Congressional shake-up; UK military austerity; Super Saudi Air Force...

THE NEW LINEUP

The November elections swept out the Democratic leadership on the House Armed Services Committee and will lead to new leadership in the lower body’s appropriations committee. The top four Democrats on the HASC—in rank order, Chairman Ike Skelton (Mo.), John M. Spratt Jr. (S.C.), Solomon P. Ortiz (Tex.), and Gene Taylor (Miss.)—all lost their seats, although in mid-November Ortiz had requested a recount in his district’s close election.

A Republican House majority with the Senate under Democratic control forecasts highly contentious House-Senate budget conferences for the 112th Congress. The new Congress convenes in January.

Top-ranking HASC Republican Howard P. McKeon (Calif.) won his bid for re-election and announced he would seek the chairmanship of the committee in the new Congress. Second-ranked Republican Roscoe G. Bartlett (Md.) also retained his seat.

Despite the leadership losses on the Democratic side, however, the congressional panels that oversee defense spending otherwise won’t see radical membership changes.

On the House Appropriations Committee, the chairmanship is likely to be taken up by re-elected Rep. Jerry Lewis (Calif.). The senior Republican, Bill Young (Fla.), also held his seat. Current chair of the defense panel Norman Dicks (D-Wash.) was re-elected but will become the ranking HAC Democrat now that the House is in Republican hands. Young will likely lead the House defense appropriations subcommittee.

Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee will remain Carl Levin (D-Mich.), who was not up for re-election. John McCain (R-Ariz.) retained his seat and will remain the senior Republican on the SASC. Other returning SASC Republicans include Richard Burr (N.C.), John Thune (S.D.), and David Vitter (La.).

Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) prevailed in his election and will retain the Senate Appropriations-Defense panel chair, joined by re-elected members Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), Barbara A. Mikulski (D-Md.), and Richard C. Shelby (R-Ala.).

THE SUN SETS

Britain’s new defense white paper signals big changes in that nation’s military posture, calling for deep cuts in the armed forces and pushing the nation further away from an ability to take unilateral military action.

The document, released in October, is the new Conservative government’s take on Britain’s military role in the world, and is highly critical of the Labor government’s handling of defense matters going back to the election of Tony Blair. It bears the signature of David Cameron, new Prime Minister, and Nick Clegg, his deputy, and calls for an across-the-board cut of about nine percent from Britain’s defense spending.

Britain’s armed forces “have been overstretched, deployed too often without appropriate planning, with the wrong equipment, in the wrong numbers, and without a clear strategy,” Cameron wrote, adding there was a “fundamental mismatch between aspiration and resources.” The previous government, he charged, failed to “face up to the new security realities of the post-Cold War world.”

The cuts are in some ways puzzling, as Britain will finish buying two new aircraft carriers but fail to equip them with aircraft for a decade. Whole classes of aircraft, such as the RAF Harrier, will be eliminated. The Nimrod aircraft is terminated, leaving Britain’s nuclear submarines undefended as they leave port for deep water, and the size of the Army will be sharply reduced.

Significantly, Britain has opted not to buy the F-35B short takeoff and vertical landing version of the Joint Strike Fighter, of which it had planned to buy 138. It was to have fielded the second largest F-35B fleet after the US Marine Corps, and its participation was one of the major justifications for developing the STOVL aircraft. Instead, the UK will buy only the F-35C catapult-capable “Navy” version for use on standard aircraft carriers. Cameron said the shift will save about 25 percent in operating costs while giving the UK an aircraft with greater range and payload.

Britain will continue to make a priority of supporting current operations in Afghanistan, and pledged to stay in the fight, “committed to succeeding,” and applying “extra resources” there as necessary, Cameron wrote.

Cameron, criticizing the Labor government, said, “The difficult legacy we have inherited has necessitated tough decisions to get our economy back on track,” and that military security is bound up with economic security.

However, although the cuts are in many cases draconian, Britain will still have the fourth largest military budget in the world and will meet its NATO target of spending two percent of GDP on its military.

The Pentagon’s press secretary, Geoffrey S. Morrell, issued a response to the white paper, saying it undertakes the necessary task of “setting priorities and making choices during tough fiscal times.”

Morrell praised the valor of British troops in Afghanistan and said the US is pleased the UK plans to “maintain its historical role as a leading nation that shapes global security,” especially...
its continued commitment to the two percent NATO target and maintenance of its independent nuclear deterrent.

The UK will completely withdraw its Army units from Germany, and reduce its heavy armor and artillery, mothballing the gear to “regenerate those capabilities if need be.” To make the Army more “mobile and more flexible,” it will acquire more airlift aircraft, both fixed-wing and rotary. Britain will be able to deploy just one brigade worldwide, but be able to “sustain it indefinitely.” The British Army will pare 7,000 troops by 2015.

There will also be a study of how other countries organize reserves “and see what lessons we might usefully apply.” The US derives high value from reserve forces, which it can maintain at a fraction of the cost of active duty forces.

