



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Democratic checks, military balances: Parliamentary oversight in an era of rising military expenditure



A flyby during a ceremony held to mark the 77th Armed Forces Day in the Republic of Korea. (photo by Kim Hong-il/POOL/AFP)

Introduction: Rising military expenditure

This issue brief addresses the growing challenge of rising military expenditure and the importance of democratic oversight. At a time of escalating global insecurity and record levels of defence spending, parliaments need clear, evidence-based information to ensure that such expenditure is transparent, accountable and aligned with national priorities and democratic values. This publication explains why parliamentary oversight matters and how it can be exercised effectively.

Section 1 starts by examining the consequences that increased military budgets have for peace, security and development. Section 2 explores the obstacles parliaments face in exercising effective oversight, while section 3 highlights the risks to democracy when such oversight fails. Drawing on examples of good practices outlined in section 4, the issue brief proposes in section 5 some concrete recommendations to help parliaments strengthen their scrutiny of military expenditure.

As violence and instability escalate around the world, governments are rapidly increasing their spending on defence. While conflict killed more than 233,000 people in 2024, a 30% increase on the previous year, data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)¹ and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) show that global military spending has reached record highs and does not show any signs of falling.

¹ United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), "Security at what cost? Examining the latest trends in global military spending", 15 May 2025: unidir.org/event/security-at-what-cost-examining-the-latest-trends-in-global-military-spending.

“Parliaments, as the core representative institution of the nation, have a special responsibility to embody democratic practices and values and ensure accountability.”

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), High-Level Declaration of the Sixth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament (2025)

Indeed, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member countries, which are collectively responsible for 55% of global defence spending, are boosting their budgets as the war in Ukraine continues, while the Russian Federation has appointed an economist as defence minister, signalling its preparation for a lengthy conflict. Elsewhere, some 120 armed conflicts – including in Asia, where the influence of China is growing – are also driving military spending upward.

This issue brief does not take a stance on the validity or otherwise of increased military spending. When international or regional tensions rise, many countries will understandably wish to boost their defences. However, parliamentary oversight is vital to protect democracy and to ensure that such spending is well-directed. Internally, too, the State is responsible for preserving law and order, but its security services must be accountable to democratic authorities.

Parliamentarians therefore have a duty to scrutinize their government’s military spending, ensuring good governance and adherence to the rule of law. How does this spending serve the public interest? Will investment in the military really deliver longer, better lives for the nation’s citizens? And how can these citizens be sure that their money will be spent as effectively and efficiently as possible?

Applying a gender lens can help with scrutiny. Military budgets are not just about numbers: they are also the product of political choices that determine who benefits and who loses from the spending. Gender-responsive oversight therefore strengthens integrity, operational effectiveness and public trust, aligning defence policy with democratic values and the rule of law.

The importance of parliaments holding their executives to account has been covered extensively in various IPU publications.² Yet the defence sector has a number of unique features that demand specific attention. As national governments procure more and more weapons, and as ever deadlier technologies are developed, it is important for MPs to understand the risks.

This issue brief builds on previous publications including the 2003 handbook *Parliamentary oversight of the security sector: Principles, mechanisms and practices*³ and the 2024 toolkit *Human security and common security to build peace*.⁴ The latter publication introduced an approach to explain how security is a much broader concept than the absence of armed conflict and violence. Climate change, pandemics and hunger, for example, are also responsible for widespread death and insecurity.

“Throughout history and in many developing countries today, authoritarian governments have resisted or overturned moves towards democracy – arguing that democracy is incompatible with public order and personal security. But the record suggests that the opposite is true: democratic civil control over state security forces, far from opposing personal security, is essential to it. Without that control the supposed guarantors of personal security can be its greatest threat.”

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Report 2002 (2002)

Since its establishment in 1889, the IPU has promoted peace and cooperation around the world through parliamentary dialogue. More than 135 years later, this issue brief is dedicated to those same goals: peace and cooperation, for democratic governance, human well-being and development.

