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EUROPE NEWS | MAY 14, 2011

Sun Setting on British Power

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By ALISTAIR MACDONALD

LONDON—From Nelson atop his column to Wellington gracing his arch, this city is filled with monuments to the martial glories of an island whose forces once dominated continents and ruled the waves.

Martial Nation



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Take a look at the British military over the years .

Downsizing the U.K. Military



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Getty Images

The Harrier jump jet, whose vertical take off technology made it a British icon, made its final operational flight on Dec. 15, 2010.

Today, though, the relatively modest British intervention in Libya is fueling fresh anxiety here and in Washington about the nation's shrinking military muscle as the U.K. cuts defense spending in response to a record deficit.

When Michael Graydon, a former head of the Royal Air Force, commanded no-fly zones over Iraq in 1991, he had more than 20 British attack squadrons to rely on, he says. For the no-fly zone over Libya, he says, the RAF has around six.

The frigate used to evacuate British citizens from Libya, HMS Cumberland, is to be decommissioned in June, along with some of the Tornado fighter planes spearheading the North American Treaty Organization attacks. Two reconnaissance planes were saved from retirement to join in the mission.

The U.K. is in the midst of the most aggressive fiscal tightening since World War II—a process that U.S. defense officials are watching with concern. In October, following a strategic review, Prime Minister David Cameron announced plans to cut the military budget by 7.5% and the head count by 10%

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over five years, and to retire lots of equipment, leaving the armed forces with 40% fewer tanks and 35% less heavy artillery. The planned cuts will come on top of an 8% reduction in personnel during the 13-year tenure of the former Labour Party government.

At a hearing Wednesday before a Parliamentary defense committee, the heads of Britain's army, navy and air force said the U.K. would no longer be a "full spectrum" military force—one capable of both low-intensity combat such as counterinsurgency and the kind of major operations required for state-on-state combat.

Air Chief Marshal Stephen Dalton, head of the air force, said simultaneous battles in Libya and Afghanistan have taxed the military. "There are times and there are phases on the operations where we have stretched the capabilities absolutely to the point where we find it very difficult to do anything else at that particular time," he said.

The three service chiefs said that the U.K. will still be able to project power on the international stage. The government has said that the cutbacks won't undermine the nation's ability to support its allies in places like Afghanistan, although they will result in a smaller military that the nation will be "more selective" in using. The U.K. will still have the world's fourth-largest military budget, Mr. Cameron has said.



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Associated Press

1950–53 Korean War: Britain and U.S. fight together against North Korea and its allies.

The cutbacks come as broad geopolitical forces are reshaping the global military landscape. The U.S., which also is trying to curtail military spending, remains the world's dominant military power. China is engaged in a military buildup that has alarmed many of its Asian neighbors. And other NATO members are grappling with budget constraints while keeping a wary eye on Russia and the Middle East.

The British cuts have sparked concern in the Pentagon about how much the U.K. will be able to contribute to future U.S.-led

operations. In recent decades, the U.K. has been its most dependable military ally—valued, among other things, for its willingness to fight abroad (it has lost more than 360 troops in Afghanistan) and the capabilities of its vaunted special forces.

From Ruling the Waves...



Everett Collection

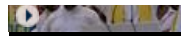
A rendering of HMS Victory, Lord Nelson's flagship at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805

James Townsend, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for European and NATO policy, says it is critical to the U.S. for Britain to remain capable of responding to a wide range of crises, and not to pare back its forces to focus narrowly on one or two missions.

"We were hoping they would maintain a full spectrum of capabilities," he says. "Whatever the mission might be that would face us in the future, we wanted to make sure they had the capability of being there on the first day, as the U.K. always is."

Thomas Docherty, a member of Parliament, says that in an April meeting at the Pentagon, U.S. defense officials told a group of U.K. lawmakers and military officers: "This is the bottom of the curve. You cannot cut any further," if you want to remain a military power.

