. He reminded his Twitter followers that it was a Labour foreign secretary, [Ernest Bevin](#), who helped found NATO in 1949 and that a line of leaders, with the notable exception of his immediate predecessor Corbyn, all supported the alliance, including Michael Foot, who is often erroneously labelled a pacifist. Defence is just another policy area that has moved away from Corbynism as Starmer tries to move the party to the [centre ground](#) in order to win back seats in 'middle England' and the northern 'red wall' at the next general election.

Starmer's response to the Stop the War petition is part of a broader enforcement of party discipline, as was also seen in his sacking of shadow cabinet ministers [who attended picket lines](#) this summer. For the left, defence and foreign policy is considered a moral issue. Prominent socialists helped found the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the 1950s, taking the view that the possession and threatened use of the hydrogen bomb was unethical. Accusing western leaders of crimes against humanity, the left protested the Vietnam War in the 1960s and the 'War on Terror' in the 2000s. The left opposes Britain's role in the global arms trade (it is the third largest exporter) and seeks to bring attention to wars abroad where these weapons are used, notably in the [ongoing war in Yemen](#). Although Corbyn is no longer the party leader, he has retained influence on the left, and continues to [object](#) to the supply of arms to Ukraine.

But the economic dimension is also important. As the cost-of-living crisis intensifies, the justification for public spending priorities will turn towards issues closer to home, particularly in sustaining employment. Britain's defence economy employs some 200,000 workers, and that is not including military personnel and MoD staff. Even before the crisis in Ukraine, the government made clear that defence had a wider economic and industrial significance. Its 2021 [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#) positioned defence as a generator of economic and research activity, with the added benefits of technological 'spin off' and employment. Last year's Defence

and Security Industrial Strategy white paper outlined a 'vision to unlock the potential of the defence and security industries to make a virtue of the immense social value they bring to our nation'. Whereas military industry was relatively open to market competition, including tenders from defence companies based abroad, in more recent times the government has moved towards a more protectionist preferential stance towards British arms manufacturers.

Labour has made similar noises. In an [address](#) to the Royal United Services Institute in 2021, the shadow defence secretary, John Healey, stated that Labour, 'as the Party of working people and trade unions' sees 'spending on defence as a force for good in the country' as it 'strengthens our UK economy and, as COVID has exposed the risks of relying on foreign supply chains, it also has the potential to strengthen our sovereignty and security'. Labour has doubled-down on this stance since [the invasion of Ukraine](#). Moreover, the location of high-intensity defence sites in constituencies Labour currently holds – or could regain – is another dimension worth acknowledging with a general election on the horizon. In May this year, Starmer told workers at [Devonport](#) in Plymouth (a Labour marginal) that its naval docks will be 'safe' should Labour be returned to government. Healey visited [Barrow-in-Furness](#), a constituency heavily reliant on submarine manufacturing and a seat Labour wants to win back from the Conservatives. There, he informed town leaders of 'Labour's unshakeable commitment to the nuclear deterrent, pursuit of multilateral disarmament and boosting investment in British industry'.

Even Paul Mason, the former BBC economics editor and supporter of Corbyn, has called for a '[belligerent left](#)', one that fuses [higher defence spending](#) with socialist redistributive policies. Stop the War disregarded Mason as a 'liberal imperialist' working for Starmer and whose '[path is one of endless war](#)'. But despite Corbyn's enduring public profile, the left is increasingly isolated on the issue of defence spending and the supply of military equipment to Ukraine, in which there is a bipartisan consensus. Most trade unions are in favour of expanding the defence economy, which in turn will boost their bargaining position as they gain more workers. For example, GMB called on the government to '[massively ramp up defence spending](#)' in its Spring Statement this year. By contrast, the Green Party, now considered a haven for disenfranchised left-wing voters, has retained its stance that Britain should end its reliance on imported gas and oil and leave NATO – [though not until the war in Ukraine is over](#). The increase in defence spending comes at

a time when the extent of the [environmental damage](#) caused by military industry is increasingly apparent. The stated ambition of the UK's defence industry giants, such as [BAE Systems](#) and [Rolls-Royce](#) , to meet the objective of 'net zero' looks incompatible with a rise in defence activity in the immediate term, combined with a new Conservative administration that will prioritise economic growth over [reducing the UK's carbon footprint](#). If the left is to reduce defence spending, it will have to win the argument that [industrial conversion](#) to a [socially useful Green New Deal](#) is possible without a loss to either the economy or national security.

About the Author



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