



## **Defence Policy and Wales: The 'Generational Challenge'**

**Academi Heddwch Cymru  
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## Contents

About this Report .....	3
Key Points:.....	4
About Academi Heddwch Cymru .....	5
Defence Policy and Wales: The ‘Generational Challenge’ .....	6
a. Introduction: Labour’s ‘step-change’ in defence.....	6
b. The 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR).....	8
c. Increasing Defence Spending .....	10
d. Growth and innovation: the economic benefits of defence spending .....	13
e. The military footprint in Wales .....	16
f. The ‘whole of society’ approach.....	17
g. A nuclear defence .....	20
h. Conclusion: Implications for Wales and the Promotion of Peace.....	21

## About this Report

The Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer was elected as the UK Government in July 2024. Since then, it has made a series of major announcements concerning defence policy, while the Prime Minister has referred to improving defence as a ‘generational challenge’<sup>1</sup> and that ‘[t]he fundamental truth is clear: a step-change in the threats we face demands a step-change in British defence to meet them.’<sup>2</sup>

This report outlines some of the key themes in this ‘step-change’ and the implications for Wales. It was drafted by Colin McInnes, Research Lead for Academi Heddwch Cymru, with support from staff at Academi Heddwch. It draws on informal discussions with staff at the Welsh Government, and Academi Heddwch expresses its gratitude to those involved. Responsibility for the contents of this Report remain with Academi Heddwch Cymru.

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<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, ‘Prime Minister sets out biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the Cold War’, *Press Release* 25 February 2025. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-sets-out-biggest-sustained-increase-in-defence-spending-since-the-cold-war-protecting-british-people-in-new-era-for-national-security>. Hereafter referred to as Prime Minister’s Office, *Press Release*, 25 February 2025.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Prime Minister’s Introduction’, in *Strategic Defence Review - Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad* (London: HMSO, 2025), p.2, available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The\\_Strategic\\_Defence\\_Review\\_2025\\_-\\_Making\\_Britain\\_Safer\\_-\\_secure\\_at\\_home\\_strong\\_abroad.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_Making_Britain_Safer_-_secure_at_home_strong_abroad.pdf). Hereafter referred to as *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*.

## Key Points:

1. The Labour government in Westminster has argued for a 'step-change' in defence because of new threats to UK security. It has therefore made a series of announcements on defence and reviewed defence policy through a Strategic Defence Review.
2. There is an emphasis on military strength rather than addressing the sources of conflict and resolving tensions through diplomacy and cooperation.
3. Many of these new announcements sit uncomfortably with the policies of the Welsh Government while Welsh interests and perspectives have been poorly represented, not least in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review.
4. There will be an increased visibility of defence and the armed forces in Wales and greater militarisation of society and industry.
5. Reductions in overseas aid to pay for increased defence spending together with the promotion of defence exports does not fit Wales's vision of a globally responsible nation.
6. Although Welsh Government ministers have expressed a desire to benefit from the 'defence dividend', given the preponderance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Wales and doubts over the cost-effectiveness of defence spending in promoting economic growth, it seems unlikely that this will have a significant, positive effect on the Welsh economy.
7. Increased defence activity will run counter to carbon reduction and sustainability targets.
8. A renewed emphasis on nuclear weapons will harm attempts to move to a non-nuclear world.

## About Academi Heddwch Cymru

Academi Heddwch Cymru is Wales's national peace institute and is the first of its kind in the four nations of the United Kingdom. It belongs to a global family of peace institutes that bring together expertise to serve with the common aim of using peace-rooted approaches to global challenges.

Academi Heddwch aims to extend Wales's long-standing tradition of peace-making and peace-promotion by developing and coordinating an independent community of researchers in related fields. Funded by the Welsh Government but independent, Academi Heddwch works to place peace firmly on Wales's national agenda as well as on the international stage.

Academi Heddwch's aims are to ensure that:

- Wales makes an internationally recognised contribution to peace research and practice.
- A focus on peace is seen in relevant Welsh Government strategies and policies.
- There is strong public engagement with peace research and practice in Wales.

Academi Heddwch was established in 2020 and is an alliance of the 9 Universities in Wales, the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, the Learned Society of Wales, and the Welsh Centre for International Affairs (WCIA). It is also supported by representatives from the peace movement in Wales, Race Council Cymru, Urdd Gobaith Cymru, Rotary International, and the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales.

# Defence Policy and Wales: The ‘Generational Challenge’

## a. Introduction: Labour’s ‘step-change’ in defence

‘Labour’s first duty in government will be to keep our country safe.’ *Change:*

*Labour Party Manifesto 2024*<sup>3</sup>

‘[t]he fundamental truth is clear: a step-change in the threats we face demands a step-change in British defence to meet them.’<sup>4</sup>

In the period since the 2024 General Election, Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour government has made a series of announcements on defence. These include:

- to review defence policy, the results of which were published in July 2025 with 62 recommendations;
- to increase defence spending by reducing international aid;
- to develop and build new nuclear reactors for the Royal Navy’s submarines through the £9Bn ‘Unity’ contract with Rolls Royce;
- to purchase F-35A aircraft from the US which will be capable of carrying nuclear weapons;
- to develop a new national security strategy;
- and to review the AUKUS [Australia, UK and US] Alliance, entered into by the previous government as part of a developing interest in the Indo-Pacific region.

