

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3510 | FEBRUARY 16, 2012

The Obama–Cameron Summit Must Advance U.S.–U.K. Defense Cooperation

Luke Coffey

President Obama will host British Prime Minister David Cameron at the White House on March 13–14. The official visit will be dominated by the eurozone crisis, developments in Syria, Iran’s nuclear program, and Afghanistan. For the U.K., the Falkland Islands will also be an important agenda item. In addition, this visit will be an important opportunity for the two leaders to discuss the U.S.–U.K. defense relationship in light of recent defense cuts on both sides of the Atlantic.

Defense and the Special Relationship. Winston Churchill made it clear during his 1946 Iron Curtain Speech that the Special Relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom is first and foremost based on defense cooperation. Sixty-six years later,

the U.K. is the number one military partner for the United States. Britain is probably the only country under whose command the U.S. military will happily place U.S. service personnel. At present, U.S.–U.K. cooperation is at its closest in Afghanistan, where Britain has approximately 10,000 troops on the ground. The ratification in the U.S. Senate of the U.S.–U.K. Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty also demonstrates the importance of the relationship. The challenge now will be to implement this treaty.

Cuts, Cuts, and More Cuts. The U.S.–U.K. defense relationship today is framed in the context of defense cuts. In 2010, the U.K. announced defense cuts of close to 20 percent when factoring in the cost of the nuclear deterrent and the £38 billion budgetary gap resulting from years of under-investment. The Pentagon has just announced cuts of \$487 billion over the next 10 years while delaying important equipment programs and reducing the number of service personnel by 100,000. These cuts weaken American leadership and creditability in Europe when trying to persuade U.S. allies, including the United Kingdom, that their defense cuts have gone too far.

U.S. Defense Cuts Undermine the Special Relationship. During the U.K.’s 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review, there were four areas the U.S. requested that the U.K. protect from cuts:

- A commitment to the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF);
- Replacement of Britain’s nuclear deterrent;
- The Mine Counter Measure Vessels (MCMV) operating in the Gulf; and
- U.K. Special Operations Forces.

Paradoxically, due to recent U.S. cuts, two of the four capabilities the U.S. wanted the U.K. to protect from defense cuts—the JSF and the nuclear deterrent—are now at risk.

Due to budgetary concerns, the U.K. has already delayed the in-service date of the JSF. The U.S. delay of five years for 179 JSF aircraft may encourage the U.K. to delay its purchase even further. It is too early to tell if the delay in the Ohio Class replacement program will impact the timely delivery of the Common Missile Compartment (CMC) jointly

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3510>

Produced by The Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

developed by the U.S. and the U.K. This is a critical part of the U.K.'s deterrent replacement program. If the CMC is delayed, this could mean delays in Britain's replacement nuclear deterrent.

Cooperation Around the World.

When Obama and Cameron meet, they should work out strategies for approaching several upcoming meetings and decisions.

Afghanistan and the Chicago Summit. The NATO summit in Chicago in May will focus on Afghanistan. Recently, the Obama Administration has sent signals that the end of combat operations may come as early as 2013 instead of 2015, the date agreed upon at the 2010 Lisbon Summit. The U.K. will soon make a decision on troop numbers in Afghanistan when its National Security Council meets later this year. The mixed signals from Washington could encourage the U.K. to decide on an earlier withdrawal date. As the second-largest troop contributor after the U.S., what the U.K. does in Afghanistan is closely watched across Europe. Once the U.K. starts to withdraw troops in meaningful numbers, European countries will follow in droves.

America and the Asia-Pacific Region. With the Obama Administration's new defense focus in the Asia-Pacific region, many in the U.K. are wondering what this means for the Special Relationship. Today, there is little U.S.-U.K. strategic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region when compared to Europe or the Middle East. The U.K. is part of the Five Power Defense Arrangements (FPDA)¹ and maintains good bilateral relations

with Australia and New Zealand, both important U.S. partners. Furthermore, there are 17 members of the Commonwealth with whom the U.K. has a close relationship in the Pacific Command area of responsibility. Increased U.S.-U.K. cooperation on a strategic level would benefit both countries.

NATO and European Defense. NATO is suffering from a lack of political will and resources. Even though defense resources in Europe are scarce, the French and Germans have moved to create more European Union (EU) defense structures that will compete with NATO. Some EU members are even calling for the creation of a permanent EU military headquarters. This would be an unnecessary duplication of what is already provided by national governments and NATO. This is a waste of resources that could otherwise go to NATO.

Time to Speak Up and Recommit. The Obama Administration should:

- **Reverse defense cuts that dramatically harm U.S.-U.K. defense cooperation.** As a sign of the importance of the Special Relationship, President Obama should reverse any U.S. defense cuts that impact British defense capability. In particular, the decisions to delay the purchase of the JSF by five years and the two-year delay to the Ohio Class replacement should be reversed.
- **Reaffirm America's commitment to the transition strategy outlined at the 2010 NATO Lisbon Summit.** President

Obama must clarify the U.S. position on Afghanistan withdrawal. It is bad enough there is a politically driven and arbitrarily established deadline of 2015 for the end of combat operations in Afghanistan. Hinting that the U.S. may leave Afghanistan earlier sends the wrong message to U.S. allies, the Afghans, and the Taliban.

- **Encourage U.S.-U.K. strategic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.** President Obama should task the Pentagon with finding creative ways to involve the U.K. in its Pacific strategy. One proposal could be to make available more staff posts to British officers at Pacific Command (PACOM), as is already the case at Central Command (CENTCOM). Another would be to expand U.S. military activities with both the U.K. and its Pacific Commonwealth partners (including Canada, as well as Australia and New Zealand).
- **Make U.S. unhappiness on EU defense initiatives known.** President Obama should publicly support British opposition to the creation of a permanent EU military headquarters that would divert scarce resources away from NATO. At a time when NATO is downsizing the number of military headquarters, the EU should not be increasing it.
- **Give assurances on the Falklands.** In addition to making U.S. support for British sovereignty over the Falkland Islands public, President Obama should offer

1. Established in 1971 to demonstrate the British commitment to Asia after the 1967 "East of Suez" decision, the FPDA consists of the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Malaysia.

assurances of U.S. military support to the U.K.—at a minimum on the same level as provided during the 1982 Falklands War. This could also include backfilling the British air-bridge to Afghanistan if the U.K. needed to divert strategic airlift to the South Atlantic in the event of a crisis.

Make the Special Relationship Special. It is in America's interest to have a strong British military partner. On the military level, the desire to increase cooperation is there. President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron need to help facilitate this cooperation. Like all relationships, the U.S.–U.K. defense relationship needs nurturing and

direction. Both leaders should use this visit as an opportunity to expand military cooperation.

—*Luke Coffey is the Margaret Thatcher Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*