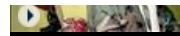
Mr. Townsend notes that almost every other NATO member is facing similar fiscal challenges, and that the U.S. remains



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the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

...to Waving Goodbye



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European Pressphoto Agency

HMS Ark Royal entering port for the last time in December prior to decommissioning.

confident that even after the cuts Britain will continue to be nimble enough to play an important global role.

But some former British commanders say the cuts already have gone too far. "If the cuts go on, there is a threat to our position as a leader of the second-tier of military powers," says Charles Guthrie, head of Britain's armed forces from 1997 to 2001. "We are at a tipping point."

Some European officials worry that cuts to the region's most powerful armed force further tilt the global military balance away from the continent. The Libya intervention underscored how reliant the region is on

U.S. power.



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Associated Press

1990–91 First Gulf War: U.K. is second-biggest contributor of troops to U.S.-led effort to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

Maj. Gen. Peter Gilchrist, Britain's defense attache in Washington from 2005 to 2008, says the U.K. would have difficulty replicating its 46,000-troop contribution to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The budget cuts, he says, mean that "we don't have the same volume of equipment. The heavy artillery and armor has all been reduced."

A document released in connection with last year's strategic defense review states that Britain could contribute around two-thirds of its Iraq commitment, or about 30,000 soldiers, to a military intervention, but only

for a "limited time." A senior military adviser noted in an interview, however, that those 30,000 would be better equipped than those sent into Iraq earlier.



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Associated Press

1995 Bosnian War: British planes take part in NATO campaign against the Bosnian Serb army, and U.K. troops later join peacekeeping force.

In Libya, the U.K. is the second largest contributor to NATO's mission, after France. Some senior U.K. defense officials say they were reluctant to get involved, arguing that doing so would reduce the nation's flexibility to respond to potentially more important crises. They say they worried about potential conflict in Bahrain and Oman, whose military facilities are used by the British, and in Iran, which they see as potentially more destabilizing.

In the wake of the Libya engagement and the wider turmoil in the region, Mr. Cameron is considering minor changes to last fall's

strategic defense review, says a person familiar with Mr. Cameron's thinking.

Discussions about the U.K.'s diminishing military are especially painful for a nation where military prowess has been woven into the national identity. Once the world's dominant power, the U.K. was eclipsed by the U.S. and Russia after World War II. But its status as a willing and capable combatant preserved its diplomatic clout.

"We are a martial nation," army Brigadier James Chiswell said late last year in an interview in Afghanistan, where he commanded British forces. "We like a scrap. We always have."

The U.K.'s willingness to use military force strengthened its relationship with the U.S. and other European nations and gave it greater voice on politically charged issues such as NATO membership, says Douglas Hurd, Britain's foreign secretary between 1989 and 1995.

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In Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. viewed the U.K. as its most capable military ally, by far. Nevertheless, British forces ran into problems in both theaters.

In Iraq, critics said, the British rarely ventured off their base outside Basra. In Afghanistan, officials such as Afghan President Hamid Karzai and U.S. Gen. Dan McNeill bemoaned what they saw as the inability of U.K. forces to get a grip on the insurgency in Helmand province, according to U.S. diplomatic cables leaked on the WikiLeaks website.

British officers involved in both wars, as well as some politicians, say the U.K. army was hampered by poor planning, too few resources, a government that didn't want to risk casualties and a mind-set rooted in fighting terrorists in Northern Ireland, where force was used sparingly.



Associated Press

1999 Kosovo War: British peacekeepers join NATO campaign to stop abuses by Yugoslavian troops in Kosovo.

A "malaise" had gripped the Ministry of Defence, says retired Col. Richard Kemp. When he was asked to lead British forces in Afghanistan in 2003, he says, he asked around for army doctrine on dealing with suicide bombers. "There was absolutely nothing. Nobody had any idea," he says.

At first, the U.S. was frustrated with the U.K.'s lack of progress in Helmand, U.S. officials say. But a senior Pentagon official says that view shifted after the U.S. sent Marines into the province in 2009 and encountered strong resistance. The British had struggled there because they had been

given too large an area to control with the number of troops they had available, U.S. defense officials say.

