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Setting Priorities in the Age of Austerity

British, French, and German Experiences

Michael Shurkin

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Summary

This report describes how British, French, and German governments and militaries approach the challenge of cutting their defense budgets while preserving their armies' capabilities and maintaining high states of readiness. They are attempting to preserve as much of the spectrum of capabilities as possible by wringing as many efficiencies as they can out of their defense establishment, prioritizing some capabilities while letting others decline to what they assess to be the minimum level required. They are also rebalancing their force structure around new fleets of medium-weight, high-tech armored vehicles in an effort to find a "sweet spot" that will allow them to handle as much of the spectrum of conflict as possible. Finally, they are, to varying degrees, embracing tiered readiness or finding ways to provide graduated levels of readiness within a force generation cycle.

The British Army has been the most adversely effected by the Afghanistan mission and has also been subject to significant budget cuts. British planners believe the army has become too "bespoke" as a result of the particular requirements of the Afghanistan mission and want to restore the army's full spectrum of capabilities. They assess that the optimal way of accomplishing this would be to accept large cuts to the size of the force, embrace specialization by dividing the force into a medium-weight conventional force and a lighter force geared toward missions such as stabilization operations, and adopt a modified form of tiered readiness. They are also hoping to maximize the effectiveness of their reduced conventional forces by introducing a new family of medium-armored vehicles. These vehicles, however, will not enter into service in significant numbers for another decade because the program has been postponed, in part, as a result of the diversion of funds to the Afghanistan mission.

The French military is similarly dedicated to retaining full-spectrum capabilities. Less effected by the Afghanistan mission, the French army is well on its way toward a medium-weight force organized around two new families of high-tech, medium-armor vehicles, the first of which, an Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV), is entering service now, and the second of which, an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC), is still in development and on track to be procured soon. The French army has also made the most progress toward fielding what, in the United States, was called Future Combat Systems and is proceeding on schedule with further development and deployment. France has, for example, already fielded squad-level systems in Afghanistan that link individual soldiers to one another and to the new IFVs. France also has folded its heavy assets into two heavy cavalry brigades reserved for high-intensity maneuver warfare. Unlike the British planners, the French military is wary of the proposition that enhancements in quality brought about by technology can substitute for reduced force size. This suggests that, faced with having to make more cuts, the army would prefer to shed capabilities or opt for cheaper but less sophisticated systems for the sake of maintaining its size. It remains to be seen whether the

unfolding events in Mali will effect French planning in any way. A new *Livre Blanc* (White Book) laying out defense priorities for the next five years will reveal if the French intend to change their approach, however new cuts appear unlikely at least for the coming fiscal year.

The German military has been subject to significant cuts while attempting to reform itself into a more expeditionary force akin to the French military. The most important change to the German military has been the abandonment of conscription—with the last class of draftees entering the ranks this year. In addition, the German army is following the trend of embracing a medium-weight force built around new APCs and IFVs, believing that it provides the most “bang for the buck” and is the most capable of meeting a broad range of contingencies. The German army is retaining heavy forces, but it is reducing their size and marginalizing them. On paper, the resulting force resembles the French army. However, available evidence suggests that, due to cultural and other factors, including the legal framework in which the military operates, Germany’s commitment to the combined-arms maneuver warfare end of the capability spectrum is the weakest of the three militaries discussed in this report. It is instead sliding toward a focus on stability operations while the French try to dig into a middle ground.