These developments reflect a decisive shift in thinking away from that of the post-Cold War era. This had been marked by a reduction in defence spending, military interventions away

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<sup>3</sup> *Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024*, p.123 available at <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Change-Labour-Party-Manifesto-2024-large-print.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Prime Minister’s Introduction’, in *Strategic Defence Review - Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad* (London: HMSO, 2025), p.2, available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The\\_Strategic\\_Defence\\_Review\\_2025\\_-\\_Making\\_Britain\\_Safer\\_-\\_secure\\_at\\_home\\_strong\\_abroad.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_Making_Britain_Safer_-_secure_at_home_strong_abroad.pdf). Hereafter referred to as *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*.

from the UK and Western Europe, a focus on interests and values not survival, and increased surveillance within the UK to counter terrorism. Instead, as Labour's Defence Secretary John Healey wrote, the new government in Westminster considered that 'The world has changed' with the emergence of threats which were both more serious and less predictable than previously encountered.<sup>5</sup> For the Westminster Government, this represented a 'generational challenge [requiring] a generational response'.<sup>6</sup> As the Prime Minister wrote in his introduction to the 2025 Strategic Defence Review, '[we] need to see the biggest shift in mindset in my lifetime: to put security and defence front and centre – to make it the fundamental organising principle of government'.<sup>7</sup>

This report examines the implications of this shift for Wales and for the prospects of peace. Although defence is a reserved power for the UK Government, defence policy does have implications for Wales. A disproportionate number of Welsh men and women serve in the UK armed forces compared to other nations in the UK. Military bases and exercise areas are located in Wales, companies in Wales are involved in defence-related activities with implications for employment, the military has a direct and indirect impact on communities in Wales, and changes in defence policy may have implications for Wales's international strategy. Not least, the rhetoric of the Prime Minister in talking of a 'generational challenge' powerfully mirrors the Welsh Government's own presentation of its keynote policy on the Well-being of Future Generations, but the two have very different approaches and policy solutions.<sup>8</sup> Wales also has a strong interest in the promotion of peace, both historically and currently, and defence policy directly impacts upon efforts to promote and sustain peace.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 'Foreword from the Secretary of State', in *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, p.3.

<sup>6</sup> Prime Minister's Office, *Press Release*, 25 February 2025.

<sup>7</sup> 'Prime Minister's Introduction', in *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, p.2.

<sup>8</sup> See for example the terminology used in the outline of Wales's Future Generations policy, and the details presented at <https://futuregenerations.wales/discover/about-future-generations-commissioner/future-generations-act-2015/>.

<sup>9</sup> On Wales's interests in peace, see Academi Heddwch Cymru, *Wales as a Nation of Peace (2024)*, available at <https://www.wcia.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Wales-as-a-Nation-of-Peace-report-AHC1.pdf>.

## b. The 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR)

The key element in this shift to date has been the Strategic Defence Review (SDR). Launched in July 2024 shortly after Labour's election victory, this differed from the long line of previous defence reviews in being conducted *for* the government not *by* the government. The SDR examined not only traditional matters such as the size and structure of the armed forces and its weapons, but also the defence industry, recruitment, the defence estate, and relations with wider society. Two of the key themes which emerged from this wider focus were the need to foster innovation in technology, both to acquire better weapons but also as part of the government's wider economic growth strategy; and the requirement to rebuild relations between the military and society.

The SDR was chaired by Lord Robertson, Tony Blair's first Defence Secretary and former NATO Secretary General, supported by Dr Fiona Hill (a former member of the US National Security Council and adviser to President Trump) and General Sir Richard Barrons (former UK Deputy Chief of Staff).<sup>10</sup> Its work was further supported by a small number of external advisers and 26 review and challenge panels drawn from 'almost 150 experts from the whole range of defence'.<sup>11</sup> What is striking about both the SDR team and the list of experts is how they reflect the defence establishment. Few if any representatives of the peace movement or proponents of alternative ways of thinking about defence appear to have been involved.<sup>12</sup> Nor was there any attempt to include Welsh experts in the review and challenge panels. When asked about the number of experts from Wales, the Ministry of Defence replied that 'We do not know how many of the experts involved in the Review and Challenge Panels (sic) were from Wales – they were not asked to identify themselves by location.'<sup>13</sup> This response suggests that the MoD were either unaware of or decided to ignore how devolution has affected Wales and aspects of Welsh life and need to be reflected in such UK-

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<sup>10</sup> House of Commons Library Research Briefing, *The Forthcoming Strategic Defence Review 2025*, 30 May 2025, p.10, available at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10153/>. Hereafter referred to as 'Research Briefing, *The Forthcoming Strategic Defence Review*'.

