

U.K., U.S. Look To Preserve Capabilities - U.S. Navy Chief Hints at Integrated Carrier Ops : A Defense News report on Mar. 30, 2013 by MARCUS WEISGERBER

WASHINGTON — The American and British militaries are examining ways to preserve critical warfighting capabilities honed over the past decade of fighting side-by-side in Afghanistan and Iraq, as combat operations wind down and defense spending declines on both sides of the Atlantic.

One U.S. service chief, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jon Greenert, even hinted that the British and Americans could share geographical presence requirements, with U.S. and British ships trading off in a rotation, but he cautioned that such an agreement would be "unprecedented" and require long-term, ironclad commitments.

Over a dinner and an all-day conference, the uniformed leadership from both nations discussed strategic priorities and how each country could sustain the level of interoperability U.S. and British forces have achieved over the past 12 years of close coordination through two wars and numerous training events. They also want to apply operational lessons learned to the threats facing each nation, according to a source familiar with the talks.

Officials from both countries called the end of combat operations in Afghanistan an "inflection point."

"We charted a course to ensure that they remain our strongest partner," said Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, during a briefing Thursday at the Pentagon.

The military leaders discussed the British plan to "further integrate into Europe"; the U.S. military strategy to emphasize engagement in the Asia-Pacific region; and the economic challenges facing each nation, Dempsey said.

Beyond that, the substance of the talks remained a closely held secret. But this much was abundantly clear: The two countries will remain the closest of allies and recognize they will be fighting side by side on some future battlefield before long, the source said.

Gen. Sir David Richards, chief of Britain's Defence Staff, said in a statement Thursday: "We will build on these talks to ensure we're properly structured to cooperate bilaterally, in coalition with others and as part of NATO with our closest military ally."

It was the first meeting of all the military leaders from the U.S. and U.K. since 1948. The chiefs dined together Tuesday and spent Wednesday at National Defense University in Washington for the strategic discussions. They even posed for a photo on the top floor of Roosevelt Hall, the same room that hosted a 1942 meeting of the so-called Combined Chiefs of Staff.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel stopped by the meetings, albeit briefly. "I would say that he [Dempsey] allowed me to come over, but only allowed me to spend 15 minutes," Hagel said with a chuckle at Thursday's briefing.

Dempsey said he intends submit a report about the talks to Hagel.

The meetings of the military leaders pave the way for British Defence Secretary Philip Hammond's visit to the United States this year. Former U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta met with Hammond and British Prime Minister David Cameron in January.

The defense chiefs from both countries discussed a range of threats facing each nation, including nation-states, terrorism and piracy, a source said. They also talked about ways to maintain war-fighting capabilities despite budget cuts.

The U.S. is preparing to cut \$41 billion from its 2013 budget over the next six months and faces additional cuts to future spending.

British officials — who, despite a much smaller total defense budget, have faced steep percentage cuts in defense spending — stressed to their U.S. counterparts the need to make careful, calculated decisions during this process, the source said.

British officials told their American counterparts that reform is scary business, but worth the risk to deliver greater capability for given resources by fundamentally changing how to do business.

Asked what he hoped to learn from his Royal Navy counterpart when it comes to budget cutting, Greenert, during an interview Wednesday with Defense News and its sister paper, Navy Times, said: "Keeping your eyes on your core competencies is very important."

Part of that future cooperation could include divvying up assets to meet joint requirements, he said.

The Royal Navy is building two aircraft carriers from which F-35B joint strike fighters will operate. The stealthy jets will also be flown by the U.S. military.

British pilots will jointly train with their U.S. counterparts, Greenert said, hinting at future coordination of carrier deployments.

"Where would you expect to employ the Queen Elizabeth class?" Greenert asked hypothetically, referring to Britain's newest carrier, which is still under construction. "In the [Mediterranean]? In and around the North Sea? Do you plan to go to the [Arabian] Gulf? Is it feasible that we would be able to then set on a combined global force management in our future? Topics like that, pretty rudimentary at first, but we have to see what are the big-picture items here."

The Global Force Management System is the U.S. process by which geographical combatant commanders provide a list of requirements to the Joint Chiefs chairman once per year. Those requirements are then used to determine where troops, ships and aircraft are sent.

When asked whether that means a British carrier could assume the rotation of a U.S. carrier, Greenert said that is "pretty speculative."

"[I]t would be unprecedented that two nations could bring together such a far-reaching strategic commitment for so many years ahead," he said. "Because as you well know, these things take years to prepare, and once you are in, [and] you make a decision, there is no turning back. So it is feasible, but it would be totally unprecedented."

Vago Muradian contributed to this report.