Military expenditure surged around the world in 2024

- Global military spending is estimated to have increased to US\$ 2,718 billion in 2024, the 10th year of consecutive rises. The world’s 15 largest spenders in 2024 all increased their military expenditure. The global military burden – the share of global GDP devoted to military expenditure – increased to 2.5%.
- In Europe (including the Russian Federation), military spending rose by 17% to US\$ 693 billion, its highest level since the break-up of the Soviet Union. With the Ukraine war in its third year, military expenditure kept rising across the continent.
- Military expenditure by the Russian Federation reached an estimated US\$ 149 billion, a 38% increase from 2023 and double the level recorded in 2015. This expenditure represented 7.1% of the country’s GDP and 19% total government spending.
- The United States of America increased its military spending by 5.7% to US\$ 997 billion, equal to 66% of total NATO spending and 37% of world military expenditure in 2024.
- In the Middle East, military spending reached an estimated US\$ 243 billion, an increase of 15% from 2023 and 19% more than in 2015. Saudi Arabia was the largest spender in the region, spending an estimated US\$ 80.3 billion on its military, while the military expenditure of Israel surged by 65% to US\$ 46.5 billion, the steepest annual increase since the Six-Day War in 1967.
- China, the world’s second-largest military spender, increased its military expenditure by 7% to an estimated US\$ 314 billion, marking three decades of consecutive growth. China currently accounts for 50% of all military spending in Asia and Oceania.
- Military expenditure in Africa totalled US\$ 52.1 billion, a 3% increase from 2023 and 11% higher than in 2015.

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme, *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024* (Stockholm: SIPRI, Xiao Liang and others, 2025): www.sipri.org/publications/2025/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2024

2 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), *Global Parliamentary Report 2017 – Parliamentary oversight: Parliament’s power to hold government to account* (Geneva: IPU, 2017): www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2017-10/global-parliamentary-report-2017-parliamentary-oversight-parliaments-power-hold-government-account.

3 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), *Parliamentary oversight of the security sector: Principles, mechanisms and practices* (Geneva: IPU and DCAF, 2003): www.ipu.org/resources/publications/handbooks/2016-07/handbook-parliamentarians-parliamentary-oversight-security-sector-principles-mechanisms-and-practices.

4 IPU, *Human security and common security to build peace: A toolkit for parliamentarians* (Geneva: IPU, 2024): www.ipu.org/resources/publications/toolkits/2024-09/human-security-and-common-security-build-peace.

1. The consequences of increased military expenditure

When governments increase military spending, the impacts can travel beyond a country's borders, sending a powerful signal to other countries in the region. Parliamentarians will want to consider very carefully the potential strategic costs and benefits, including those outlined below:

- **Military spending may deter potential enemies from attack:** Some countries may seek peace but still feel compelled to maintain military readiness in response to the actions of aggressive neighbours. Better training and equipment can enhance their capacity to defend themselves and to reassure others in a volatile region. During the cold war, deterrence was elevated to an extreme, with the doctrine of “mutually assured destruction” shaping international relations. This episode also underscored the precariousness of relying solely on such threats to prevent conflict.
- **Military expenditure can bring peace and stability:** A significant portion of such expenditure is devoted to functions that ensure stability and directly benefit societies. Armed forces can provide rapid logistics support, offer military engineering capabilities for critical infrastructure, and serve as peacekeeping forces to protect civilians and keep warring parties apart. Naval and air assets can protect trade and sea lanes, highlighting the fact that military spending can contribute not only to deterrence, but also to peace, security and humanitarian action.
- **Increased defence spending can stimulate an economy:** Defence procurement can stimulate growth, jobs and technological breakthroughs. For example, the origins of the internet are directly linked to military spending by the United States of America during the cold war. More generally, the United States aerospace and defence industry employed an estimated 2.2 million people in 2014, while the European defence industry employs half a million people directly and indirectly creates another 1.2 million jobs.⁵ In terms of economic stimulus, however, the evidence seems to indicate that other sectors yield better returns on investment.
- **Increased defence spending can erode trust and heighten the risk of conflict:** Increased military spending in one nation often triggers a response in neighbouring countries. This higher spending, coupled with the development of advanced technologies, can fuel an arms race, which in turn drains public resources and heightens the risk of conflict, especially in regions marked by strategic rivalries or tensions. As the IPU noted in its toolkit *Human security and common security to build peace*, we all win when an arms race can be avoided.