<sup>11</sup> Rt Hon John Healey MP, *House of Commons Debates*, 18 November 2024 column 20, quoted in Research Briefing, *The Forthcoming Strategic Defence Review*, p.10.

<sup>12</sup> The full list of experts on the review and challenge panels is published in *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, pp.138-40.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Ministry of Defence to Professor Colin McInnes, File reference FOI2025-15333, 1 August 2025.

wide reviews. From planning permission for the defence estate, to investment in Welsh industry, to cadet forces in schools, to ensuring social and economic resilience, to the c.2000 Welsh men and women in the armed forces, to the distinctive Welsh approach to international relations reflected in its international strategy, Wales has legitimate interests in defence which may differ from those elsewhere in the UK but were not acknowledged in the SDR process.

This process also included an open invitation for submissions and Lord Robertson wrote directly to the Welsh Government inviting its views.<sup>14</sup> Approximately 14,500 submissions were received as a result of this call. Surprisingly, the Welsh Government chose not to provide a submission – again, despite Wales’s interests in the outcome. Although the Defence Secretary ‘held a call with the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales to brief the Welsh Government on the content of the Strategic Defence Review’,<sup>15</sup> this appears somewhat minimal and a more formal outline of Wales’s interests from its Government would have likely provided greater weight and detail. Of the submissions received, only 0.67% (97) were identifiable from Wales and only 1 Welsh university provided a submission.<sup>16</sup>

Overall therefore, Wales’s engagement with the SDR appears to have been slight and its interests not as fully represented as might have been, despite its interests in the outcome.

Although the SDR is in some respects radical and diverges from the policy of the previous government, this is within an orthodox paradigm. It equates military might with security, emphasises the need for high technology weapons, relies on nuclear deterrence rather than disarmament, and views the defence industry as a key national asset (including its ability to generate jobs and revenue through exports). That a different approach was possible was seen in the publication a month before the SDR of the *Alternative Defence Review*,

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<sup>14</sup> UK Parliament, *Strategic Defence Review: Welsh Government, Question for Ministry of Defence* Luke Pollard MP UIN 58250, answered on 12 June 2025. Available at <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-06-09/58250>.

<sup>15</sup> UK Parliament, *Strategic Defence Review: Welsh Government, Question for Ministry of Defence* Luke Pollard MP UIN 58250, answered on 12 June 2025. Available at <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-06-09/58250>.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Ministry of Defence to Professor Colin McInnes, File reference FOI2025-15333, 22 July 2025.

‘proposed by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in response to the RMT union’s decision to ... work out the basis of a new foreign policy with the promotion of peace and social justice at its heart.’<sup>17</sup> From the perspective of the *Alternative Defence Review*, the SDR appears less of a radical response to a changing world than a tweak – albeit a substantial tweak – to existing policies and mindsets.

The SDR was released in June 2025 and at 144 pages is one of the longest defence reviews published. It contained 62 recommendations which were all immediately accepted by the Westminster Government.<sup>18</sup>

### c. Increasing Defence Spending

In February 2025, with the SDR process underway and in line with its election commitment, the Prime Minister announced that defence spending would increase to 2.5% of GDP from April 2027, with an ‘ambition to reach 3% in the next Parliament’.<sup>19</sup> This was not simply a reflection of the shift in thinking about defence, but also a response to the newly installed Trump administration’s vigorous verbal assault on its European allies for a perceived lack of financial commitment to NATO.<sup>20</sup>

Public expenditure however was under considerable pressure at the time of the announcement. For some months Labour had been arguing that it had inherited a £22bn ‘black hole’ in the public finances, but raising additional money through taxation had proved

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<sup>17</sup> Karen Bell ed., *Alternative Defence Review*, p.5. Available at <https://cnduk.org/adr/>.

<sup>18</sup> *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*. In contrast Duncan Sandys 1957 defence review – possibly the most radical since the Second World War in ending conscription, restructuring the armed forces and moving to a reliance on nuclear weapons – was just 12 pages long. *Defence: Outline of Future Policy* Cd 124 (London: HMSO, 1957). George Robertson’s own 1998 *Strategic Defence Review* was 72 pages long but was bulked out to 390 pages by a series of ‘supporting essays’. *Strategic Defence Review: Modern Forces for the Modern World* (London: HMSO, 1998), available at [https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20121018172816/http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/65F3D7AC-4340-4119-93A2-20825848E50E/0/sdr1998\\_complete.pdf](https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20121018172816/http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/65F3D7AC-4340-4119-93A2-20825848E50E/0/sdr1998_complete.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, *Press Release*, 25 February 2025. See also Research Briefing, *The Forthcoming Strategic Defence Review*, pp.4-5.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew Savill, ‘Starmer shows his hand on defence spending’, *RUSI Commentary* 26 February 2025. Available at <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/starmer-shows-his-hand-defence-spending>.

