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Britain's Future Defence: Impact on FPDA

By Geoffrey Till

Synopsis

The recently announced programme of defence cuts in the United Kingdom will have an impact on the Royal Navy. This in turn will affect the East-West naval balance and the future operations of the Five Power Defence Arrangement of which Singapore is a part.

Commentary

AS PART of a range of huge spending cuts to tackle a S\$322 billion budget deficit, Britain's new coalition government has announced an estimated cut of almost eight percent in future defence spending over the next five years. This is on top of a 10 per cent 'black hole' in the defence budget that already existed - so the actual total cuts are more like 18%. The government has tried to answer the criticism that it has rushed through these cuts with insufficient strategic thought beforehand by producing a strategy document called 'A Strong Britain In An Age of Uncertainty'. This document reads well and has been generally welcomed but dodges some fundamental issues.

The most obvious of these is the basic question of how much money Britain *should* be allocating to defence as a proportion both of the government spending and of the country's GDP. It assumes, rather than justifies, a target of just over two per cent of GNP, the NATO minimum. The review also assumes that the increasingly unpopular Afghanistan campaign must be the 'main effort' for the next five years and should take priority over preparations for a longer term future, but does not show why. Both of these assumptions are difficult and highly sensitive politically. Politicians think discussion of them best avoided politically even though they will determine the manner in which the cuts will be administered.

Impact on the Royal Navy

The result has been particularly severe for the Royal Navy. It was unlucky enough to have the most expensive capital projects going through at this time, after a long period of relative neglect -- projects which, moreover, seemed to have little to do with the immediate needs of the Afghanistan campaign. These projects included two large 65,000 tonne strike carriers, a replacement programme for its Trident strategic deterrent submarine force, the completion of its *Astute* nuclear hunter-killer submarine and Type 45 Air warfare destroyer programmes

and, in the longer term, an ambitious frigate replacement programme. All of these projects involve cutting-edge technologies of the sort appropriate for a navy that the American journal *DefenseNews* called 'the gold standard for the world's navies' in a recent editorial, but they are all fiendishly expensive.

Not surprisingly therefore, this ambitious fleet renewal programme has been scaled back. There have been cuts in the current fleet to help pay for the 'recapitalisation' of the future fleet. The Royal Navy will decommission its current, if somewhat venerable, flagship carrier *HMS Ark Royal* and its Harrier aircraft; it will lose one helicopter carrier, one amphibious warfare ship, four old Type 22 frigates, two replenishment vessels and 5,000 people. While both carriers will be built, only the second, *HMS Prince of Wales*, will be initially completed as a fleet carrier and will only carry 12 JSF Joint Strike Fighter jets although equipped for 36. The first carrier to complete, *HMS Queen Elizabeth*, will commission for three years as a helicopter carrier, without fixed wing aircraft, and may even be sold off.

This sounds bad, but many expected it to have been worse. The Amphibious force has survived, albeit on a somewhat smaller scale, and the Royal Marines have fought off the threat of being taken over by the Army; the Type 45s destroyers will complete, and there will even be a seventh Astute class submarine; the Trident replacement programme, now underway, faces no more than a slight delay. From 2015, new frigates in the shape of the Type 26 Global Combat Ship, new tankers, landing ships and maritime helicopters will all be joining the fleet.

Both carriers will at least be built, and *Prince of Wales* will be upgraded for the operation of the much more capable conventional take-off variant of the F 35 Joint Strike Fighter. There is always the chance that the first carrier will be retro-fitted as a fleet carrier later on. Both of them, after all, are likely to serve until 2070! The fact that the British carrier will carry fewer fighter aircraft than it could is hardly surprising. Even the Americans cannot afford full deckloads for their carriers.

Impact on Asia and FPDA

These cuts can be seen as part of the slow drift of maritime power from West to East. It will certainly not be welcomed by the US Navy, which has looked on the Royal Navy as its principal ally for over 50 years. The loss of British support for the vertical take-off F35B JSF will be lamented by the US Marine Corps and may even kill off the programme. Curiously, though, it is in the issues that did not rate so many headlines that there will be concern about Britain's capacity to sustain its contribution to the Five Power Defence Agreement (FPDA) between Singapore, Malaysia, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

Although this commitment still has a high priority at ministerial level, the Afghanistan commitment has already meant that Britain has found it difficult to provide the warships and personnel for FPDA exercises and meetings that it would have liked to have done. The loss of half a dozen warships can only exacerbate that, although it is true that you can get far more work out of capable new vessels than from old ones that need constant maintenance. This is much less true of people, however, and the UK may find it more difficult than in the past to provide the augmentees needed to staff FPDA exercises on land and sea.

David Cameron, the British prime minister, is adamant that this programme of cuts will not diminish Britain's relative standing and general role in the world. But there is some doubt that this will prove to be the case.

Geoffrey Till is Visiting Professor in the Maritime Security Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University and Director of the Corbett Centre of King's College, London.