- **Extensive weapon procurement may divert a nation's resources:** While military expenditure may deter conflict and protect vital civilian facilities, it also risks diverting funds away from social priorities. In turn, this crowds out investments in education, health and infrastructure, making populations more vulnerable to poverty, disease and inequality, and disproportionately affecting women and girls, who tend to bear the burden of weakened health, education and caregiving systems. Military strength is not the only enabler of security: access to food and healthcare are usually more effective drivers of peace and stability.
- **Increased defence spending may come with hidden costs:** The true trade-off between costs and benefits may not be well understood when the procurement decision is made. Expensive equipment needs to be regularly maintained, and these maintenance costs can inflate the true price by a factor of three or four. Likewise, landmines may be cheap to deploy – at a cost of between US\$ 3 and US\$ 75 each – but clearing them can be both dangerous and expensive: somewhere between US\$ 300 and US\$ 1,000 per mine. And that says nothing about the loss of life and limb to farmers, children and other civilians while the landmines are still in the ground. Moreover, multi-million-dollar assets can now be destroyed by low-cost weapons such as drones, revealing an increasingly asymmetric battlefield. Without rigorous oversight, these expenditures can quickly become inefficient, consuming vast quantities of public funds while offering low strategic returns.

New technologies: Recipients and drivers of military spending

Conflict and increased military spending are driving the development of new technologies. In particular, the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models is transforming the ways that modern militaries operate. AI now accelerates every stage of the “kill chain” – from finding targets through to eliminating them and assessing the aftermath of strikes.

While China, the Russian Federation, the United States of America and others continue to develop their AI applications, including autonomous weapons, the roll-out of these new technologies has raised widespread concerns. Despite disclaimers that AI can make mistakes, the development and training processes behind these new systems remain opaque. Indeed, this opacity has produced well-documented errors such as gender bias, hallucinations and failure to align with human intent. In civilian life, such flaws may lead to an incorrect answer or a distorted image. In a military context, however, they can endanger civilian lives and risk breaches of international humanitarian law.

Recognizing these dangers, the IPU resolution *Addressing the social and humanitarian impact of autonomous weapon systems and artificial intelligence*, adopted at the 148th IPU Assembly in March 2024, recommended “that parliaments and parliamentarians work with relevant stakeholders, including the defence industry, civil society and academia, to understand, evaluate and create safeguards in relation to both AI and AWS [autonomous weapon systems], including weapon system designers, particularly regarding their compliance with existing law and with any developments to the law that may occur in the future”.

⁵ Todor Tagarev, “Parliamentary oversight of national defence industries in NATO countries”, in DCAF, *Parliamentary Oversight of National Defence Industry* (Geneva: DCAF, 2022), 23: www.dcaf.ch/parliamentary-oversight-national-defence-industry.

2. Obstacles to parliamentary oversight of military expenditure

The challenge of off-budget expenditure

Off-budget military expenditure refers to spending that falls outside the regular national budget process, often bypassing parliamentary scrutiny and public oversight. Governments may justify off-budget defence spending during emergencies or for classified operations, but its growing use poses systemic risks.

Robust democracies sometimes use extraordinary off-budget defence instruments while there is an oversight mechanism in place. Poland, for instance, financed nearly one third of its 2023 military spending off-budget to accelerate the modernization of its military at a time of heightened regional tensions without being constrained by the formal limits of the annual defence budget or legislative budgeting cycles. Meanwhile, the European Peace Facility is an off-budget funding mechanism for European Union actions with military and defence implications. It has a total budget of more than 17 billion euros for the period 2021–2027.