unpopular and increasing the government deficit ran counter to Labour's pre-election commitment to fiscal responsibility.<sup>21</sup> The money for the increase in defence spending therefore had to come from somewhere else in the UK Government's budget and the result was a decision to reduce spending for overseas aid from 0.5% to 0.3% GNI – albeit with a somewhat vague commitment to increase it back to the United Nation's (UN) target of 0.7% 'when the fiscal conditions allow'.<sup>22</sup>

This increase followed a real terms reduction in defence spending of 22% between 2009/10 and 2016/17, before a slow increase prior to Labour's 2024 election victory. In November 2024, the Defence Secretary had also announced savings in the defence budget by retiring some older ships and aircraft slightly earlier than expected.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, some defence commentators questioned whether this increase would be enough given the 'hollowing out' of the armed forces in previous years, and whether this commitment would be realised given the likelihood of pressure on public finances in future years.<sup>24</sup> What appears to have been lacking however is both a questioning of whether increasing expenditure on the military is the best way to improve international peace and security, and an examination of whether alternative approaches emphasising diplomacy, soft power tools and overseas aid might be a more effective and less costly approach to building peace.<sup>25</sup> But the starting point was an unquestioning belief that threats require armed responses rather than the more positive assertion found in the UNESCO constitution that 'Since wars begin in the minds of women and men, it is in the minds of women and men that the defences of peace must be constructed.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See for example Paul Johnson, 'The £22bn 'black hole' was obvious to anyone who dared to look', Institute of Fiscal Studies, 24 August 2024, available at <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/ps22bn-black-hole-was-obvious-anyone-who-dared-look>.

<sup>22</sup> Prime Minister's Office, *Press Release*, 25 February 2025. The target of 0.7% of GNI was first met by the UK in 2013 and was passed into UK law in 2015. In 2021 the Conservative government announced it would reduce the target to 0.5%. See House of Commons Research Briefing, *The 0.7% Aid Target*, 5 December 2024, available at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn03714/>.

<sup>23</sup> Research Briefing, *The Forthcoming Strategic Defence Review*, p.15.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Matthew Savill, 'The Strategic Defence Review and the challenge of turning ambition into action', *RUSI Commentary* 9 June 2025. Available at <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/strategic-defence-review-and-challenge-turning-ambition-action>.

<sup>25</sup> For example, Bell ed., *Alternative Defence Review*.

<sup>26</sup> See <https://www.unesco.org/en/vision>.

Since the 2.5% increase is a reallocation of current spending by the UK Government, it seems unlikely that the Welsh Government's own budget will increase under the rules established by the Barnett formula (though this might be the case with the 3% increase). However, increasing defence spending does have implications for Wales and the Welsh Government's priorities. Two are particularly noteworthy.

First, the Welsh Government's international strategy outlines as one of its three 'core ambitions' a 'vision' of Wales as a globally responsible nation.<sup>27</sup> Although not explicitly including overseas aid in this ambition – presumably because foreign affairs are a reserved power for the UK Government – examples of this run through the strategy<sup>28</sup> and may be considered implicit in its vision of global responsibility. The UK Government's decision to reduce overseas aid to pay for increased defence spending therefore risks at the very least the optics of this 'core ambition' and does not seem to align with the Welsh Government's priorities for its international relations.

Second, the Welsh Government has identified climate change as a key challenge. Although a part of its response is to adapt to the reality of climate change, to mitigating the effects by reducing carbon expenditure and promoting greater sustainability are also acknowledged as a vital element.<sup>29</sup> The commitment to sustainability is reflected in a range of Welsh Government policies, including the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015)* and the *International Strategy*,<sup>30</sup> and it is committed to achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Increasing defence spending however risks this both directly and indirectly. Directly, there is a substantial body of evidence which suggests that defence is generally a high

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<sup>27</sup> Welsh Government, *International Strategy 2020-2025* available at <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-10/international-strategy-for-wales-v1.pdf>. Hereafter referred to as Welsh Government, *International Strategy*.

<sup>28</sup> Not least in the section on the Wales for Africa programme. Welsh Government, *International Strategy*, p.28.

<sup>29</sup> See for example, Welsh Government, *Climate Adaptation Strategy Wales (2024)* available at <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2024-10/climate-adaptation-strategy-for-wales-2024.pdf>, p.2.

<sup>30</sup> See 'The Well-Being of Future Generations', <https://www.gov.wales/well-being-of-future-generations-wales>; Welsh Government, *International Strategy 2020-2025* available at <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-10/international-strategy-for-wales-v1.pdf>.

carbon activity with poor levels of sustainability.<sup>31</sup> Increasing defence spending therefore appears to run counter to the Welsh Government's policies on mitigation and sustainability. Indirectly, there is an opportunity cost in that money spent on defence is money not spent on climate change activities. Both adaptation and mitigation strategies require funding and, although the Welsh Government has some discretion in how it spends its budget in this area, its priorities no longer appear as closely aligned to those of the UK Government.

