CHAPTER VI
THE 'GLOBALIST FRINGE'

The post-War British foreign policy, as conceived by Winston Churchill, was to be centered around what was called 'the three overlapping circles' - the Commonwealth, the Atlantic Community and Europe. Each was important in its own ways for Britain. It was perceived that only by sustaining and nurturing British interests in all these three circles would all her foreign and defence policy interests be addressed. Implicit in this identification of the areas of interest was the recognition that all these areas were equally important and that developments in none of the three circles would ever force Britain to choose one and discard the other.

By stating at the end of the War that her interests still stretched across all these 'overlapping circles' Britain was only reasserting an obvious fact that as far as Britain's foreign and defence policy interests were concerned, nothing much had changed after the War, that she still had global interests and that she remained a global power to be reckoned with. As F.S. Northedge observed, "Britain's retention of her sovereignty during the Second World War while most European states lost theirs, either in its course or immediately after its end fostered the illusion that Britain was still free to shape the world closer to her heart's desire." What the world witnessed for another quarter of a century after the War was British efforts to pursue a strategy in conformity with this thinking.

However, the global political and economic environment had changed drastically at the end of the War. And so did, in many ways, British capability to play a global role. Having already lost many of her important colonies, and considerably weakened economically, Britain was no longer the unquestioned imperial power nor the economic superpower she used to be. Still, at the end of the War, the need to play a global role was reinforced by the perceived new threat emerging from Communism. Britain thus found herself in an unenviable position of having to play a 'world-power' role without the

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necessary means to live up to that. As Walter Lippmann observed, in 1943, a policy could be taken to have been formed “only when commitments and power have been brought into balance.” In the case of Britain, however, this matching of commitments with capability was not an easy task. Whereas the unwieldy commitments were the baggage of history the capability had to do more with the post-War and the post-colonial reality which could not simply be wished away by mere posturing.

Added to this was the problem of having to address the growing expectations of the people both about the need for giving a welfare orientation to the State and on the importance of Britain continuing to play a great power role. The British people were not yet ready to accept a reduced role for Britain in managing world affairs. As Northedge commented, “It has been characteristic of thought in Britain about foreign policy since the Second World War that, on the one hand most people have unquestioningly accepted the premise that Britain should continue to rank as a world power of the first order, and on the other, that the same people have insisted that living standards should go on rising and spending on social services should be shielded to the utmost against inroads made by taxation on behalf of the financing of foreign policy commitments.”

And having failed to evolve a realistic policy which reconciled commitments with capability, ultimately, pushed Britain to a situation of having to do too much with too little. However, all along, the political class, the policy makers and the military planners were aware that sooner or later Britain would have to address this contradiction.

Initially this was sought to be achieved by entangling Britain into a military alliance with the rest of Western Europe and the United States in the form of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Within this alliance also Britain succeeded in cultivating a very close and special relationship with the United States who for all practical considerations had come to occupy the center-stage of world politics with the necessary capability to play such a role. It was perceived that this arrangement, while safeguarding British interests in Europe, especially her territorial integrity, with the full backing of the United States’ military might, would leave sufficient room for her to divert attention to her interests elsewhere. Considering the nature and extent of the

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3 Cited in, Ibid., p.37.
4 Ibid.
threat faced in Europe from the Communist bloc, this arrangement definitely worked for Britain since the end of the War.

Britain's status as one of the Big Five in the United Nations, as one of the leading nuclear powers, and her special relationship with the United States helped in camouflaging the extent of the gap between her capability and commitment in the early decades following the War. However, viewed from the angle of the nature and extent of British interests and commitments elsewhere in the world, the space for independent action this provided for sustaining these interests was still not enough.