However, in contexts where oversight frameworks are weak or underdeveloped, off-budget spending can carry serious risks. Without effective legal and institutional safeguards, such mechanisms may become vehicles for corruption, the misappropriation of public funds or the erosion of civilian oversight. In fragile settings, this can contribute to the entrenchment of opaque practices and the expansion of military influence into non-military spheres. Once institutionalized, such mechanisms can be very difficult to dismantle.

Robust oversight mechanisms and clear legal safeguards are essential to ensure that all defence spending, both on and off-budget, remains transparent, accountable and democratically legitimate.

Parliamentary oversight is central to democracy, legitimacy and trust. But the defence and security sector presents specific features that require special attention. Complex budgets, secrecy and political pressures are among the many obstacles to effective parliamentary oversight of military expenditure:

- **Secrecy:** Defence ministries frequently restrict information, citing national or operational security. While some level of secrecy is necessary, excessive classification prevents parliamentarians from having informed discussions and may also impede them in addressing inefficiencies or corruption. Likewise, when access to sensitive information is granted, the recipients need to be an inclusive and representative group to allow for fair democratic oversight.
- **Political pressure and lobbying:** Debates around defence spending can be highly charged, given the amount of money at stake and the significant national security implications at play. MPs often face intense pressure from parties, governments, industries and international partners. Substantial lobbying by defence contractors can also add to the pressure, potentially influencing priorities and making it more challenging to maintain a balanced and fully objective assessment of national needs
- **Technical complexity:** Multi-year procurement cycles, classified technologies and intricate geopolitical considerations can be difficult to understand without specialist knowledge or experience. Many parliamentarians rely on external expertise – and some providers of this expertise may have vested interests. In such cases, the complexity of the sector can make it more difficult for parliaments to exercise proactive and fully independent oversight, underscoring the importance of strengthening internal parliamentary expertise.
- **Fragmented and weak institutions:** In some countries, oversight responsibilities are divided among committees without any clear authority or hierarchy. Defence committees may lack funding, expertise, or the legal authority to amend proposals. Some constitutions grant the government wide discretion over defence matters, limiting parliamentary influence.
- **Emergency powers:** During national crises such as war, terrorist acts or pandemics, governments often invoke emergency powers to fragment and bypass normal budgetary procedures. When these emergency measures become entrenched, they limit transparency and normalize exceptional spending, thus undermining democracy.
- **Public apathy:** Citizens tend to prioritize visible sectors such as health and education, meaning that MPs face less pressure to scrutinize defence. Public apathy may derive from limited media engagement, but without public pressure, civil society organizations lose their influence. The absence of vibrant public discourse and civil oversight diminishes accountability. Weak public interest reduces pressure on MPs to ask the difficult questions, allowing inefficiency or corruption to persist. Yet in such cases, individual MPs carry even more responsibility to scrutinize military spending.
- **Economic and diplomatic ties:** Arms deals are often tied to foreign policy or trade relations. Parliamentarians may lack the mandate – or the information – to fully assess the broader implications, limiting democratic oversight of these strategic decisions.

3. How oversight failures erode democracy

Parliamentary oversight of military spending is not just a financial safeguard. It also protects democracy. Weak oversight exposes countries to several key risks:

- **Transparency and accountability are eroded:** In a democracy, elected representatives make decisions on the basis of robust discussions and consideration of how taxpayers' money is to be spent. Without this scrutiny, leaders can make decisions about wars, weapons or alliances behind closed doors, with little public debate. Without effective parliamentary scrutiny, they can divert funds, engage in wasteful procurement or channel contracts to political allies without consequence. Governments become less accountable for their decisions on military spending.
- **Civilian control of the military is weakened:** When military institutions extend beyond their constitutional role, one likely consequence is the erosion of democratic oversight and civilian authority – two cornerstones of democratic governance. When parliament fails to exercise its oversight role, power tilts towards the executive branch or even the military itself. Corruption, abuse and politicization become more likely. To safeguard political stability and public trust, security agencies must be democratically accountable.
- **The executive gains too much power:** When the executive arm of government attempts to bypass parliament on military matters, this can set a dangerous precedent, potentially leading to attempts at overreach in other areas, too. Extraordinary financing tools – such as emergency funding and off-budget spending – become normalized, weakening the rule of law and undermining the principle of checks and balances. Governments may gain control over these resources, using emergency powers to suppress dissent or entrench elites. This dynamic erodes the balance of power and leads to democratic backsliding.
- **Government becomes less responsive to citizens' expectations:** When defence spending is not subject to parliamentary scrutiny, it risks crowding out expenditure on essential social departments. Governments – sometimes influenced by the military-industrial complex – may allocate disproportionate resources to the defence sector. This can lead to a misalignment between national spending patterns and the needs of citizens as expressed by their elected representatives, raising concerns about transparency, inclusiveness and democratic responsiveness.
- **Citizens lose trust in their democratic institutions:** When parliament fails to uphold its oversight function, this leaves the door open to inefficiency and corruption. The social contract is undermined. It signals that power, not reason, is guiding national policy. Such a situation weakens the foundation of institutions and risks further democratic backsliding. Unchecked military spending erodes trust in institutions and distorts civil-military relations.

In short, oversight failures are not just technical lapses; they are political risks that erode trust, invite secrecy and overreach, and can weaken democracy itself. By contrast, effective parliamentary scrutiny reinforces public trust, preserves the balance between security and liberty, safeguards civilian control of the military, and anchors national security decisions in democratic values.

Parliamentary mechanisms for oversight of military expenditure

Parliamentary oversight is vital to ensure that defence spending aligns with national interests, democratic values and the public interest. MPs fulfil these oversight responsibilities in several key ways:

- **Budget allocation and approval:** Parliaments scrutinize, amend and approve defence budgets to ensure transparency and alignment with national priorities. This includes reviewing off-budget spending, particularly where such expenditure is justified as urgent, secret or exceptional.
- **Gender-responsive scrutiny:** When defence budgets and procurement decisions are examined to determine their differentiated impact on women and men, they are more likely to promote inclusive security and to minimize unintended harm.
- **Defence committees:** Specialized committees review defence policies, procurement plans and spending, enabling informed and expert-led decision-making.
- **Auditing and reporting:** Collaboration with supreme audit institutions (SAIs) helps assess military spending, reduce waste, and strengthen parliamentary oversight and accountability.
- **Inquiries and hearings:** Legislative inquiries and public hearings allow MPs to question defence officials and experts, promoting transparency and accountability. Citizen-driven perspectives ensure that national security reflects human and societal priorities.
- **Legislative frameworks:** Long-term parliamentary engagement and oversight are strengthened by laws that mandate regular reporting and establish clear defence spending guidelines.
- **Reviews of official reports:** Systematic analysis of official documents ensures that parliamentary decisions are based on facts, evidence and national security needs.
- **Parliamentary diplomacy:** Parliamentarians may not have the same international responsibilities as governments and may be less involved in international cooperation. But MPs play a role in reducing regional or international tensions, including through parliamentary diplomacy. This enables them to address global military spending while promoting disarmament, non-proliferation, and confidence-building measures.

Together, these mechanisms empower parliaments to provide effective oversight of defence expenditure and uphold democratic control over the armed forces.