#### d. Growth and innovation: the economic benefits of defence spending

In January 2025, the Defence Secretary John Healey claimed that 'defence is an engine of growth in this country'.<sup>32</sup> This point has been made on multiple occasions by UK Government ministers including the Prime Minister and chimes with its priority to increase UK economic growth. Notably this claim runs through the SDR, which refers to the role of defence in 'seeding innovation and growth' and that defence should 'deliver for the UK economy'. It identifies £29Bn as having been spent with UK industry in 2023/4, supporting 440,000 jobs and 24,000 apprenticeships, with exports worth £14Bn. These are big numbers, but the SDR argues that there is still 'untapped potential [for defence] to be an engine for growth' which the Labour government will seek to realise.<sup>33</sup> This includes increasing the value of defence exports, a policy which not only raises ethical concerns over the provision of weapons to some states, but may also may undermine efforts to promote a more just and peaceful world.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See for example the various reports by the Conflict and Environment Observatory, especially those on: global military spending; military greenhouse gas emissions; the military's contribution to climate change; military climate action; and global military emissions. All are available from their website at <https://ceobs.org/>.

<sup>32</sup> Bell ed., *Alternative Defence Review*, p.31. The point was made by Healey on the BBC Radio 4 'Today' programme, 24 January 2025.

<sup>33</sup> *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, pp.6, 16, 51 and 63.

<sup>34</sup> For a critical examination of UK policy on arms exports, see for example Action on Armed Violence, *UK legislative push for ethical arms trade? Key highlights of the new Arms Trade (Inquiry and Suspension) Bill* <https://aoav.org.uk/2025/uk-legislative-push-for-ethical-arms-trade-key-highlights-of-the-new-arms-trade-inquiry-and-suspension-bill/>. More generally, Amnesty international has long expressed concerns over the ethical and human rights implications of arms exports, lobbying for stronger international controls. See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/arms-control/>.

Prior to the increase in defence spending the MoD had spent £910M on businesses in Wales, just 3.4% of the total it spent on UK businesses.<sup>35</sup> The BBC reported that ‘more than 160 companies supporting the defence sector have operations based in Wales, employing over 20,000 people’, although in an answer to a question in the House of Commons this number was placed at 7,000.<sup>36</sup> Even before the publication of the SDR, Welsh Government ministers had expressed their desire that Wales benefit from this ‘defence dividend’, while the UK Treasury Minister Darren Jones, while visiting Wales in February 2025, talked of the ‘great opportunity’ for Welsh industry.<sup>37</sup> In particular, Wales has a disproportionately large number of SMEs which historically have found it difficult to attract defence funding compared to larger ‘anchor’ companies. The *Alternative Defence Review* for example estimated that only 5% of defence orders went to SMEs, but in 2022 Welsh Government data suggests that over 99% of businesses in Wales were SMEs.<sup>38</sup> This suggests that Wales might not be well placed to profit from this ‘defence dividend’ compared to the rest of the UK. However, the SDR was explicit in its desire to broaden the range of companies involved in defence and especially those highly innovative small and medium-size companies developing potentially dual use technologies – that is, technologies which may be designed initially for the civilian sector but which might be repurposed for military applications. If successful, the result of this would be to create a situation where a greater proportion of businesses and employees in Wales were involved in and reliant on defence, including defence exports. This potential for the increased militarisation of Welsh industry sits uncomfortably with Wales’s heritage of promoting peace, the interests of many civil society organisations in Wales, and with the Welsh Government’s vision of a sustainable, globally responsible nation.

As the *Alternative Defence Review* argues however, the emphasis on defence as an engine of growth and innovation might be misplaced. Defence is a relatively small sector in the UK,

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<sup>35</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, *Press Release*, 25 February 2025.

<sup>36</sup> David Deans and Cemlyn Davies, ‘Extra defence cash could be spent in Wales – minister’, BBC News Online, 27 February 2025, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpwddq1gnzeo>; Hansard, ‘Defence Spending Wales: oral questions’, 11 June 2025. This discrepancy in job numbers is striking but may be due to different counting methods.