The most consistent feature of defence policy planning since the end of the War, except for the period of the Korean rearmament of the early 1950s, has, therefore, been a progressive reduction in the defence commitments and, to some extent, in the allocation to defence and attempts to cover up the gap by laying increasing emphasis on the Atlantic Alliance, especially on the special relationship with the United States, as also on other regional arrangements Britain had made in the post-War years. This considerably reduced the scope for independent British action in pursuit of exclusive British interests, provoking many to conclude that Britain had 'retreated to Europe', that the 'British power has collapsed' that the chief characteristic of post-War British defence policy has been one of 'the long recessional', etc. This is attributed to the consistent economic decline Britain had experienced since the end of the War. Those who have come to this conclusion have produced persuasive evidence to support their case. According to them the progressively reduced level of manpower and equipment, the less dispersed deployment of British forces; and the reduced allocation of resources to defence give enough proof for this.

The three million strong British armed forces in 1947 was reduced to around 320,000 by 1985. Similar cut was effected in the size of the military equipments available to the forces also. Several important projects, at different stages of development, had to be cancelled during the 1950s and the 1960s for want of resources to sustain them.

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According to Michael Howard, 32 major projects had been cancelled by 1967 at a cost of around 500 million pounds.⁶

Even these attempts to play around with the budgetary allocations for defence, shifting and changing priorities over a period of nearly a quarter century, did not address the fundamental problem of overstretch. Moreover by the late 1960s, Britain had come to experience unmanageable economic difficulties resulting into a major balance of payments crisis which in turn led to the devaluation of the Pound in November 1967. Contraction of material and physical capabilities was a reality which could be effectively addressed only through a corresponding scaling down of the commitments across the world.

This was sought to be achieved through the major Defence Reviews of 1967 and 1968 initiated by the Labour Government, headed by Harold Wilson.⁷ The basic objective of the review was to progressively scale down British commitments East of Suez and thereby have a deployment policy compatible with her capabilities. Soon after assuming power, the Labour government had come to the conclusion that an unjustifiably large proportion of the national income was being devoted to defence. The 1965 White Paper on defence had stated, "...Britain was steadily raising the percentage of her national income devoted to defence at a time when Russia and the United States were reducing theirs."⁸ The focus of the government, therefore, was to correct this imbalance. With this end in view, to start with, it was announced in 1966, that Britain would not undertake any major military operation outside Europe except in cooperation with its allies and if and when such a crisis emerged necessitating British intervention by force, it was to be accomplished by sending forces stationed in Britain itself.⁹

Again, on 16 January 1968, announcing the government's decision to go for a radical review of all aspects of public policy and government's spending, Prime

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Minister Wilson declared his intention to effect substantial cut on excessive ‘demands at home’ and ‘reassessing Britain’s role in the world’ and ‘realistically limiting her commitments and outgoings to her true capacities’. The Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy issued in July 1968 revealed the details of the government’s proposals for changes in Britain’s force deployments outside Europe and the Mediterranean.

The 1968 Defence Review had brought about radical changes in Britain’s global defence policy and commitments. The objective of the review was stated to be the matching of capability with commitments. The Statement on Defence Estimate stated this very clearly when it said: “...reductions in capability whether in terms of manpower or equipment, must be accompanied by reductions in the tasks imposed by the commitments ...” The Review was the result of a serious reassessment of Britain’s role in the world, in the context of the changes that had taken place in the world since the end of the war as also the limitations Britain experienced in continuing to play a global role. Among the decisions announced by the government in the Review was: to retain a general capability based in Europe, including in the United Kingdom, which can be deployed overseas when circumstances demanded, especially to support the United Nation’s operations, as need arose.

The focus of the British government thereafter was to be on the economic recovery of Britain and the British diplomacy was to be oriented towards this objective. Subsequently, in August 1969, the government appointed a Committee, under the Chairmanship of Sir Val Duncan, to review Britain’s overseas representation in the context of the changes in policy effected by the defence review. The Duncan Committee’s Report was an eye-opener to Britain’s global outlook for the future. This Committee, in its effort to streamline the functioning of the British diplomatic service proposed the division of the areas of British diplomatic interests into two categories, viz; ‘the Area of Concentration of British Diplomacy’ and the ‘rest of the world’. The first category was to consist of about a dozen or so developed countries in Western Europe.