4. Success stories

The country-specific examples below show how legislatures from around the world have effectively influenced, limited or redirected defence budgets to ensure accountability, transparency and alignment with national priorities, revealing that strong legal frameworks, institutional culture and inclusive engagement are key to successful oversight:

- **Canada: Using independent analysis for more effective scrutiny**

In Canada, the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer provides independent, authoritative and non-partisan financial and economic analysis. The Office was established in 2006 and comprises 40 members of staff. It is led by the Parliamentary Budget Officer, an independent officer who supports parliamentarians in carrying out their constitutional role of scrutinizing government spending. In March 2011, the Office published a 65-page peer-reviewed report that estimated the cost of buying F-35 fighter jets to be more than three times higher than the cost publicly announced by the Department of National Defence.⁶ A no-confidence vote initiated by the opposition led to the fall of the government, delayed acquisition of the jets by some years, and prompted a serious debate about the country's procurement system.

- **Chile: Bringing back military finances under democratic control**

For decades, Chile financed about one quarter of its military spending through a secretive, off-budget mechanism known as the Copper Law. Strengthened in 1973, the Law required Codelco, the State-owned copper mining company, to channel 10% of its copper sales to the military – outside the regular budget and beyond the review of parliament. In 2019, however, Chile initiated reforms to phase out this opaque system, replacing the Law with a new, transparent framework comprising a multi-year strategic fund and a strategic contingency fund, both integrated into the national budget and subject to parliamentary oversight. The transition to the new arrangement will be phased over 12 years, restoring budget unity, transparency and predictability.

- **Denmark: Building consensus through multi-year defence agreements**

Since the 1990s, Denmark has managed its defence spending through broad multiparty Defence Agreements approved by parliament. These Agreements establish multi-year funding frameworks and set out strategic priorities, creating a stable foundation for defence policy. Under this umbrella, detailed partial agreements are negotiated, allowing governments to adjust procurement decisions while remaining within parameters agreed across the political spectrum. This institutional culture of inclusive, cross-party bargaining reduces volatility, increases transparency and keeps the executive inside rails pre-agreed with parliament. Supplementary deals – such as the 2024 acceleration package to reach the NATO 2% spending target – are debated and ratified by parliament. The Defence, Resilience and Preparedness Committee further strengthens parliamentary oversight, while audit institutions monitor compliance.

- **Republic of Korea: Reasserting parliamentary power**

In late 2024, the opposition-controlled National Assembly of the Republic of Korea imposed its authority over the 2025 budget, including through reduced spending on the President's Office of National Security, as well as on the police and on multiple defence procurement projects. It was the first time in the country's constitutional history that the annual budget plan was passed without partisan agreement, showing how parliament was able to reclaim its budgetary scrutiny powers, including over defence. The President subsequently sought to impose martial law, but parliament voted 190-0 to revoke it, preventing military intervention and demonstrating its resilience in placing checks on executive power.

- **South Africa: Scrutinizing defence spending through specialized committees**

In South Africa, parliament scrutinizes defence spending through its Portfolio Committee on Defence and Military Veterans. Unlike the Joint Standing Committee on Defence, which takes a broad look at strategy and deployments, the Portfolio Committee focuses on finance, performance and accountability in day-to-day governance. For example, it recommends earmarked allocations for specific priorities – such as navy frigates or strategic airlift capacity – which are then locked and cannot be repurposed without approval from the National Treasury. Parliament also works closely with the Auditor-General of South Africa to identify irregular or wasteful spending, while regular parliamentary hearings allow MPs to question the defence minister and other senior officials. Parliament also invites civil society, veterans' groups and academics to round-table discussions on military policy and spending.

These examples show that when parliaments have the legal authority, technical capacity and political will, they can play a critical role in shaping and overseeing military budgets. Success often depends on strong institutions, bipartisan cooperation and access to transparent information.