<sup>37</sup> Deans and Davies, ‘Extra defence cash could be spent in Wales’s; interview with Welsh Government officials, 14 July 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Bell ed., *Alternative Defence Review*, p.31; Welsh Government *Size Analysis of Businesses 2022*, available at <https://www.gov.wales/size-analysis-businesses-2022>.

which suggests that a significant investment in defence is unlikely to have a dramatic effect on economic growth. Only 5% of industrial jobs are in defence and only 0.6% of those employed in full time work are in the defence sector. Moreover, only 0.004% of UK Treasury revenue is generated by defence companies and just 1 % of industrial output. It goes on to argue that global supply chains in the defence industry means that many large projects have significant elements which are sub-contracted outside the UK - although figures provided to Parliament suggested that 84% of defence equipment spending does remain in the UK.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, as many defence companies are multinational, profits do not always stay in the UK.<sup>40</sup> The *Alternative Defence Review* also points out that there is evidence that investing in defence is unlikely to generate long term economic growth, while the history of dramatic overspends in defence is legion suggesting that defence is a poor sector for the UK economy to invest in (though the UK is not alone in this, and defence is not alone in the UK in suffering overspends on large projects).<sup>41</sup>

In summary therefore: it is unclear that the Welsh economy in particular and the UK's in general would benefit from increased defence spending compared to other possible public investments which might also lead to greater social benefit; there are risks of militarising industry from an increased emphasis on defence in innovation; and the lure of financial benefits from defence exports may undermine Wales's vision of being a globally responsible nation.

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<sup>39</sup> Bell ed., *Alternative Defence Review*, p.31-3; George Allison, 'Figures show that 84% of defence equipment spending stayed in the UK', *UK Defence Journal* 10 December 2024, available at <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/figures-show-84-of-defence-equipment-spending-stayed-in-uk/>.

<sup>40</sup> Bell ed., *Alternative Defence Review*, p.31.

<sup>41</sup> Bell ed., *Alternative Defence Review*, pp.26 and 31; National Audit Office, *The [Defence] Equipment Plan 2023-2033*, 4 December 2023, available at <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/equipment-plan-2023-to-2033/>.

## e. The military footprint in Wales

There are currently an estimated 31 military and Ministry of Defence sites in Wales. Just 1% of UK Regular Forces Personnel are stationed in Wales, although in the 12 months to 31 March 2024, 5% of new recruits came from Wales.<sup>42</sup> Some of these facilities are live firing areas, taking up considerable land which might be used for more productive purposes, while RAF low-flying training areas such as the ‘Mach-loop’ between Dolgellau and Machynlleth have historically been the subject of complaints from residents.<sup>43</sup> Although this military footprint has been declining over the past decade,<sup>44</sup> and especially since the end of the Cold War, it nevertheless has an impact on a small country such as Wales.

The SDR announced a £7Bn programme of investment and improvement in the defence estate across the UK. This included more than £1.5Bn for defence housing, some £100M of which would be spent in Wales.<sup>45</sup> Although the SDR did not specify where these major new investments would take place, the Welsh Government do not expect more bases in Wales but rather an emphasis on land retention, improvement and possibly the expansion of existing facilities. The increased emphasis upon warfighting capabilities in the SDR however implies a greater use of areas for exercises and live firing in Wales, including low-flying by military jets. The SDR also discussed the importance of ‘space domain awareness’,<sup>46</sup> which suggests that the plans to install 27 deep space radars at Cawdor Barracks in Pembrokeshire (the ‘DARC’ programme<sup>47</sup>) will be a priority, despite local opposition.

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<sup>42</sup> Academi Heddwch Cymru, *Wales as a Nation of Peace* (2024), available at <https://www.wcia.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Wales-as-a-Nation-of-Peace-report-AHC1.pdf>, p.32; Cymdeithas y Cymod and Wales Peace Institute Initiative, *The Extent of Military Presence and its Influence in Wales* (2015) available at <https://www.wcia.org.uk/cy/academiheddwch/khakildragonreport/>; Esme Kirk-Wade, *UK Defence Personnel Statistics*, House of Commons Library Research Briefing 30 June 2025, p.26, available at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7930/>.

<sup>43</sup> See for example BBC News, ‘Complaints spark probe into Machynlleth low fly jets’, 8 August 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-45084885>.

<sup>44</sup> See for example the analysis from the Welsh Government’s Council for Economic Renewal, *Impact of Strategic Defence and Security Review [2014] in Wales*, 3 February 2014, available at <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-10/council-for-economic-renewal-february-14-impact-of-the-strategic-defence-and-security-review-in-wales.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, pp.133-4; Hansard, ‘Defence Spending Wales: oral questions’, 11 June 2025.

<sup>46</sup> *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, p.117.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of the Deep Space Advanced Radar Capability (DARC) programme, see Academi Heddwch Cymru, *The Deep Space Radar capability Programme (DARC): Questions for Pembrokeshire & Wales*

Since recruitment to all three of the armed services has been missing its target, efforts to increase this are likely, which will presumably include efforts to increase the number of recruits from Wales.<sup>48</sup> This will probably involve advertising campaigns and a greater presence in careers fairs and at educational establishments, further raising the profile of the military. This risks greater militarisation in society, both through the numbers of Welsh men and women in the armed forces and from campaigns valorising the military as part of a recruitment drive.

The consequence of all of these changes is an increased risk of militarism in Wales as the military becomes a more visible element of society and as some communities increase their dependency on the military. This is amplified by the SDR's 'whole of society' approach, discussed below.