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12 Ibid., para. 3, pp.2-3 (emphasis added).
plus North America and Australia and Japan and the second category covered all other countries.\textsuperscript{14} The Committee also perceived that a more ‘wide-ranging and more intensive new kind of diplomacy’\textsuperscript{15} would evolve to manage the relationship between nations, particularly, in the case of those belonging to the countries of the Area of Concentration.

It was also recognized that “there is a high probability that a considerably high proportion of the world’s trade will take place in the Area of Concentration and that an increasing number of policy decisions on commercial and broader economic issues will be taken in concert by these nations. There is likely to be a similar trend in the management of monetary and social questions. It is more difficult to foresee how far the development of multilateral diplomacy in international organizations like the European Economic Community, EFTA or even NATO will carry these countries towards the adoption of common external policies towards the rest of the world.”\textsuperscript{16}

According to the Report, the two central commitments of British foreign policy that have emerged at the end of the period of decolonisation in the late 1960s was first “the commitment to an increasingly integrated Western Europe on as wide a basis as possible, with the European Common Market as its core, and secondly the commitment to a North Atlantic Alliance under US leadership as the main instrument for the conduct of East-West relations…”\textsuperscript{17} The Report also clarified that the application of the \textit{new diplomacy} was not confined to any geographical limitations, thereby keeping the option of extending it to other areas, including the Soviet bloc, as and when the conditions acceptable to the West emerged there, meaning thereby that British foreign policy for the future was to be pursued on the basis of certain identified common political and economic interests between the countries involved.\textsuperscript{18}

The Report also pointed to yet another important aspect of British external policy and that was the rationale for sustaining British interests in areas outside

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.13.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
There are issues outside Europe which will continue to matter to the nation. We shall continue to be concerned in the welfare of the Commonwealth and to be directly involved in the efforts of the new members to achieve economic take-off. There will also be the actual responsibility of government in a number of Dependent Territories scattered around the world. Our interests in the countries bordering the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf as well as Africa will not cease in the 1970s – nor is it likely that it will be reduced to the low level of priority that it has had in the Foreign Ministries of most continental European nations. . . . It is not unreasonable to anticipate that the European nations will sooner or later, and hopefully in concert, return to a more active diplomacy in these regions and further afield. . . . These areas contain a high proportion of the world’s population; their capacity to produce is growing fast; and their capacity for engendering problems for the rest of the world is unlikely to diminish... we should not be guided entirely by the evidence of unconcern with extra-European problems which has been characteristic of most continental European countries in recent years.19

The Committee identified three main priority areas for the future British governments to focus upon: the improvement of the balance of payments, the maintenance of the North Atlantic Alliance and the promotion of integration in Western Europe. Added to these were the reduction of East-West tension, the sustaining of the Commonwealth links, responsibilities for the Dependent Territories, support for the economic development of the less developed countries and the strengthening of international organizations.20 A cursory reading of the recommendations of the Committee would reveal that even a quarter century since the end of the War and after losing all her important colonies, British perception about her global foreign policy interests had not changed radically. These, indeed, were the actual focus of the British foreign and defence policies since the end of the War. A logical question that would arise here then is: what is the meaning and significance of the much publicized British withdrawal from the East of Suez?

One possible interpretation is that it was only a political strategy intended to

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19 Ibid., pp.14-15 (emphasis added).
20 Ibid., p.15.
balance the economic pressures at home and to address the pressing crises on that front. As Andrew Shonfield, one of the members of the Duncan Committee, puts it, "The 1968 decision (to withdraw from East of Suez) was an important act in the general European withdrawal from the exercise of direct power over the political affairs of nations outside Europe."21 Britain came to this conclusion on the basis of certain well-conceived assumptions about the course of politics in the two categories of countries, 'the Area of Concentration' and the 'rest of the world' that the Duncan Committee identified for the purposes of focusing British foreign policy for the future.

