

“Why we fight”: The Nature of Modern Imperialism

Aggressive and exclusive military alliances like NATO should be disbanded

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Alan McKinnon shows that the UK and US ‘defence’ policy is in fact a ‘projection of power’ policy with the primary purpose of defending the commercial interests of transnational companies

The world of war is today dominated by a single superpower. In military terms the United States sits astride the world like a giant Colossus. As a country with only five per cent of the world’s population it accounts for almost 50 per cent of global arms spending. Its 11 naval carrier fleets patrol every ocean and its 909 military bases are scattered strategically across every continent. No other country has reciprocal bases on US territory – it would be unthinkable and unconstitutional. It is 20 years since the end of the Cold War and the United States and its allies face no significant military threat today. Why then have we not had the hoped-for peace dividend? Why does the world’s most powerful nation continue to increase its military budget, now over \$1.2 trillion a year in real terms? What threat is all this supposed to counter?

Britain’s armed forces are different only in scale. For generations our defence posture has emphasised the projection of power to other parts of the world. And today our armed forces have the third highest military spending in the world (after the United States and China) and the second highest power projection capability behind the United States. The Royal Navy is the world’s second largest navy and our large air force is in the process of procuring hundreds of the most advanced aircraft in the world. And then there is Trident, Britain’s strategic nuclear ‘deterrent’ – the ultimate weapon for projecting power across the world. None of this is designed to match any threat to our nation. It is designed to meet the ‘expeditionary’ role of our armed forces in support of the policy of our senior ally, the United States.

This military overkill cannot be justified by ‘defence’ unless we extend its meaning to the ‘defence of its interests’ across the world. And this gets us closer to the real explanation for this military build up. US and UK companies comprise many of the biggest transnational companies. Twenty-nine of the top 100 global companies by turnover are US and seven are UK-based. And the top five global companies are all US or UK based. Both economies share many of the same strengths and weaknesses. Both have seen major erosion of their manufacturing base as compared with economies like Germany and Japan. Both have become increasingly dependent on banking, privatised utilities and financial services, hence their vulnerability in the recent banking collapse. But both retain dominance in certain key areas such as oil and gas and arms manufacturing. In the case of the UK we can add mining. Of the top 10 global companies, all but three are in oil and gas, with British companies Royal Dutch Shell and BP coming first and fourth on the list. The world’s three biggest mining

companies – Anglo-American, Rio Tinto and BHP Billington – are UK-based.

Today Britain continues to export capital on a scale unmatched by any other country apart from the United States. By 2006 British capital assets overseas were worth the equivalent of 410 per cent of Britain's GDP. This is the highest of any major capitalist economy. Much of this investment is in the United States and Europe, but a significant amount continues to be invested in extractive industries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. An even greater amount of money from abroad (mainly US) is invested in British financial and industrial companies, many of them now under external ownership. It is this interlocking of capital between the UK and the much stronger US economy which helps to bind UK and US foreign policy together. Britain's oil and gas giants, its mining companies and its arms manufacturers have a powerful and ongoing relationship with government and an effective lobbying influence in the office of successive Prime Ministers.

All of these strands come together with the drive for 'energy security' by the US and UK governments. It is the desire to protect overseas investments and control the strategic materials such as oil, gas and minerals that drive the foreign and defence policy of both countries. Britain no longer has the global military reach to defend its overseas investments. Increasingly it depends on the United States for this. The unwritten agreement is that, in return, the British government supports US policy around the world. The same is true for Britain's biggest arms manufacturer, BAE Systems. It has grown rapidly in recent years to become the second biggest arms manufacturer in the world, mainly through the acquisition of other US companies. It now gets more business from the Pentagon than the MoD. UK support for America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan certainly helps to oil the wheels of the UK arms business.

That becomes a greater imperative in a rapidly changing world where US power is being challenged by banking collapse and growing indebtedness at home, the rise of the economies of the east, a political challenge to its hegemony in Latin America, and unwinnable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. With the steady increase in demand for oil across the world, especially from the rapidly growing economy of China, the emergence of Russia as an oil and gas giant to rival Saudi Arabia, the creation of an Asian Energy Security Grid placing up to half the world's oil and gas reserves outside US control in a network of pipelines linking Russia, Iran, China and the countries of Central Asia, that US strategy to control the arterial network of oil is now in crisis. The Gulf area still accounts for up to 70 per cent of known oil reserves where the costs of production are lowest. So it is no surprise that US policy continues to focus on Iran which has the world's second largest combined oil and gas reserves.