A Ministry of Defence spokesman said about Iraq and Afghanistan: "Where mistakes were made, lessons have and will be learned."

The New Arms Race

This is the third in a series of articles examining how the global military balance is shifting with the world economic order.

- [Russia's Fading Army Fights Losing Battle to Reform Itself](#) (4/10/2011)
- [Asia's New Arms Race](#) (2/12/2011)

military cuts, and that he "didn't come into politics wishing to see a reduction in our defense budget."

The defense-budget cuts come amid a sweeping government austerity program that will see police numbers fall, welfare payments cut and government services pared back. Secretary of State for Defence Liam Fox has said that overspending by the Ministry of Defence and the deficit built up by the last government necessitated the

Completion of one of two aircraft carriers currently under construction will be delayed, and the other will be mothballed or sold. One of Britain's two existing carriers is scheduled to be decommissioned, the other turned into a helicopter platform, which will leave the U.K. with no carrier-strike capability for almost 10 years.

Admiral Mark Stanhope, the head of the navy, said at the hearing Wednesday that he regretted the decision to retire Britain's two carriers and said it will be a "major challenge" to regenerate that capability when new carriers are brought into service in around 10 years, given the loss of relevant skills.



The Pentagon's Mr. Townsend said that the gap in Britain's carrier capability would have to be managed, and the U.S. would help the U.K. "over the hump."

Alan West, a former head of the Royal Navy and security adviser to former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and other senior naval officials say the U.K. wouldn't be able to

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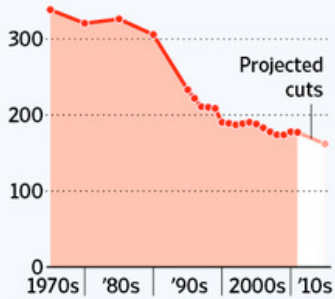
Associated Press

2001 to present, Afghanistan: The U.K. commits 10,000 troops, second only to the U.S.'s 90,000.

mount the sort of naval operation that retook the Falkland Islands from Argentina in 1982. A Ministry of Defence spokeswoman said the Falklands Islands are "better protected than ever before."

Limited Force

U.K.'s active-duty military personnel
400 thousand



Source: U.K. Ministry of Defense

What is likely to emerge from the process is a smaller military more focused on fast deployment to unstable states, with better equipped troops and strong special forces. It will be suited to work in tandem with allies like the U.S. and France.

Among other changes, a greater emphasis is being placed on intelligence and surveillance, and the capacity to handle it is being pushed further down the chain of command. Once used mainly to track Cold War military technology, intelligence is now needed to understand and counter local insurgencies.

British officers in Afghanistan say the new-look army is taking shape on the ground there. Even small patrol bases now bristle with surveillance equipment for monitoring insurgents. The number of intelligence personnel in Afghanistan has increased by about 50% in recent years, the

Ministry of Defence says.

At a British base in Nahr-E Saraj late last year, seven intelligence analysts worked at computers and hunkered over maps, collating and analyzing threat warnings from around the Helmand Valley. At a nightly briefing, an intelligence officer described "Iranian style" wiring of a recently discovered improvised explosive device.



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Associated Press

2003 Second Gulf War: 46,000 British troops join the U.S.-led force that ousted Saddam Hussein.

British soldiers on the ground say a renewed focus on making sure they are properly equipped has made a difference. Four years ago, Lt. Col. Dougie Graham, commanding officer of the Royal Highland Fusiliers battalion, bought his own boots, gloves, patrol pack, binoculars and sleeping bag for a tour in Afghanistan. Before his most recent tour, he says, he didn't need to stock up, and his requests for extra equipment such as shotguns were met.

—Julian E. Barnes contributed to this article.

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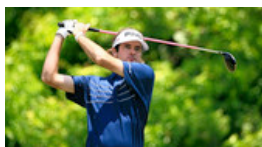
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