5. Recommendations for parliamentary oversight

With military spending at record highs, effective parliamentary oversight is more important than ever. Scrutiny does not weaken security; it ensures that defence budgets are transparent, well-considered, and aligned with national priorities and democratic values. The following recommendations highlight some of the practical ways in which parliaments can strengthen their oversight of military expenditure:

- **Require regular reports on the defence budget:**

Parliaments should mandate timely reporting on all military expenditure, including off-budget funds. Regular reporting improves transparency and helps to identify any inconsistencies, cost overruns or even risks of corruption. Reports should follow a standardized format to allow for comparison over time and across sectors. In Brazil, for instance, regular, standardized reporting on defence spending is a requirement. Each year, details of strategy, governance, results and budget execution are published, with more granular information accessible via the Ministry of Defence website.

⁶ Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, *An Estimate of the Fiscal Impact of Canada's Proposed Acquisition of the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter* (Ottawa: Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, 2011): publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2011/dpb-pbo/YN5-31-2011-eng.pdf.

“In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1961

- **Enable independent audits:** SAIs and independent watchdogs should have full access to defence contracts and expenditure data. Independent audits and integrity risk assessments detect inefficiencies, waste or mismanagement, providing MPs with credible, evidence-based analysis, as well as strengthening civilian control and reinforcing public trust. Tools such as Transparency International’s Government Defence Integrity Index⁷ can guide reform and highlight areas of vulnerability. In the United Kingdom, the National Audit Office conducts both financial and value-for-money audits of all government departments, including the Ministry of Defence. As an independent public spending watchdog, it has full access to defence contracts and expenditure data. Its findings inform the Public Accounts Committee and parliament overall.
- **Apply budget unity and public financial management rules to defence:** All defence spending – including intelligence, contingencies and off-budget funds – should go through the regular budget cycle, be recorded in the financial system and be audited to the same standards as other sectors. Parliament should review audit reports (in closed sessions if needed) and ensure corrective action is taken. Ending special treatment for the military improves accountability, efficiency and risk management. In France, defence and intelligence spending is outlined in the Military Programming Act, ensuring alignment with the same budget cycle, audit standards and discipline as other sectors. The Act establishes priorities and funding envelopes, while also promoting transparency and medium-term defence spending.
- **Conduct regular public expenditure reviews (PERs):** PERs assess how governments allocate resources, focusing on equity, efficiency and sustainability. Applied to security and justice, they reveal whether spending is adequate, modern, and balanced against other priorities. Integrating security financing into the national budget process through PERs promotes transparency, accountability and evidence-based policymaking. In 2013, the World Bank and United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) conducted a joint PER of the security sector in Liberia, focusing on transition scenarios, core security needs and fiscal space.⁸ A follow-up review took place after the closure of UNMIL in 2018, while a broader justice and security PER was conducted in 2021.
- **Adopt integrity action plans:** Parliaments should use integrity action plans to promote anti-corruption, transparency and accountability measures. This means limiting secrecy to what is genuinely necessary for security, while opening up meetings and documents to public scrutiny. In Slovenia, the Integrity and Prevention of Corruption Act mandates that all State bodies, even at local and institutional levels, must create and adopt an integrity plan and submit a copy to the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption. This legislative foundation institutionalizes transparency and integrity across the various structures of governance and embeds anti-corruption mechanisms throughout the public sector.
- **Hold open hearings:** Regular public hearings allow MPs to question defence officials and debate priorities in a transparent setting. While certain open testimony could compromise ongoing operations and therefore must remain confidential for national security reasons, open hearings help to build trust, improve decision-making and demonstrate that defence policy is not beyond public debate. In Ghana, the Public Accounts Committee is constitutionally tasked with examining reports from the Auditor-General, conducting its oversight through open, public hearings that are routinely televised and livestreamed on parliamentary channels and by national broadcasters. These sessions have included appearances from representatives of the Ministry of Defence, bringing defence spending under real-time public scrutiny.
- **Discuss military expenditures in committee:** Committees bring together MPs from across the political spectrum and provide a useful forum for building consensus on long-term defence strategies and major procurement exercises. Such structures reduce partisanship, give legitimacy to large investments and insulate decisions from short-term political pressure. In Sweden, the Swedish Defence Commission unites all major parties to assess future threats and recommend multi-year strategies.
- **Consult with civil society and other experts:** Structured consultation with civil society, including women’s peace organizations, veterans’ groups and gender equality advocates, as well as academics and watchdogs, enriches oversight with independent perspectives. External engagement highlights risks, brings in specialist expertise, and ensures that military and defence policy reflects wider social interests and democratic values and remains accountable to society. In South Africa, for example, the Portfolio Committee on Defence and Military Veterans regularly consults with veterans’ groups, as well as with non-government organizations active in anti-corruption.

