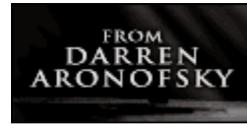


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October 2, 2010

British Nukes vs. British Troops

The pledge by Britain's coalition government to drastically slash spending is bad economics and bad public policy. Budget tightening is needed, but not this much, this fast or this way. The cuts to be announced this month will put recovery at risk, unfairly squeeze poorer Britons, and make it hard for government departments to work. That includes defense — targeted for a 10 to 20 percent reduction over the next five years.

How those cuts are apportioned will make a huge difference in what kind of world role the country will be able to play in the years ahead.

Put simply, the most important choice is between nuclear weapons and troops — specifically, whether to build four new nuclear missile-launching submarines or to preserve an army large enough to contribute to allied missions overseas. Even with painful cuts in other areas, there will not be money enough for both.

Britain's annual military budget is \$58 billion. Replacing all four submarines — as the Conservatives, the lead partner in the coalition government, want — would cost \$30 billion over the next decade, or roughly \$3 billion a year. Eliminating 20,000 army troops will save less than \$2 billion a year. Scaling back the submarine replacement plan — or deferring it, as the junior partner, the Liberal Democrats, urge — could save enough to keep the army at its current strength of 105,000.

There is no reason for Britain to press ahead with the submarines now. The current fleet, built in the 1990s, will remain operational for another decade — longer if Britain relaxes its cold war policy of keeping at least one sub continuously at sea. (United States subs stay in service for 40 years.)

It is also hard to see why — in today's world — Britain needs four new subs, each of which can carry up to 160 nuclear warheads. Only a fraction of that capacity is currently used, roughly 48 warheads per submarine, for a total of 192. There are, of course, still nuclear dangers out there, most notably North Korea and Iran. But the United States nuclear umbrella plus a smaller Trident force should provide Britain with full deterrence.

Britain has vowed that its army strength will not be reduced as long as it has ground forces in Afghanistan. (Prime Minister David Cameron says he expects those forces to be withdrawn by 2015.) That is welcome. But unless other savings are found, that will require even steeper force cuts later in the decade and more drastic reductions in navy and air force equipment purchases.

Britain has been America's most reliable military ally and a backbone of NATO. That is good for Britons — for their security and for their continuing influence. Britain will not be able to deliver if this government decides to sacrifice troop numbers for nuclear symbolism.