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CANDIDLY, ONE FRIEND TO ANOTHER

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The Transatlantic Partnership between the United States and the United Kingdom has remained viable for the better part of a century. During that time it weathered assorted and sometimes severe storms – from trials over nuclear armament in the late 1940s, to the Suez crisis of the 1950s, to the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, and to today’s extensive and costly counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, one could well say that the long-standing partnership between the U.S. and UK has been what Prime Minister David Cameron recently, and aptly, described as “the candid friend, the best friend” relationship.¹ Advice offered by one partner to the other has always been refreshingly frank, even if it has been at times difficult to hear, and to heed.

As the UK moves into the final stretch before the completion of its all-important Strategic Defense and Security Review (SDSR), perhaps a few candid words of advice might not be out of place. Neither would a healthy dose of frankness. Simply put, for British defense policy to repeat the mistakes that underpinned American strategic thinking during the height of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) era would be a waste as well as a pity. Yet—with sizeable budget cuts all but certain for the British military and profound changes in the political climate already in place—the RMA’s celebrated formula of trading mass for efficiency might seem all the more appealing. But it is a temptation best avoided.

As recent history has shown, the promise that a small but highly capable force could be built around the seemingly clear-cut principles of knowledge, speed, and precision ultimately betrayed both partners of the “Special Relationship.” Just as the advocates of the RMA and its transparent successor, Defense Transformation, mistook battles for wars, so too the resultant “New American Way of War” confused grammar with logic. If the Americans had not been so bloody good at perfecting war’s grammar, the debate over the logic of intervention in Iraq would, by necessity, have taken a different turn. In the end, the intervention might not have been avoided. But, at the very least, there would have been a greater opportunity to expose the optimistic forecasts for that campaign as decidedly reckless, and to take measures to reduce the risks of vertical and lateral escalation.

Sacrificing effectiveness for efficiency is a common mistake in defense circles. The cost of failure is always paid first by the military; but in every case there are ultimately political casualties as well, sometimes at the highest levels. With deep defense cuts expected across the UK’s military services, the natural impulse will be to search for efficiencies in an effort to strike a balance. It would be better to avoid the illusion of balance altogether. That

illusion helped produce the controversial legacy that surrounds Basra, and is contributing to the struggles in Helmand. Budget cuts ought to mean deciding which fundamental capabilities remain essential and must be preserved, and which are important but not critical. Every service will make its case, and some of those cases will have merit.

As recent events have shown, times have not changed so much that a sovereign nation can afford to dispense with the fundamental capabilities needed to take control of, or provide security for, people and places on land. In short, regardless of the complexion of the emerging security environment, the UK will need competent ground forces capable of protecting its interests by performing a broad range of missions. These include humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, noncombatant evacuation, peacekeeping, peace enforcement, stabilization, power projection, and intervention. Ground forces would not only have to be able to maintain a credible presence in theater for as long as necessary, they would have to have the muscle to prevent any given crisis from escalating. The ability to contain a crisis has always been a prerequisite for effective deterrence.

The British MoD has a program in the works called Transformational Army Structures (TAS) which looks like it could provide the requisite ground capabilities. It consists of five modular or multirole brigades, plus supporting logistics and artillery brigades, which can be organized around two divisional headquarters; it also has a division-size Early Effect Force. Such ground forces would surely help secure British interests in a dynamic, multipolar world. However, if rumors are true that a cut of 20% is in store for the British Army, then it is not clear that the TAS has any hope of becoming reality. If not, then the allure of efficiency will have overtaken effectiveness.

History never repeats itself, but there are times when it comes close.

Still, the spirit of frankness has saved a "best friend" from making a costly mistake more than once. There's no reason to believe it can't happen again.

ENDNOTE

1. Catherine Mayer, "Why Britain's Affair with the US is Over," *TIME*, March 29, 2010.

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