

by Ted R. Bromund

Executive Summary of a Heritage paper

The British armed forces are too weak and are becoming weaker. Since 1999, British forces have been continually in action around the world, but Britain is spending a lower share of its national income on defense than at any point since 1933. Britain has adopted defense doctrines that emphasize low-intensity war as a way to justify spending less on its forces, and it is being pulled into a tooth-less European defense plan. All of its services are shrinking, and they are poorly served by a procurement system that is a disguise for a system of social and corporate welfare. The Ministry of Defence is no longer a leading office of state, and it lacks the political strength and institutional culture to do its job. In short, Britain is in danger of becoming just another European state that fails to take defense seriously.

The Special Relationship. This matters profoundly to the United States. Military and intelligence cooperation has been at the heart of the special relationship between the U.S. and Britain since World War II. The U.S. and Britain played the crucial roles in founding NATO in 1949 and in sustaining that alliance over the past 50 years. NATO, and the U.S. commitment to the defense of the Western democracies that it represents, continues to be central to U.S. policy. Yet without a strong Britain, NATO will have no European state committed to spending a significant amount of money on its own defense. Nor will the British armed forces be able to play their traditional role of deterring adversaries. This will further weaken NATO and continue the gradual retreat of the state that since 1939 has been the essential friend of the United States and of the values of democracy and free enterprise.

Both Britain and the U.S. must act to renew the transatlantic bargain on defense that was made in 1949. That bargain has been based on a U.S. willingness to help the Europeans defend themselves, as long as the Europeans were strongly committed to their own defense. That bargain is now in jeopardy.

For Britain, change must begin at the top. Without change in the Ministry of Defence and above all a powerful Secretary of State for Defence dedicated to fixing its culture, restoring funding to the services, amending its doctrine, and reforming its procurement system, none of the problems confronting the British armed forces can be addressed. If the British political system cannot summon the necessary will to restore its military, Britain will join the ranks of the European states that cannot be bothered to defend themselves and that treat security—the first duty of the state—as a negligible responsibility.

What the United States Should Do. The U.S. should help any British administration that is serious about restoring its armed forces. It can do this in several ways. In public diplomacy, it should continue to emphasize that the U.S. has a vital interest in ensuring that all European members of NATO contribute meaningfully to their own defense. Institutionally, it should reinforce the links between the U.S. and British armed forces and emphasize the importance

of interoperability within NATO. Most importantly, it should reform its own procurement and export control systems to give greater emphasis to joint development, manufacturing, and purchasing agreements with Britain and to improve the ability of U.S. firms to sell to trusted allies.

If the U.S. continues to treat defense trade cooperation with Britain as a matter of secondary importance, other countries will take the U.S.'s place as Britain's defense industrial partner. If this happens, U.S. industry will lose orders, U.S. workers will lose jobs, and the U.S. will lose military interoperability with and a vital connection to its closest ally in its most important alliance.

Conclusion. Both the U.S. and Britain need to return to responsibility. The U.S. needs to be a responsible partner in trade and procurement. The U.K. needs to recognize that it is in grave danger of being unable to fulfill its responsibilities to its citizens, forces, and friends and allies around the world. Acting together, as they have in the past, the U.S. and Britain can meet these challenges.

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