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Spending Cuts in British Defense Review: Less Than Expected, but Still Damaging

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On October 19, British Prime Minister David Cameron announced the results of Britain's Strategic Defense and Security Review. This review, the first since 1998, has resulted in substantial reductions in Britain's defense spending that will have dangerous long-term consequences.

The outcome of the review must be seen in the context of Britain's financial crisis, for which the previous Labour government bears complete responsibility. While the coalition government unwisely decided against protecting defense spending from all cuts, Defense Secretary Liam Fox did ensure that the reductions were lower than those borne by most other departments.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that these cuts will reduce Britain's ability to provide for its defense, will increase the burdens on the United States, will impact NATO and Anglo-American relations, and are based on arguments about the future of war that are, at best, untested.

The Outcome. By 2015–2016, British defense spending will fall to about 2 percent of GDP, down from today's 2.7 percent. The army will lose approximately 7,000 soldiers, while the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force will each lose 5,000. Britain will be able to make an enduring commitment of approximately 7,000 combat troops, with a "surge" capacity of 30,000.

The new Trident nuclear submarine fleet will be delayed, and though the two new carriers will be built, one will be sold shortly after completion. The second carrier will not be equipped with Joint Strike

Fighters until 2020. As Britain's Harrier aircraft and the *Ark Royal*—its only existing carrier—will be scrapped, Britain will be without a carrier-borne strike force until 2020. Forty percent of the army's artillery and tanks will also be cut, as will 25,000 civilian jobs in the Ministry of Defense.

The review was not all about cuts. Cameron has pledged that Britain will not reduce its effort in Afghanistan and that more money will be available for armored personnel carriers and helicopters and especially for Britain's special forces. These are valuable additions, but they do not outweigh the damage to the forces on the ground and to Britain's procurement programs done by the review.

The Dangers. The long-term review poses a risk to Britain's ability to deter, fight, and win wars. It is a serious error to believe that Britain's armed forces matter only because Britain is a close ally of the U.S. While it is good that Britain and the U.S. are close allies and that Britain has long sought to fight alongside other powers, it is also true that Britain has legitimate responsibilities for which it must be responsible.

Britain's decreasing ability to act on its own will hurt Britain first and foremost. But such reduced

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capacity also poses a political threat to the Anglo-American Special Relationship. An alliance of choice between the U.S. and Britain is highly desirable; an alliance of necessity is likely to breed resentment in Britain.

The effects of the review will also be felt in NATO. Before the review, U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, expressed public reservations about its outcome.¹ The cuts in British defense spending will make it easier for other NATO allies to justify cuts as well.

By delaying and reducing the carriers, the review continued a disturbing pattern in British defense procurement. As costs escalate or defense spending is squeezed, programs are delayed, which only makes them more expensive. The scale of the programs is reduced to cut costs, but this also cuts capabilities. Finally, the government redefines its doctrine to assert that the missing capabilities are not vital, which paves the way for more cuts.

As a result of these cuts, Britain will become increasingly focused on providing boots on the ground while relying on the U.S. to supply the transport, logistics, and heavy weapons. The U.S. is already carrying a disproportionate burden for many facets of combat operations. The consequences of this review will increase Britain's already substantial reliance on the U.S. and, thus, the burden on the U.S.

Finally, the review is based on the argument that unconventional wars like the one in Afghanistan represent the future of war. The war in Afghanistan does represent a kind of war that may be prevalent in the future. But it goes too far to claim that the Afghanistan conflict represents the absolute future of warfare. Simply because conventional threats from great powers do not dominate today's

news does not mean that they have disappeared for all time.

While Cameron's expressed desire to increase defense spending in a second term is welcome, such increases will be hard pressed to make up for the loss of skills, knowledge, and industrial capabilities—and manpower and equipment—that will result from his actions now. Simply put, Britain is slowly giving up on conventional deterrence. That is a risky step to take.

What the U.S. and Britain Must Do. While Britain's financial position—like that of the U.S.—made budget cuts inevitable and desirable, both nations should remember that defense is the first responsibility of the state. The cuts that have resulted from Britain's review will have dangerous long-term consequences.

Britain and the U.S. should—like the rest of the NATO alliance—seek all sensible economies in defense while recognizing that they cannot cut their way to security and basing their spending on prudent, long-term plans that give them the ability to deter, fight, and win across the spectrum of combat. That will require Britain to increase its defense spending. By the end of the next Parliament, Britain should have restored defense spending to its 1996 level of 2.9 percent of GDP, with further increases to follow in succeeding years. This spending should go, first, toward restoring Britain's capacity to deploy and sustain its ground forces.²

For its part, the U.S. should recognize that the arguments now heard in the U.S. about the need for cuts in defense spending have been made repeatedly in Britain for over a decade.³ The arguments are no truer in the U.S. than they were in Britain.

The only difference between the U.S. and Britain is that, while the British believe they could rely on

1. James Kirkup and Andy Bloxham, "Liam Fox Assures U.S. of Britain's Commitment to NATO," *Daily Telegraph*, October 15, 2010, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/politics/defence/8065583/Liam-Fox-assures-US-of-Britains-commitment-to-Nato.html> (October 20, 2010).
2. Ted R. Bromund, "Ten Recommendations for the Next British Secretary of State for Defense," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2893, May 10, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/05/Ten-Recommendations-for-the-Next-British-Secretary-of-State-for-Defense>.
3. Ted R. Bromund, "British Example Shows Danger Facing American Forces," Heritage Foundation *America at Risk* Memo No. 10-05, May 26, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/05/British-Example-Shows-Danger-Facing-American-Forces>.

the U.S. to defend both nations' common interests, the U.S. will not be able to rely on any other democratic nation to play that role. The U.S. should set the record straight on defense spending and continue to accept its global leadership responsibilities.⁴

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4. The Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Foreign Policy Initiative, "Defending Defense: Setting the Record Straight on U.S. Military Spending Requirements," October 2010, at http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2010/pdf/Defending-Defense.pdf.