This conclusion was arrived at after realistically assessing the socio-political, economic and the military-strategic situation across the world. According to this assessment:

What seems to be in process is [as in 1969-70] a reversal of international styles. Whereas international relations were for more than a century characterized by the rule that the main conflicts occurred at the European center, where the Great Powers faced each other directly, it seems likely in future that this central region will be an area of peace while violent conflict, both inside states and between states, tends to increase sharply in the erstwhile peaceful regions of Asia and Africa [the so called, 'rest of the world']... Meanwhile, the advanced industrial nations of the West European/North Atlantic area, a dozen or so states [including Australia and Japan] which are much the richest in the world, have been developing increasingly effective techniques of collaboration with one another over a wide range of public affairs, and all the signs are that this range will be further extended.22

It was further assumed that the nations in the area of concentration "will never again use war with one another as a means of achieving any end that they may have in view. Moreover, since these nations have very similar political institutions and social structures, share a number of assumptions about the appropriate way of conducting the business of states, and also have a number of political objectives in common, the scope for joint action in many spheres of

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22 Ibid., pp.247-248.
activity which have hitherto been regarded as the private domestic affairs of states, is very large.”

The content and direction of Britain’s foreign and defence policies (not necessarily limited to the post 1968-71 period) can be discerned from these assumptions which had formed the basis of the conclusions that the Duncan Committee had arrived at. As claimed by Shonfield above, the decision to withdraw from East of Suez was part of a strategy to desist from ‘the exercise of direct power over the political affairs of nations outside Europe,’ with all the attendant risks and the responsibility of having to address whole lot of seemingly unmanageable internal local problems there, but at the same time keeping alive the perceived British interests there intact.

At no stage did Britain state that it was renouncing all her interests in areas from where she was withdrawing her forces. On the contrary, it proposed a different kind of prioritizing with economic interests being projected as primary interests and increased cooperation with the industrially advanced countries of the area of concentration coming as a natural corollary to this. It is equally important to note that while deciding to withdraw from areas East of Suez, Britain also recognized that there are a large number of political objectives in common (between the countries in the identified area of concentration), and therefore, logically, it was expected that ‘the scope for joint action in many spheres of activity which have hitherto been regarded as the private domestic affairs of States’ will also be ‘very large’. The teeming up of these countries in the management of global economic issues, including in the activities of the international financial institutions, on environmental matters, on issues relating to the political aspects of Human Rights and on major political issues before the United Nations, go to prove the validity of British expectations while deciding to withdraw from East of Suez.

The observations in the Report go to prove that with withdrawal Britain was not abandoning her interests in those areas, but instead, it was more of a tactical move.

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23 Ibid., p.248.
to escape the economic fallouts of decolonisation and of the long physical military presence in those areas. This was explicitly stated by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, George Brown, in the House of Commons, on 24 January 1968:

It does not follow that by withdrawing our military presence in the Middle East we are thereby withdrawing all our influence. There are other ways in which we can contribute to the stability and prosperity in the area.

We have many and deep seated links... which bind us and the Middle East together and they do not depend on the presence of our military forces. Increasingly in other ways, by trade, by aid, by cultural activities, our presence will be felt, and I believe, felt even more strongly...

The logical consequence of the defence cuts is certainly not a retreat into a Little Englander role. We are not withdrawing into a selfish isolation. Much more, we see that our contribution to the development and prosperity of other continents is geared to what we can afford to do and that from the base of economic strength which we must create in this country we can then exert an influence for good, worldwide.

While conceding that Britain still has an important role to play in the world, the Foreign Secretary stated that that role could be played even without military bases all over the world. According to him, "there can be a British presence without a military presence. There can be a British influence without British Armies on the spot. Our aim must be to exert a world influence through the UN, through the Atlantic Alliance and, in the future, with and through a United Europe."