#### f. The 'whole of society' approach

A major innovation – indeed, one to which a whole chapter of the SDR (Chapter 6) was devoted – is the 'whole of society' approach to defence. John Healey, the Secretary of State for Defence, described this as 'widening participation in national resilience and renewing the Nation's contract with those who serve'.<sup>49</sup> This was prompted by two factors. First, the belief that, having been operating overseas for much of the period since the end of the Cold War, there was a need for the UK's armed forces and society to 'reconnect' with each other.<sup>50</sup> This seems odd given the prominence of the armed forces in national life since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – from the 'help for heroes' campaign to the 'Invictus games' – while Remembrance Day parades and other long-standing military events continue to receive widespread attention (both the Edinburgh military tattoo and Trooping the Colour were broadcast on national television in 2025).

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<https://www.wcia.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-Edited-DARC-Report-Academi-Heddwch-Cymru-FINAL-1.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Kirk-Wade, *UK Defence Personnel Statistics*, p.11.

<sup>49</sup> John Healey, 'Foreword from the Secretary of State [for Defence]', *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, p.4

<sup>50</sup> *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, pp.18-19 and 36.

The SDR proposed a number of means by which the UK armed forces should reconnect with wider society, including:

- public engagement days;
- raising awareness in schools;
- a 30% increase in Cadet forces;
- courses on the value of defence for leaders of industry and civil society organisations.<sup>51</sup>

Second, the SDR emphasised the dangers posed by new threats to ‘critical national infrastructure’ (CNI), including power and communications. Currently, much of CNI is protected by private security contractors. But the SDR argued that:

In many cases, CNI operators do not have the ability to protect the infrastructure they own in the face of such complex and evolving threats. The MOD should explore, with wider Government, options for a ‘new deal’ for the defence of CNI, rooted in partnership between Defence and private-sector and allied operators of infrastructure that is most critical to the continuity of essential services in the UK.<sup>52</sup>

Part of the response suggested by the SDR was a ‘new deal’ between defence and private companies operating CNI, as well as exploring the creation of local reserve forces capable of protecting CNI and ‘connect[ing] communities with Defence’.<sup>53</sup> The SDR also argued that legislation will need to be amended or introduced to enable the protection of CNI against the new threats the UK faces, from ‘soft’ cyber-attacks to ‘kinetic’ attacks (on, for example, undersea cables).

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p.88.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p.89.

The SDR therefore proposed a ‘national conversation’ on defence and security ‘to raise public awareness of the threats to the UK, how Defence deters and protects against them, and why Defence requires support’.<sup>54</sup> Meaningful details of this were absent from the SDR, including a timetable and modes of engagement, but the intent appears to be less of a conversation which might include varied perspectives and critical voices, than a public relations exercise to promote the values of defence and the military.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the ‘whole of society’ approach will mean greater militarisation of the UK as a whole. Its aim is greater visibility, valorisation and prominence of the military in everyday life. But for Wales there is a further concern. It is approaching three decades since the devolution vote, and two decades since the Government of Wales Act which added further powers to the Welsh Government. Wales now has powers over many aspects of its national life and has reaffirmed a distinct national identity and developed a distinctive idea of society, not least through the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015)*.<sup>55</sup> In discussing the ‘whole of society’ approach, however, the SDR appears deliberately or unconsciously to be wholly ignorant of this. A flagrant example is when it discusses raising awareness of the armed forces and defence in schools through ‘working with the Department of Education’.<sup>56</sup> The SDR appears to be ignorant of the fact that education is a devolved responsibility. Nor does it express a willingness to work with – or even acknowledge - Welsh legislation which is of direct relevance, such as the *Wales Resilience Framework (2025)*.<sup>57</sup> In frequently conflating ‘nation’ and ‘national’ with the UK, the SDR demonstrates not only an insensitivity to the people of Wales and Welsh society, but implicitly a perspective that social relations in Wales can be determined outside Wales and without reference to distinctive Welsh interests and concerns.

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<sup>54</sup> *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, p.87.

<sup>55</sup> See for example the list of legislation outlined in Academi Heddwch Cymru, *Wales as a Nation of Peace (2024)*, available at <https://www.wcia.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Wales-as-a-Nation-of-Peace-report-AHC1.pdf>, pp.18-20.

<sup>56</sup> *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, p.88.

<sup>57</sup> Available at <https://www.gov.wales/wales-resilience-framework-2025>.

