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Libya Mission Demonstrates That British Defense Cuts Must Be Reversed

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Britain's Strategic Defense and Security Review (SDSR), released in October 2010, has already led to significant cuts in the size and capabilities of Britain's armed forces, with more reductions in the years to come. These reductions came on top of those made by the previous Labour government and failed to recognize that Britain's forces were already inadequately funded.

The start of NATO's operation against the Libyan regime of Colonel Muammar Qadhafi proves that the review was comprehensively flawed and that the reductions it imposed were demonstrably unwise. It is certainly true that Britain cannot hope to play the major world role that Prime Minister David Cameron wishes to preserve if the nation is bankrupt. But it is also true that defense spending does not impose a substantial financial burden on Britain and that the capabilities the current government has sacrificed are now sorely needed in Libya.

The prime minister cannot effectively wage a major military campaign in Libya without reversing the crippling defense cuts that his coalition government has introduced, as well as significantly increasing defense spending. The government should reconsider the review and reject its flawed foundations. The British armed forces should be funded at a level sufficient to allow them to accomplish the missions given to them by the country's political leaders. Britain and the United States must stand together in rejecting defense cuts that are driven not by serious strategic analysis but by a desire to cut

spending without regard to the dangers that exist in the world.

The Defense Review's Outcome and Flaws.

In 2010, Britain spent approximately 2.7 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. 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 artillery and 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 only aircraft carrier, *HMS Ark Royal*, was decommissioned on March 11. Britain will not have a carrier-borne strike force until 2020.

The SDSR poses a series of dangers to the British armed forces, the Anglo–American Special Relationship, and Britain's leading role in NATO. It increases Britain's reliance on the United States for transport, logistics, and heavy weapons. By imposing cuts and delays on Britain's procurement of new carriers, it increases costs and creates a serious capability gap in Britain's forces. Finally, the SDSR makes it easier for other NATO allies—including the U.S.—to justify cuts as well.

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Even before the start of operations in Libya, the justifications for the SDSR were fatally flawed. Throughout NATO, member countries are cutting spending and proclaiming that they will cooperate more closely with each other to fill the resulting gaps. This is an absurdity: Cuts all around cannot produce improved security.

The SDSR is based on the argument that unconventional wars such as the one in Afghanistan represent the future of war. Certainly, Afghanistan is one important kind of war, but it was never likely to be the only kind of war that Britain and NATO would have to fight. Britain's emphasis on unconventional war will soon leave it completely unprepared to fight conventional foes.

The Failures of the Review Have Been Exposed in Libya. Only five months after Cameron announced the results of the SDSR, Britain is engaged in a war that the SDSR utterly failed to anticipate. NATO is fighting the Libyan war from the air, seeking to use its air power to protect rebel forces and civilians from Qadhafi's forces. The most convenient way to do this would be to fly aircraft capable of striking ground targets off carriers in the Mediterranean. But as Britain has eliminated its Harrier force and mothballed the *Ark Royal*, it must instead fly out of southern Italy. This makes it hard to respond rapidly to strike targets and to maintain a continual presence in the Libyan skies, and it imposes additional wear and tear on Britain's planes and pilots.

The forces at Britain's disposal are extremely limited. Foreign Secretary William Hague has said that "it would be useful to have a larger number of aircraft capable of striking ground targets."¹ If Britain had

not grounded its Harrier force, it would be capable of supplying those aircraft itself. The RAF has only about 50 Tornado GR4 ground attack aircraft in service, and only 16 of these are based in southern Italy. Britain is reportedly seeking to modify four Typhoons—the aircraft formerly known as the Eurofighter—to be capable of ground attack missions.² This upgrade has been planned since 2004 and is not scheduled to be complete for Tranche 2 of the Typhoon force until 2018. The need to rush four Typhoons through the upgrade process is symptomatic of the delays and capability gaps that years of under-funding have created in Britain's forces.

Reports that the NATO forces are running out of precision munitions—after less than a month of relatively low-intensity strikes—are even more alarming.³ The failure stems partly from Europe's failure to spend enough money to retool its jets to carry U.S. bombs and partly from its failure to invest in sufficient stocks of the bombs their aircraft can currently carry. In Britain, the switch in 2001 to a new accounting system incentivized the forces to hold smaller stocks. This was financially convenient but militarily foolish.

Most fundamentally, the Libyan conflict is exactly the kind of conflict that the SDSR argued was unlikely to occur. It is a high-tech war fought from the air against a regime with a conventional military. It requires exactly the forces that Britain decided were unnecessary, and it is cruelly exposing the failure of successive governments to adequately invest in the capabilities and endurance of the British forces. The SDSR's decisions were wrong when they were announced; the Libya campaign has merely demonstrated that criticisms of them at the time were correct.⁴

1. Alex Delmar-Morgan, Nathan Hodge, and Charles Levinson, "Allies Clash on Libya Stalemate," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2011, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703730104576260832626131842.html> (April 19, 2011).
2. Nick Hopkins and Richard Norton-Taylor, "RAF Converts Typhoons So They Can Join NATO Airstrikes on Gaddafi's Forces," *The Guardian*, April 6, 2011, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/06/uk-typhoons-libya-bombing> (April 19, 2011).
3. Karen DeYoung and Greg Jaffe, "NATO Runs Short on Some Munitions in Libya," *The Washington Post*, April 15, 2011, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/nato-runs-short-on-some-munitions-in-libya/2011/04/15/AF307E1D_story.html?hpid=z1 (April 19, 2011).
4. See Ted R. Bromund, "Spending Cuts in British Defense Review: Less Than Expected, but Still Damaging," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3039, October 22, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/10/Spending-Cuts-in-British-Defense-Review-Less-Than-Expected-but-Still-Damaging>.

What the U.S. and Britain Must Do. Washington 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. The arguments are no truer in the United States than they were in Britain.

Britain should not allow its accounting system to encourage it to under-invest in supplies, stocks, and spares. Instead, Britain and the U.S.—along with the rest of the NATO alliance—should seek sensible economies in defense while recognizing that they cannot cut their way to security. They must also base 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. Such increases will not affect the outcome of operations in Libya, but they are vital to ensure that future crises do not find

Britain and NATO ill-prepared to undertake vital missions.

Britain Is at War on Two Fronts. Britain is now a nation at war on two fronts: in the skies over North Africa and the battlefields of Afghanistan. Its defense spending levels have to reflect this reality if it is to wage war successfully against the Taliban and al-Qaeda and the barbaric regime of Colonel Qadhafi, not to mention prepare for the looming threat on the horizon from the Islamist dictatorship in Tehran.

The Prime Minister and his Secretary of Defence have so far shown resilience on Libya and an admirable willingness to stand up to tyranny and despotism—a great British tradition. They should now back that up with a long-term strategy for the rebuilding of British military power to advance the safety of the United Kingdom and the free world.

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