From the initiatives Britain took to make alternative local collective security arrangements between countries in the region, reinforced by the presence of other English-speaking countries like Australia and New Zealand in them and the transfer of responsibility, in certain cases like Diego Garcia, the Gulf, the Philippines, etc. to the United States, the continued British interests in these areas become apparent. In 1970 Britain had committed herself to help in the formation of a four-power security arrangement involving Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore specifically.

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for the defence of the Malaysia-Singapore region. At a five-power Conference of these countries and Britain, held in Canberra in June 1969, Australia and New Zealand undertook to maintain operational forces of all the three Services in the area even after the formal British withdrawal was effected in 1971. Britain, on her part, committed herself to assist in imparting the required training for the forces deployed by the other countries.

Another significant point to be noted is that on the issue of withdrawal from East of Suez, there was no bi-partisan consensus between the major political Parties within Britain. While the ruling Labour Party was convinced of the propriety of the course they were adopting, mainly for economic reasons, the Opposition Conservatives were equally convinced of the fallacy of the government’s case.

The Conservative Party was totally opposed to the decision to withdraw British forces from East of Suez. Soon after the decision to withdraw was announced, the Conservative Party leader and the Leader of the Opposition, Edward Heath, announced that if his Party was returned to power, it would reverse the policy adopted by the Labour Government and send the British forces back to the areas from which they were being withdrawn. The Party also produced strong economic and strategic reasons for the continued British presence East of Suez. According to Heath: "... the question to be faced is whether the rulers with their small population in Qatar, Bahrain and the Trucial states have the people to train and to defend themselves. They have the wealth, but it is their wealth which makes them more vulnerable. Who will influence them in the conduct of their foreign affairs now that Her Majesty's Ministers are withdrawing." Heath also emphasised that Britain's economic interests in those areas were immense. He further added: "We have £200m of foreign exchange income, and in that area there is more than 60 per cent of the world's oil reserves... ." Extending the argument to the strategic front, he

28 The Times (London), 6 March 1968.
30 Ibid., Col.246.
said: "There are vital British and Commonwealth interests in Malaysia and Singapore. There are vital British and European interests in the Gulf. There are vital British European and North Atlantic interests... in the sea-routes round the Cape....but they [the government] are no longer prepared to sustain them." 31

The government, however, defended its decision stating that it was not renouncing Britain’s interests in those areas, but instead such interests were to be sustained and defended, if need arose, with the help of “modern and powerful forces, powerfully equipped, based in Europe.” This was expected to give Britain “a capability, which ... can be used anywhere in the world as we may determine.” 32 Heath also contended that the proposal to have a UK-based arrangement to extend military assistance to these countries in times of need is unworkable and it lacked credibility both with the countries intended to be assisted as also with the potential adversaries. He said, “when we had a presence in the Far East and the Gulf our general capability to reinforce was credible, because people believed we would do it.” 33

The fears expressed by the Conservative Party and the assertions made by the Government to the effect that withdrawal of British forces from East of Suez did not amount to a renunciation of British interests in those areas go to prove that the decision to withdraw was more of a tactical move to come out of the economic crisis, particularly on the balance of payment front. The government was as much aware of the vital economic and strategic interests Britain had in the regions from where Britain was planning to withdraw. British planners earnestly hoped that these interests would continue to be sustained, even without their physical presence but with the help of modern forces, other friendly powers in Europe and in the North Atlantic as also by pursuing a proactive policy vis-à-vis the countries of the region from where Britain was withdrawing.

31 Ibid., Col. 239-240.
33 UK, Commons, n.29, Col.241.
The Labour government while deciding to withdraw its forces from areas East of Suez, in fact, actually believed that fixed bases in Asia and Africa were of declining military utility and involved increasing political costs.\(^{34}\) Whereas the presence of British troops in many parts of the world, before the Second World War and in the years immediately following the War, was seen as a stabilizing factor, by the late 1960s, it had begun to be seen as an irritant with a potential destabilizing effect by many.\(^{35}\) Moreover, it was established eventually that twentieth century's colonialism itself was a drain, rather than a gain, on the British economy.\(^{36}\) It was also perceived, by the late 1960s, that the political and economic objectives served by military presence could be secured even without actual physical presence, taking advantage of the developments in the military technology by then.\(^{37}\) Philip Darby also claimed that the argument that military presence should be maintained to safeguard economic interests did not make much economic or military sense and, therefore, should have been 'laid to rest' long back.\(^{38}\)

