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Barack Obama and Gordon Brown Must Strengthen U.S.–U.K. Defense Cooperation

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When President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown meet on Tuesday, they must begin by recognizing the truth that in defense, as in other areas of policy, the United States and Great Britain are far stronger together than apart. For each state, the other is the indispensable ally.

Absent American support, Britain cannot hope to play a leading role in the world. Without British support, the U.S. not only would lose the ally that since 1941 has been its most enduring, stable, and valuable friend, but would also see its position in NATO gravely weakened. Obama and Brown have substantive work to do on defense, but none of this work is as valuable as—or will be accomplished without—a firm recommitment by both leaders to the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship.

Acknowledge British Support in Afghanistan. Obama should also gratefully acknowledge, publicly and privately, the support and sacrifices of British forces in the campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Britain is second only to the U.S. in the size of its commitment to that war, for which the President has repeatedly expressed support. Britain's resolve to fight and win stands in stark contrast to most of the NATO allies, who have brought little to the war except excuses and evasions. Britain's commitment, and the sacrifices it has required, deserve the public thanks that was notably lacking from the President's address to Congress on February 24.

Increase British Defense Spending. When the discussion turns to substantive issues, both

leaders must speak frankly. President Obama should begin by expressing grave reservations about the decline of British defense spending and the extent to which British defense capabilities are being mortgaged by the spend-now-pay-later system imposed by the Treasury.

According to NATO's most recent report, in 2008 Britain's defense spending slumped to only 2.2 percent of GDP. That is the lowest level since 2004, when it was also 2.2 percent, and is far lower than the 1990–1994 post–Cold War average of 3.8 percent.¹ Britain today is on the knife-edge of a collapse of its defenses: The overstretch and underfunding of its forces is widely acknowledged.² This peril is exacerbated by the hand-to-mouth existence of the Ministry of Defence, which has been forced by the Treasury to assume budgetary responsibility for most of its urgent operational requirements. This arrangement will either deprive forces in the field of vital equipment or result in even deeper cuts in capabilities in the years to come.³

The President cannot leave the Prime Minister in any doubt that these policies, if continued, will have a serious and enduring effect on the ability of the U.S. and Britain to collaborate meaningfully in the

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defense of their interests and those of the world's democracies. Obama should call on Brown to commit to halting the decline in defense spending as a percentage of GDP and to raising it gradually to 4 percent within 10 years.

Reconsider Support for the ESDP. This meeting also offers an opportunity for both sides to reconsider the support they have shown for the gradual Europeanization of the defense of the West. Since 1998, successive Labour governments have committed themselves gradually but steadily to increased defense cooperation within Europe through the EU's European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). This is a serious error. All European-based defense plans are intended to achieve political objectives unrelated to defense. The ESDP's goal is to create a defense organization that does not include the U.S. and to slowly supplant NATO. It will be more intent on elevating Brussels' influence and on preventing action by Britain in alliance with the U.S. than on achieving any substantive aim. Both Obama and Brown should return to the tradition that NATO is the sole military component in Europe's security architecture.⁴

Expand Information Sharing. Obama must also offer to help rebuild Britain's forces. On a policy level, he should ask Brown to work with his Administration to carry out a full review of opportunities for joint Anglo-American training programs. The President should also continue and expand sharing of information on recruiting policies, thus leveraging U.S. expertise in maintaining an all-volunteer force that represents a cross-section of the nation. Brown should take this opportunity to announce a full review of Britain's recruiting and retention poli-

cies to be conducted on the assumption of slow but steady increases in defense spending.

Act Responsibly on Joint Development. Obama should recognize that the U.S. has a vital interest in promoting interoperability with U.S. forces within NATO. The U.S. must act responsibly by continuing to develop and fund new weapons systems that close allies such as Britain have budgeted for and are relying upon. In particular, Obama should commit to fully funding the short take-off vertical landing variant of the F-35—without which Britain's new aircraft carriers will have no planes—and support Britain's participation in the Trident II D-5 life extension program. Brown should press Obama to declare this support, as both programs are essential to British defense planning in the coming decade.⁵

Reform Procurement and Expand Trade. Finally, both leaders must act to reform their procurement systems. Here, Brown should take the lead. He should both emphasize his desire to expand competition in the defense market, and urge the Senate to pass the U.S.–U.K. Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty. This treaty enjoys strong support from both major parties in Britain. Obama should reciprocate by pledging to promote future joint development, manufacturing, and purchasing agreements with Britain, and by promising to ask the Senate to give the treaty early consideration. If adopted, the treaty will secure the position of both countries as defense industrial partners. The treaty is a fulfillment of the President's rejection of protectionism in his February address to Congress, and it will boost U.S. industry, save U.S. jobs, and promote military interoperability between these closest of allies.⁶

1. Press release, "Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, February 19, 2009, Table 3, at <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2009/p09-009.pdf> (February 25, 2009).
2. *The Economist*, "Britain's Armed Forces: Losing Their Way?," January 29, 2009, at http://www.economist.com/world/britain/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13022177 (February 26, 2009).
3. Ted R. Bromund, "The Brown Government Should Stop Mortgaging the Future of Britain's Defenses," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2298, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm2298.cfm>.
4. Ted R. Bromund, "British Defense Cuts Threaten the Anglo-American Special Relationship," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2210, November 18, 2008, pp. 17–18, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/bg2210>; Sally McNamara, "Principles and Proposals for NATO Reform," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2220, December 11, 2008, pp. 8–9, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/bg2220.cfm>.
5. Bromund, "British Defense Cuts," pp. 19, 21–22.

An Opportunity for Renewed Partnership.

Prime Minister Brown's visit comes at an important moment in the long-standing Anglo-American defense partnership. The start of a new U.S. Administration offers a vital and necessary opportunity to reaffirm that partnership and to take the measures necessary to strengthen and renew it. Both President Obama and Prime Minister Brown should

acknowledge the shared values and interests that are at stake and act to continue this indispensable collaboration.

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6. Ted R. Bromund, "The Defense Trade Cooperation Treaties with the United Kingdom and Australia Advance the American Interest," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2090, September 29, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm2090.cfm>.