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BM-grade update
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UK BUDGET DEBATE ALAN DRON LONDON

Cuts for now – or forever?

Filling a £37bn black hole in planned but unfunded purchases may spell doom for some Royal Air Force capabilities

UK defence secretary Liam Fox's recent speech on the vexed question of his ministry's grievously overstretched budget raised as many questions as it answered.

He indicated, for example, that the looming reductions in defence spending would be "short term", raising the possibility that funding levels may rise again after the UK's financial crisis has been dealt with some years down the line. But he also ruled out the traditional "salamislicing" approach to budget-cutting, instead suggesting the Ministry of Defence will divest itself of military capabilities unlikely to be required by the end of the current decade – but gave no indication what might be ditched.

Fox said neither he nor Prime Minister David Cameron had entered government wishing to oversee a cut in the defence budget. Indeed, both had previously argued there was a strong case for actually increasing the amount spent on national security.

However, in his 13 August address to the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, Fox made clear that the £37 billion (\$54 billion) "black hole" of planned but unfunded purchases built up under the previous administration meant that cuts were inevitable.

IRRESPONSIBILITY

He said: "During their time in office Labour pushed projects ever more desperately into future years to try to make an impossible budget balance in year, only to increase the overall cost of the defence programme still further.

"The price of this irresponsibility will ultimately be paid for by short-term reductions as we try to return defence to a sound footing."

Defence analysts think it unlikely that there will be permanent jettisoning of capabilities from the UK Royal Air Force's portfolio.



The entire Panavia Tornado GR4 strike aircraft fleet could be axed

They do, however, think that those capabilities may be reduced to very low levels.

"The trick is to keep enough 'seed corn' so that when the better times come, you can regenerate," says Andrew Brookes, director of The Air League, which promotes the cause of aviation in the UK.

ADS, the UK's aerospace and defence industry umbrella group, widely welcomes Fox's comments. However, chief executive Rees Ward cautions: "Maintaining the medium-term capabilities required to address emerging threats will require the sustainment if not enhancement of the small percentage of the defence budget earmarked for investment in research and technology."

Trevor Taylor, professorial research fellow in defence management at the Royal United Services Institute, concurs: "I think what they're looking for are areas where they can minimise the capability so they can rebuild it if necessary." This could mean sharing specific capabilities with France or another European nation in the short term, he suggests.

Rumours have abounded that complete fleets of aircraft may be disposed of, with the Panavia

Tornado GR4 strike aircraft and BAE Systems Harrier GR9 held up as candidates.

Brookes points out there is no immediately available replacement for the Tornado: "You can argue that once the Joint Strike Fighter comes in, you can do all manner of things, but it's not around yet, so you might lose capability for some time."

Taylor adds that the UK originally planned to buy 138 of the Lockheed Martin F-35 JSFs, but at a time when the aircraft's predicted cost was much lower than today. "I would be very surprised if the UK bought the number it originally said it would," he says.

Buying a radically smaller number would potentially affect plans for the full complement of JSFs on its two new Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers, but Taylor strongly suspects that the second carrier will fall victim to budget cuts.

He adds that the service is facing a culturally difficult period. "The great value of the RAF at the moment is in providing services that it has never seen as particularly glamorous, but there's no doubt the air transport – and particularly the helicopter operations

and work the [Boeing] Chinook is doing in Afghanistan – are really very important. The air force is also facing up to the reality that in the medium term the significance of the combat pilot is likely to diminish with the appearance of UAVs and UCAVs."

However, Brookes does think there may be a risk of some capabilities disappearing by default.

MARITIME PATROL

One of the most obvious cases is maritime patrol. The last BAE Systems Nimrod MR2 was withdrawn from service earlier than anticipated this year as a money-saving exercise and the latest MoD-mandated delay to the replacement MRA4 variant means that it will not reach initial operational capability until October 2012. This means the UK has no maritime patrol capability, notwithstanding the use of the Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules as a rudimentary patroller.

"With each passing month, some Treasury person might say: 'You've done without it so far – do you actually need [a maritime patrol capability]?'"

Both acknowledge that funding for all the UK's armed forces will take a further major hit if the Treasury continues to insist that the £20 billion cost of replacing the Vanguard nuclear deterrent submarines has to come out of the MoD's budget, rather than central funds, as has always previously been the case with the UK's nuclear forces.

This, says Brookes, raises the question of "How much is enough?" when it comes to deterrence. "There's no Soviet Union any more. You're holding this [capability] presumably against a failed state or a marauding group of terrorists. If you need the bare minimum to deter, maybe you don't need those submarines." An air-delivered deterrent would be much cheaper, he suggests. ■