

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY



September 23, 2010

British Cuts to Military Concern U.S. Officials

By **MICHAEL R. GORDON** and **JOHN F. BURNS**

WASHINGTON — Plans by the British government to make significant cuts in defense spending have spurred concerns among American military experts about **Britain's** ability to carry out its role as the United States' most dependable ally.

A wrenching government spending review has pitted Britain's army against its navy, spawned a series of leaks to the British media and raised the question of whether the military that emerges from the budget cuts — expected to be 10 percent to 20 percent of current outlays — will be a strategically agile force that can join the United States on major combat operations.

American and British officials said that they did not expect any cutbacks to curtail Britain's capabilities to fight in Afghanistan over the next five years. But some American military experts question whether the British military will be capable of undertaking future ground operations that are as demanding as those in Afghanistan or to carry out simultaneous operations, including risky humanitarian missions, effectively.

With other European nations embarking on substantial military spending retrenchments, and the Obama administration committed to acting in concert with allies whenever possible, the British spending review has received high-level attention in Washington, including in a meeting on Wednesday between Liam Fox, the British defense minister, and Defense Secretary **Robert M. Gates**.

Mr. Fox told reporters later that, after any cuts, the British military would be able to respond to a broad array of threats and retain capabilities particularly valued by the Pentagon. He identified those as Britain's Special Forces, its nuclear deterrent, its participation in the Joint Strike Fighter program and its ability to deploy substantial forces when needed.

“We would be able to maintain a moderate deployable force for a considerable length of time, if required,” Mr. Fox added. “Maybe not exactly at the level we have now, but at still a respectable and useful level.”

Still, the entire active-duty British armed forces are smaller than the [United States Marine Corps](#), and some critics at home have charged that the review is little more than a budgetary drill dressed up as a broader assessment of military requirements.

“We have not had enough time to produce a coherent strategic and defense overview,” said Paul Cornish, the head of the international security program at Chatham House, a leading British research center. “Instead of it being a [Treasury](#)-informed defense review, it is, by most accounts, Treasury-led. This is a fairly brutal cost-cutting exercise.”

Some American experts say that some of the cuts being contemplated — there have been calls to reduce the number of British Army troops by 20 percent eventually — go too far. “A cut this deep would probably have a negative impact on the British Army’s ability to deploy and sustain substantial forces,” said Antulio J. Echevarria II, the research director of the [United States Army War College](#).

The British defense cuts are part of a broader drive by the coalition government led by Prime Minister [David Cameron](#) to reduce Britain’s annual government deficit of \$240 billion, one of the highest deficits in Europe. The government is to provide details of its proposed cuts to Parliament on Oct. 20.

The cuts have set off a heated debate among Britain’s military services about what capabilities should be kept — and about the painful tradeoffs. British Army officers have questioned whether Britain should build two new costly aircraft carriers, and there have been fierce arguments about the cost of replacing submarines that carried nuclear-tipped Trident missiles.

“There is no way that the U.K., in the current financial climate, will be able to maintain a permanent at-sea, submarine-based nuclear deterrent, the size of fast jet fleet that we currently have, the ambition for a two-aircraft carrier strike program and an army of 100,000,” said Richard Dannatt, the former head of the British Army.

Adding to the quandary, the British Navy and Air Force can reduce spending by trimming weapons programs, while the army’s principal cost is personnel. The standing British Army has 103,000 soldiers, not including reserves or national guard troops, and army officers have argued that no more than several thousand could be cut without hampering the operation in Afghanistan, where about 10,000 British troops are deployed.

Longer-term plans call for shrinking the army by about 20 percent and establishing an army structure of five brigades and somewhat smaller airborne and commando units. That would enable Britain to deploy a 6,000-strong force for a prolonged ground operation, but the eventual size of the British Army has not been formally decided.

Whatever budgetary steps the British take have major implications for United States military planning. More than other allies, Britain has displayed both the will to join the United States in the initial phase of military operations and the wherewithal to quickly deploy, sustain and command its own forces.

“They have the capability to go in early on in a crisis, particularly on the ground, to be with us,” said a senior [United States Defense Department](#) official, who asked not to be named because of the confidential nature of the continuing consultations. “If they maintain the full-spectrum capability to operate with us quickly on the front end of a conflict, it is helpful. That is what we are watching and talking to them about.”

A spokesman for Mr. Gates declined to comment in detail on the meeting with Mr. Fox, who noted that he had gone over the budget review with Mr. Gates.

“There will have to be some choices made,” Mr. Fox said. “So we need to concentrate on where we think we can be best contributors as an ally for the United States as well as being able to deal with Britain’s unique security interests.”

General Dannatt said it was important for the British military to retain the capability to deploy two or three army brigades under a division-level headquarters in a crisis. “If we gave up the capacity to put a division into the field, I think we do go immediately well down into the second rank of European armies,” he said.

Asked if Britain would have such a capability if the number of troops were cut by 20 percent under a long-term plan, he said: “I think that comes into the ‘just’ category. We can just about do it. This is where the planners will be getting their slide rules and their calculators out.

“They will want to be able to say this is doable, but in fact they will be building in severe pressure on the system.”