The Conservative Party, however, was not ready for the gamble. True to its pronouncements, on returning to power, in June 1970, under the leadership of Edward Heath, the government committed itself to “resume within her resources, a proper share of responsibility for the preservation of peace and stability in the world”\(^{39}\). The new government also reiterated that the “total withdrawal of forces planned by the previous administration would have weakened the security of Malaysia and Singapore; and that a continuing British military presence on that spot will be valuable in helping to preserve confidence in the area...”\(^{40}\) It was, therefore,

\(^{35}\) Observations by Lord Denis Healey, Former Secretary of State for Defence (1964-70), and later the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1974-79), in an interview with the present Researcher on 10 June 2003, at the House of Lords, London.
\(^{36}\) Ibid.
\(^{37}\) Observations by Mr. Chris Wright, Head, New Security Issues Programme, Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), London, during an interview with the present Researcher on 5 June 2003, at RIIA, London.
\(^{38}\) Philip Darby, n. 34, p.658.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., p. 4.
decided to continue to have a token military contribution to the Five Power Commonwealth defence arrangements relating to Malaysia and Singapore.41

Regarding the Persian Gulf also the new government was of the opinion that it was an "area of outstanding strategic importance to Britain, to the rest of Europe and the world at large." The Heath government, therefore, decided to suspend further force withdrawal from the Gulf region and the Far East and began to explore the possibility of evolving collective security arrangements for the countries of the region. Britain also decided to establish a Treaty of Friendship with the countries of the Gulf region from where she was to be withdrawing as also to facilitate the training of the defence forces of the region by British experts. An immediate outcome of these efforts was the formation of the Union of Arab States which was eventually transformed into the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971. Britain signed a treaty of friendship with UAE, which included military cooperation, before it was to withdraw its forces from the Gulf region.

Yet another example of Britain trying to tread a cautious path in defence of her perceived long-term interest was her policy towards South Africa. In spite of opposition from the United Nations and the Commonwealth, Britain continued to maintain a very close relationship with the apartheid regime in South Africa and keeping her security interests in view, especially her concern for the safety of the sea-routes to Africa and the Indian Ocean, Britain even continued to supply arms to the regime. With this objective in view, the Simonstown Agreement of 1955, which the previous government was no longer interested in sustaining, was revived by the Heath government. The basic rationale for this renewed interest was that it was important for Britain for pursuing a global policy. Explaining this in the House of Commons, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Sir Alec Douglas-Home said: "... Her Majesty's Government have an overriding duty to take account of present and future strategic needs, of the United Kingdom and, in that

41 Ibid, also see, The Times (London), 29 October 1970.
context, a particular concern for the free passage of ships in all circumstances on the vital sea routes round South Africa.\textsuperscript{43}

The government also believed that cooperation with the South African Navy was in Britain's global strategic interests. Douglas Home expressed it candidly when he said: "The South African Navy is a useful reinforcement in the defence of the sea routes... . In the face of a rapid expansion of the Soviet Navy into the Oceans, it would be folly to sacrifice a base which offers security of tenure."\textsuperscript{44}

Britain's decision to extend military support for the apartheid regime even in the face of opposition from the Commonwealth\textsuperscript{45} demonstrated a certain degree of desperation on the part of Britain to bank on the certainty of a time-tested friendship with its security implications, rather than on an uncertain Commonwealth. It was particularly significant since by the late 1960s the Commonwealth had faded out\textsuperscript{46} as a significant element in Britain's foreign policy and was reduced to, what Kenneth Waltz called, the level of an almost "meaningless consultative association" for Britain.\textsuperscript{47} The Conservative government did not make any attempt to conceal this apparent dilution in the importance of the Commonwealth both for Britain and for the rest of the member countries behind nice diplomatic jargons. Prime Minister Heath took it as \emph{a fait accompli} and prepared Britain to adjust itself to the new reality.\textsuperscript{48}