7 Transparency International, “Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI)”: [ti-defence.org/what-we-do/responsible-defence-governance/government-defence-integrity-index-gdi/](https://www.transparency.org/what-we-do/responsible-defence-governance/government-defence-integrity-index-gdi/).

8 World Bank and United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), *Liberia Public Expenditure Review Note: Meeting the Challenges of the UNMIL Security Transition*, Report No. 71990-LR (World Bank and UNMIL, 2013): documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/524941468055756666/pdf/710090ESW0P1270C0disclosed030130130.pdf.

- **Ensure that parliament has the authority to summon ministers and senior officials:** When ministers are summoned, they should be obliged to appear in person rather than send staff members in their place. Parliaments should also have the power to summon senior officials from the administration, military, law enforcement and intelligence services. In Indonesia, Law No. 27/2009 allows the House of Representatives to issue a “forced summon” to any civilian public official who fails to appear. The Law was later revised to include officials from the military and police, strengthening parliament’s powers to compel attendance.
- **Use sunset clauses for emergency funds:** Special defence allocations should be time-bound to prevent their indefinite or opaque use. Sunset clauses ensure that extraordinary funds automatically expire unless renewed by parliament. This prevents emergency measures from becoming permanent, safeguards democratic control and compels the timely reassessment of strategic needs. In Kenya, under the Public Finance Management Act, any withdrawals from the Contingencies Fund must be put before the parliament for approval within two months, and then covered by a subsequent appropriation. This arrangement is designed to prevent open-ended use.
- **Integrate women, peace and security (WPS) considerations into defence spending and oversight:** Parliaments should require ministries of defence to apply gender-responsive budgeting across the budget cycle. WPS impact statements should be published for major programmes, budget lines should be marked with clear WPS indicators, and sex-disaggregated data should be reported. Funds should be earmarked for implementation, covering aspects such as gender advisers, data systems, safe facilities and equipment. The SAI should be tasked with conducting annual audits of WPS performance, including off-budget items. In Canada, application of the Gender-based Analysis Plus process has strengthened operational effectiveness, integrity, and public trust, ensuring that defence resources protect everyone.

Conclusion

As military budgets evolve in response to shifting global and national security dynamics, parliaments have a central role to play in ensuring that resources are allocated transparently, efficiently and in line with national priorities. Oversight requires a careful balance between the duty to meet legitimate security needs on the one hand, and the need to uphold financial responsibility and accountability to citizens on the other.

In all circumstances – including times of crisis – parliamentarians are uniquely positioned to ask informed questions, foster open dialogue and promote evidence-based decision-making. By fulfilling this role, they help ensure that defence policies and budgets remain subject to democratic checks while reflecting broader collective values such as peace, stability and good governance.

Effective oversight is not about opposing defence spending, but about ensuring that such spending is guided by clear priorities, sound evidence and the public interest. Parliaments can help avoid the risks of overreach, inefficiency or imbalance by engaging with expert analysis, listening to diverse perspectives, and maintaining a strong commitment to transparency and accountability.

Even in times of heightened tension or uncertainty, parliaments can serve as stabilizing institutions, grounding national security decisions in democratic values and long-term vision. By asking critical questions, insisting on clarity and fostering inclusive dialogue, parliamentarians ensure that public resources are used responsibly, that citizens remain informed, and that security policies reflect the values of peace, trust and responsible governance.

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