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What President Obama Should Tell Prime Minister Cameron About Britain's Defense Cuts

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During his state visit to the United Kingdom on May 24–26, President Barack Obama should speak clearly to Prime Minister David Cameron about the serious damage that the latest round of British defense cuts is doing to Britain's armed forces. The Special Relationship between the U.S. and Great Britain rests in part on the desire of each nation to play a leading role in the world. Without capable armed forces, Britain cannot play this role. Thus, Britain's defense cuts are bad not only for its forces but for the Anglo–American alliance.

The Disheartening Pattern of British Defense Spending and Doctrine. When Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher left office in 1990, British defense spending was 4.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). By the time Prime Minister Tony Blair took office in 1997, it had fallen to 2.9 percent. From 1999 onward, Britain's armed forces were regularly in action, first in the former Yugoslavia, then in Sierra Leone, then in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet British defense spending as a share of GDP continued to decline. After 2004, it recovered slightly, but even by 2009 it was at only 2.7 percent.¹

In 2010, the newly elected coalition government led by Cameron announced the results of a Strategic Defense and Security Review (SDSR), which was held in parallel with the creation of a new National Security Strategy (NSS) and a U.S.-style National Security Council, and—most importantly—with a Comprehensive Spending Review intended to restore balance to Britain's public finances. The coalition agreement explicitly committed the gov-

ernment to conduct the SDSR “alongside the Spending Review with strong involvement of the Treasury.” In other words, the NSS and the SDSR were about funding, not strategy.

By 2015–2016, as a result of the SDSR, British defense spending will fall to 2 percent of GDP. The army will lose approximately 7,000 soldiers, and 40 percent of its tanks will be cut. The Royal Navy and Royal Air Force will each lose about 5,000 personnel. Britain's Harrier aircraft have already been mothballed, and its aircraft carrier, *HMS Ark Royal*, was decommissioned on March 11. Britain will not have a carrier-borne strike force until 2020.²

These cuts were unwise in themselves. Even more dangerous, though, was the doctrine that was used to justify them. The SDSR defines Britain's highest security priorities as counterterrorism, cybersecurity, natural hazards, and the need to prevent military crises. In other words, it emphasizes everything except actual military conflicts, the most expensive of the possible contingencies.³ It is based on the assumptions that have dominated British defense planning since at least 2003: that, as the U.K. Ministry of Defence put it, “intervention against state adversaries...can only plausibly be conducted if

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US forces are engaged, either leading a coalition or in NATO,” that Britain therefore does “not need to generate large-scale [military] capabilities across the...spectrum,” and that Britain can focus on preparing for smaller, asymmetric wars.⁴

Libyan Intervention Reveals Errors of Britain’s Policies. Less than six months after the SDSR concluded that most future wars would be asymmetric and fought on the ground, its carrier force was no longer necessary, and the U.S. would carry most of the burden in any war against a state, Britain is involved in a war that refutes every single premise of the SDSR. Moreover, it is a war the British government entered deliberately, knowing that the decisions it had just taken left it ill-prepared for the conflict.

The result is that Britain has under-resourced its operations in Libya. It is still doing more than most other members of NATO, but that speaks to the broader European failure to maintain creditable forces. Britain initially deployed only eight ground attack Tornado aircraft against the Muammar Qadhafi regime. A series of early retirements of various aircraft means that Britain’s ground attack-capable Typhoon fighters are committed to air defense operations. Delayed upgrades of the second tranche of Typhoons means they will not be available for ground attack roles until 2012, and a shortage of spare parts has so reduced training time that the Royal Air Force in any event has only eight pilots capable of flying the Typhoon in ground attack missions.

The problems with the Typhoon are illustrative of the broader, fundamental challenges faced by Britain’s forces: Decades of under-funding have cre-

ated overlapping procurement needs that are now deemed unaffordable, with the result that Britain, flying from NATO bases in Italy, is barely able to wage a relatively small war from the air against a third-tier military that was heavily degraded by initial U.S. air strikes and cruise missiles.

What is even more disturbing is Britain’s tendency to ignore these realities. In testimony to Parliament, British military officials stated that the 2010 SDSR will result in Britain no longer possessing a “full spectrum” military force.⁵ That should come as no surprise: It has been British doctrine since 2003 that such a force is unnecessary.

There is a serious disconnect between the stated desire of successive British governments to play a leading role in the world, their readiness to commit forces to combat, and their willingness to fund these forces at sufficient levels. This disconnect will lead to policy failure and, eventually, to a British defeat that cannot be redeemed by the United States.

What the U.S. and Britain Should Do. Regrettably, the U.S. is not in a strong position to express concerns about the inadequacy of Britain’s defense spending as it, too, is seeking to make major defense cuts. But the President should make it clear to the Prime Minister that the inability of the European members of NATO to field adequate forces in Libya is an embarrassment and a strategic failure of the first order and call on him to reverse the recently imposed cuts. For his part, the Prime Minister should reiterate Britain’s commitment to NATO and remind the President that, without a militarily strong and politically committed United States, NATO cannot succeed.

1. See Ted R. Bromund, “British Defense Cuts Threaten the Anglo–American Special Relationship,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2210, November 18, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2008/11/British-Defense-Cuts-Threaten-the-Anglo-American-Special-Relationship>.
2. See Ted R. Bromund and Nile Gardiner, “Libya Mission Demonstrates That British Defense Cuts Must Be Reversed,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3231, April 19, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/04/Libya-Mission-Demonstrates-That-British-Defense-Cuts-Must-Be-Reversed>.
3. See Ted R. Bromund, “Preserving the Special Relationship: A Conservative Agenda for President Obama’s State Visit to Great Britain,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2558, May 19, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/05/preserving-special-relationship-conservative-agenda-for-president-obamas-state-visit-great-britain>.
4. U.K. Ministry of Defence, “Delivering Security in a Changing World,” December 2003, at http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/051AF365-0A97-4550-99C0-4D87D7C95DED/0/cm60411_whitepaper2003.pdf (May 18, 2011).
5. Alistair MacDonald, “Sun Setting on British Power,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 14, 2011, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704081604576144311857979054.html> (May 17, 2011).

The Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty between Britain and the U.S., which the Senate ratified last September, offers one route to increased efficiency in procurement. Both leaders should commit their nations to ensuring that the reforms the treaty contemplates are brought into being in a way that makes them accessible to small and large industry in both countries.

Restoring Britain's Forces. The future of Britain's armed forces is bleak: Efficiencies in procurement, though desirable, can go only so far in compensating for continued spending cuts, espe-

cially when these cuts find their justification in a doctrine that has been fundamentally shaped by a desire to spend less money.

The President and the Prime Minister have a vital obligation to recognize that the policies they are pursuing are reducing the capabilities of their armed forces, hollowing out NATO and the Special Relationship, and diminishing their security and power in the world.

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