The Ministry of Defense will lose 25,000 civilian employees under Cameron’s restructuring.

The Royal Air Force will neck down to two types of combat aircraft; at the high end will be a “modernized” Eurofighter Typhoon able to do both air-to-air and ground attack missions, supplemented by Lockheed Martin F-35Cs and “a growing fleet” of unmanned aircraft for both attack and reconnaissance. They will be extended by a tanker version of the Airbus A330, which the white paper described as “the most modern air-to-air refueling aircraft.” Older C-130 tactical transports will be retired 10 years early—they will have fewer troops to move—but a smaller number of new, larger Airbus A400Ms will be bought, supplemented by C-17s already in the UK inventory. The RAF will shrink by 5,000 billets in the next five years.

Although the UK will complete the two carriers now being built, they won’t be equipped with “ski jumps,” which were necessary for the Harriers and F-35Bs. And while in the long term, Cameron wrote that Britain needs the ability to deploy carriers in order to “deploy airpower from anywhere in the world;” he sees no “short-term” circumstances that would require Britain to actually use one; thus the purchase of the F-35C will be delayed. The advantage of a conventional carrier, he said, is that it will be able to operate “in tandem with the US and French Navies, and for American and French aircraft to operate from our carrier and vice versa.” The Royal Navy will lose 5,000 sailors by 2015. The Royal Marine brigade will be retained with an “effective amphibious capability.”

Britain’s nuclear submarine fleet will be retained, but with fewer nuclear weapons, reducing the missile tubes in each from 12 to eight, and the warheads from 48 to 40, “in line with our commitment [to] vigorously ... pursue multilateral global disarmament.” The Royal Navy’s Type 45 destroyers—which Cameron described as too expensive—will be completed, but a program will be started to design cheaper ships better suited to anti-piracy, anti-drug trafficking, and counterterrorism.

In explaining the changes, Cameron said the UK will still be able to “punch above its weight in the world” and will continue to be “an absolutely front-rank military power.”

You Get What You Pay For

Under an arms deal announced in October, Saudi Arabia will build an air force comparable in many ways to that of the US Air Force.

The deal, valued at more than $58 billion, would be the largest arms sale ever, if Congress approves. The deal calls for the US to supply the Royal Saudi Air Force with 84 new F-15SA (for Saudi Advanced) fighters, and upgrade 70 of the F-15S aircraft the nation already has to the same configuration.

Accessories sold separately include an impressive array of air-to-air missiles (the AIM-9X and AIM-120 C7, the same as USAF), more than 17,000 bombs—many of which are satellite- and/or infrared-guided—plus top-of-the-line radars, helmet-mounted cueing systems, infrared search-and-track systems, night attack targeting pods and night vision goggles.

Along with other gear, the package will make RSAF’s F-15s as good as those USAF itself hopes to field by the middle of this decade. The difference will be that most of Saudi Arabia’s F-15s will be factory-fresh, while USAF models will all be about 30 years old.

The sale also included AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, UH-60 Black Hawk utility choppers, and a number of light scout and trainer helicopters.

The Saudi air superiority force, by the time the sale is completed, will number 154 of the most advanced F-15s in the world, complementing 72 Eurofighter Typhoons now being delivered, for a total of 226 top-line fighters. These are augmented by five AWACS aircraft. The Typhoon is by some measures second only to the F-22 in all-around capability. The Saudis will also have all the bells and whistles on their Typhoons, to include AIM-132 ASRAAM missiles comparable to the AIM-9X Sidewinder, and Storm Shadow cruise missiles comparable to the American Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile, or JASSM.

The level of Saudi air superiority capability will be significant indeed. The US totals are a useful point of reference: In USAF service there will be 178 refurbished F-15s of comparable capability with the Air National Guard, plus 186 F-22s, for a total of 364 dedicated air superiority machines. The Saudi F-15s can also conduct ground attack missions like USAF’s F-15E.

In addition to its Eagles and Typhoons, the Saudis have some 90 Tornado IDS (interdiction/strike) aircraft, which are receiving upgrades to keep them capable through 2020, and about 50 Hawk trainers that can swing to a ground attack role at need.

Andrew J. Shapiro, assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs, said the sale was meant to “send a strong message to countries in the region” that the US is committed to its Middle East allies. The deal will help Saudi Arabia “defend against threats to its borders and to its oil infrastructure, which is critical to our economic interests.”

Asked if the sale was meant specifically to deter Iran, Shapiro said the Saudis “live in a dangerous neighborhood,” and the US is helping that country defend itself against “legitimate security threats.”

“It’s not solely about Iran,” Shapiro said.

Two members of Congress—Rep. Howard L. Berman (D-Calif.) and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.)—have raised questions about the sale, but not outright objection. In a letter to Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, the two wrote there could be significant repercussions for other US allies in the region “in the event of political change in Saudi Arabia,” akin to an Iran-like Islamist revolution. They also questioned whether the sale would undermine Israel’s qualitative edge over neighboring countries that haven’t recognized its right to exist.