## g. A nuclear defence

The SDR baldly stated that ‘A modernised nuclear deterrent is the bedrock of the UK’s defence and the cornerstone of its commitment to NATO and global security.’<sup>58</sup> It expressed concerns that future conflicts involving the UK could be with nuclear or near-nuclear states and was clearly committed to the idea that possession of nuclear weapons deters their use in conflict rather than focussing on the risks of a nuclear-armed world. Only passing reference is made to nuclear non-proliferation efforts and the risk that emphasising nuclear weapons might encourage other currently non-nuclear weapon states to acquire such weapons so that they too could be as ‘well defended’ is almost wholly ignored. This is despite the risk of more states possessing nuclear weapons being a key justification of the SDR’s advocacy of nuclear weapons. There is a terrible irony here that the policy being pursued risks the very situation it is intended to avoid – of conflict between nuclear-armed states. Instead of denuclearising to avoid conflict between nuclear states, the SDR helps to normalise the possession of nuclear weapons on the grounds of deterrence.

The Labour government in Westminster also confirmed the decision made by its conservative predecessor to modernise the Trident nuclear warheads (the ASTREA programme) and announced the decision to purchase F-35A aircraft explicitly because of their potential to carry tactical nuclear warheads. Although these would be US warheads not UK and only used in NATO missions, it seems probable that they would at some point be based in the UK for operational reasons.<sup>59</sup>

Although the Welsh Government has not expressed a view on nuclear weapons, in 2022 the Senedd passed a motion calling on all states to sign the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.<sup>60</sup> This builds on a long Welsh tradition of opposition to nuclear weapons,

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<sup>58</sup> *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, p.98.

<sup>59</sup> *Strategic Defence Review (2025)*, p.101; Nuclear Information Service, ‘Astrea: new warhead named in Defence Command paper’, 11 April 2024, available at <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/article/astraea-new-warhead-named-in-defence-command-paper/>; Prime Minister’s Office Press Release, ‘UK to purchase F-35As and join NATO nuclear mission as Government steps up national security and delivers defence dividend’, 24 June 2025, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-purchase-f-35as-and-join-nato-nuclear-mission-as-government-steps-up-national-security-and-delivers-defence-dividend>.

<sup>60</sup> See <https://business.senedd.wales/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=700&MIId=12656> agenda item 6.

including the march from Wales to Greenham Common which led to the establishment of the women's peace camp there, and the 1982 declaration by all local councils in Wales of their opposition to the siting of nuclear weapons in their region. Although the policy of the Starmer Government may not be a surprise, it does stand in contrast to the concerns currently expressed in Wales by the Senedd and many civil society organisations.

## h. Conclusion: Implications for Wales and the Promotion of Peace

In 2024, Labour was elected as the UK's government. Defence was not a prominent feature of Labour's election manifesto nor was it a major issue in the General Election campaign (Rishi Sunak's proposal to reintroduce conscription for example quickly faded from debate). Nevertheless, the Labour Party's manifesto did contain a clear commitment to defence, a commitment which it has since begun to realise through a series of announcements. Moreover, the Prime Minister has talked explicitly of defence being a 'generational challenge' and of the need for a new mind-set on defence. (It is interesting to contrast this with the Welsh Government's keynote 'Future Generations' policy, which similarly talks of the need for a new mind-set and explicitly engages with generational thinking, but with a very different tenor and approach).<sup>61</sup>

This paper has outlined a number of concerns for Wales over the UK government's policies and its direction of travel. Four issues however are perhaps of most concern:

1. that many of these new initiatives appear to sit uncomfortably with Welsh interests and the policies undertaken by the Welsh Government since devolution;
2. that there appears to be an ignorance of Welsh interests in many of the new policies, but especially those concerning the 'whole of society' approach;
3. that these policies will lead to increased visibility of defence and the armed forces in Wales; and

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<sup>61</sup> See <https://futuregenerations.wales/discover/about-future-generations-commissioner/future-generations-act-2015/>.

4. that Wales did not engage as fully as it might in the defence review process, despite opportunities to do so.

Although ministers in the Welsh Government have expressed a desire to benefit from the 'defence dividend', given the preponderance of SMEs in Wales and doubts over the cost-effectiveness of defence spending in promoting economic growth, it seems unlikely that this will have a significant, positive effect on the Welsh economy.

The 'step-change' in defence also has implications for the prospects of peace in the world and will raise significant concerns for many in the peace movement in Wales. These include:

1. The emphasis on orthodox defence thinking which argues that security derives from military strength, rather than addressing the sources of conflict and attempting to resolve tensions through diplomacy and cooperation.
2. The reduction in overseas aid to pay for increased defence spending, which harms those most at risk in the world today and creates a negative image of the UK as a globally responsible nation.
3. The aspiration to increase defence exports, which raises not only ethical concerns but promotes the view that security derives from military strength.
4. The increased militarisation of society, not least through the 'whole of society approach', but also through the intention to expand the number of companies involved in (and therefore dependent on) defence contracts.
5. The opportunity costs of increased defence spending which has poor economic returns and lower social value than other forms of government expenditure.
6. The emphasis on nuclear weapons, including continuing the development of a new nuclear warhead and the purchase of aircraft to carry tactical nuclear weapons.
7. The high carbon costs and low sustainability of increased defence activities, which run counter to policies to limit climate change.