The US response has been largely military – the expansion of NATO and the encirclement of Russia and China in a ring of hostile bases and alliances. And continuing pressure to isolate and weaken Iran by a campaign of sanctions orchestrated through the IAEA and the United Nations with the threat of military action lurking in the background. The danger is that, even under the presidency of Obama, an economically weakened United States will tend to use the one massive advantage it has over its rivals – its global war machine.

Of course the battle to secure control over strategic materials does not explain everything that happens in the world today. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are not *purely* about oil. In the Middle East the US strategy is about changing the balance of forces against the Palestinians, establishing US client states in Iraq and Iran and leaving an expansionist Israel

as the only surviving military power (although even that is ultimately connected with control over Middle East oil). The wars in central Africa (especially the Democratic Republic of Congo) are not *purely* about strategic minerals. But behind the rival guerrilla groups vying for control of these assets and the rival African neighbouring states who support them, stand the mining companies and their nation states.

And what is not directly connected to the battle for strategic resources is the wider agenda of free trade, open economies, deregulation and privatisation which the US and its allies are trying to impose on every country in the world through the IMF, the World Bank, the EU and NAFTA. Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed on countries as the price for 'forgiving' or rescheduling debt allow US and UK transnationals to prize open and penetrate the economies of the poorest countries with catastrophic consequences for the people.

In short, to understand the world of war, we need to understand the nature of modern imperialism, and how nation states act internationally to help maximise the profits of their biggest companies. Directly and indirectly these policies generate conflict and war on a daily basis. Moreover, the problem is compounded by arms manufacturing firms, generously supported by state funds, who sell lethal weapons around the world to allow wars to be fought. In 2007 the world's leading 100 defence manufacturers sold arms worth \$347 billion, an increase of 45 per cent in the past 10 years. Britain's 'champion', BAE Systems, is currently under investigation for corrupt practices in several countries and has sold all kinds of weapons across the world, including to countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel who have a record of human rights abuses.

As we have seen, British defence policy is geared to fighting wars overseas in support of the United States. Our four nuclear submarines and their payload of 160 warheads, are really an extension of America's strategic 'deterrent' and could not be used independently. But there is an alternative. The overwhelming majority of countries, including some who have the technology and wealth to do differently, do not have nuclear weapons and do not seek them. They do not invest in power projection or the expensive platforms or transport systems which will allow them to fight wars thousands of miles from their own borders.

If our concern is really the defence of the nation's land and coastal waters we could make deep cuts in our 'defence' spending without compromising our security one iota. Indeed, withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and Germany would dramatically reduce the threat of terrorism and reduce tensions in Europe. It would also save us a lot of money. So would cancelling the two new aircraft carriers, and the F-35 aircraft which are designed to fly from them, the Type 45 Destroyers and the Astute-class attack submarines. Our Trident submarine force is useless, dangerous and expensive and should be scrapped. None of these are required for real defence. Instead we could invest in coastal patrol vessels, early warning aircraft and relatively cheap sophisticated anti-tank, anti-ship and anti-aircraft radar guided missile launchers. Dispersal of these mobile but effective weapons would ensure that a heavy toll can be taken of any potential attacker. A fraction of the money saved could be used to tackle climate change by harnessing wind, wave and tidal energy and insulating millions of homes. We could radically cut the size of the navy, slim down the airforce and army and still have plenty of forces left over to help in any genuine humanitarian intervention led by the United Nations.

In today's multi-polar and 'asymmetrical' world the only threats are from terrorism and unstable states (none of whom could remotely pose a military threat to Britain or the United States). Real security comes from strengthening and democratising the United Nations and

developing collective security arrangements in all parts of the world that involve all countries in the region. Aggressive and exclusive military alliances like NATO should be disbanded. Mediation and diplomacy should be used to settle international disputes. A global ban on nuclear weapons as proposed by Obama and the UN Security Council would be an excellent place to start.

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