Edward Heath, defended his government's policy towards South Africa stating that in the context of rapidly expanding Soviet Naval presence across the oceans, it was important that the Simonstown Agreement which was giving valuable support for the Royal Navy in that vital area, remained effective. The economic rationale was even more convincing: "We live by trade, and we are dependent on the

\textsuperscript{45} Faced with enormous criticism from within the Commonwealth to the policy of apartheid, South Africa had left the Commonwealth in 1961.
\textsuperscript{46} Joseph Frankel, \textit{Britain's Changing Role}, \textit{International Affairs} (London), Vol. 50, October, 1974, p. 582.
\textsuperscript{48} See his observations in the interview to the \textit{The Times} (London), on 26 October 1970, where he uses words like 'Britain cannot be taken ... for granted' and that the other member countries could take care of their own interest, etc., in, \textit{The Times} (London) 27 October 1970.
freedom of the seas. In seeking to discharge its responsibilities to the nation to safeguard the free passage of our commerce, the government recognizes the concern of those who find it difficult to separate these defence considerations from their feelings over apartheid.\textsuperscript{49} Foreign Secretary, Douglas-Home, was even more categorical in his assertions on the need for Britain to ensure that her sea-routes remained secure for ever: "If we were to sell arms to South Africa ... it would only be to make sure that in all circumstances in the future... the trade routes of Britain and Western Europe are always open so that we could never have a threat to our vital supplies."\textsuperscript{50}

An important factor that determined the Conservative Government's defence policy was its perception of the ever growing Soviet threat in different parts of the world, including in Europe. In Britain's assessment, by 1970, the Soviet Navy had grown to become a modern and well-equipped force, second in size only to that of the United States and capable of acting as a coercive politico-military force on a global scale, posing a threat to the British interests in different parts of the world, especially in the Mediterranean, and in the Indian Ocean and the African littoral areas.

Britain had very important commercial and trade interests in all these areas. The Indian Ocean provided a major junction of sea communications through which the entire maritime commerce between Britain and the countries of East Africa, Asia and the Far East passed. Equally important was the Ocean's position as a major supply line which provides Britain with about 60 per cent of its oil, 50 per cent of food imports and most of its raw materials.\textsuperscript{51} Keeping the trade-routes in the Indian Ocean open was, therefore, a vital interest for Britain. It was this consideration that prevailed on Britain while going to the aid of Kuwait in 1961, India in 1962, East


\textsuperscript{50} Douglas-Home's address at the Conservative Party's Annual Conference at Blackpool, in October 1970, Reported in the The Times (London), 10 October, 1970. (Cited in, Ibid., p.60)

\textsuperscript{51} B. Vivekanandan, 'Naval Power In the Indian Ocean: A Problem in the Indo-British Relations' The Round Table (London), No.257, January 1975, p.60.
Africa in 1964, Malaysia in 1963 and 1966, Ceylon in 1971 and the Sultanate of Oman in 1972 either to suppress internal rebellion or against local conflict.52

By the early 1970s, the Soviet Union had succeeded in getting closer to quite a few countries in the region, which included India, Somalia, South Yemen, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, the Seychelles, et al.53 Besides, the Soviets also had managed to have several militarily significant staging posts in the area. The growing Soviet presence in this area was, therefore, a matter of genuine concern for Britain. Britain viewed increasing Soviet interest in the area as "a logical sequence upon the Soviet naval presence in the North Atlantic, the Caribbean, the Middle East and the Mediterranean"54 and as an expression of its "determination to establish a permanent foothold there with a design to establish Russian dominance in the region"55

Prime Minister Heath, therefore, was convinced that if the West did not stand up to the Soviet threat, "a stage would eventually be reached at which the sheer disparity of military strength would leave Western Europe with no convincing strategy and no confidence in its ability to sustain a confrontation if one occurred."56 He also added that the countries directly exposed to the sustained Soviet political and military pressure could be vulnerable to such pressures forcing them to opt for political and military neutrality vis-à-vis the Soviet Bloc which in turn could even contribute to the disintegration of the Western Alliance.57

Even while effecting her withdrawal from some areas, Britain was convinced of the need to counter the Soviet threat effectively by mobilizing all the resources it could. Recognizing the importance of the Indian ocean area for the West, the strategically important Diego Garcia was literally handed over to the Americans to expand and use as a military base, so that British interests could be sustained.

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., p.62.
54 Ibid., p.63.
55 Ibid.
57 Ibid., Col.1416-17.
continuously. Though it assumed office proclaiming that it will try to restore British commitments in the areas from where the previous administration had started the processes of withdrawal, the four years in office, during 1970-74, convinced the Conservatives of the practical difficulties in sustaining a global presence on exclusive British efforts. It, however, succeeded to some extent in minimizing the damage to Britain's global strategic interests by developing as many alternative arrangements as possible, either with her direct involvement or with her military or diplomatic assistance.

The four year period of the Conservative government under Edward Heath, though equally constrained by economic difficulties as was the preceding Labour administration, more than anything else, helped in conveying to Britain's friends and allies and to the world at large that Britain still thought globally and that she was not yet ready to abandon her world-wide interests. This posturing in itself was important for Britain as without that British voice in the international arena would have been further weakened.

When Labour returned to power in March 1974, Britain's economic situation had not changed much. Defence spending was an important issue in the 1974 election. The Labour Manifesto had pledged that it will "progressively reduce the burden of Britain's defence spending to bring our costs into line with those carried by our main European allies." The new government, once again under Harold Wilson, inherited a slightly reduced defence budget and armed forces reduced by about 30,000 men. Economic difficulties were further accentuated by the oil crisis of the early 1970s. The government, therefore, was compelled to initiate another serious defence review. The review this time, aiming at a saving in defence expenditure to the tune of £4700m over a ten year period, effected further drastic cuts in Britain's defence capabilities and commitments. While announcing the decision to reduce on

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59 The oil crisis of early 1970s acted as a major constraint upon Britain's economy and had its fallouts on the defence budget also. See, Michael Chichester and John Wilkinson, British Defence: A Blueprint for Reform (London, Brassey's, 1987), p.12.
commitments outside the NATO area, the government reiterated its unqualified commitment to NATO and decided to continue to have "a general purpose forces as an insurance against the unforeseen...." As part of this ‘insurance policy against the unforeseen’ Britain was to continue with her association with the SEATO and CENTO and with her military presence in Hong Kong, Gibraltar, Belize and the Falkland Islands. Arrangements for the security of the Indian Ocean area, now secured with the American base facility in Diego Garcia, was also to continue.

From all these, it becomes obvious that Britain, while announcing her review decisions, forced on her by the recurring economic constraints, was not yet ready to renounce her global strategic interests. Adjustments were made in commitments, only to circumvent the economic difficulties and keeping her hopes on the ability of the Atlantic Alliance to guard those British interests which had also become part of the larger Alliance interests. Britain was aware that a formidable threat to those interests could come only with the Soviet support, and containing such threats was the collective responsibility of the Alliance. By helping to retain the solidarity of the Alliance and by helping to evolve appropriate responses to Soviet offensives and by focussing on the diplomatic efforts to contain Soviet adventurism world-wide, Britain could continue to guard her global interests in and through the Western Alliance.

This shift of emphasis and strategy, in support of a global policy, became all the more pronounced during the Conservative Administration, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. Though the previous administration was successful in further reducing the strength of the armed forces to the lowest post-War figure of 315000 and the defence budget to a figure below 5 per cent of the GDP, (the economic situation could not have allowed anything more), the defence environment of the country was no safer, as the world around was preparing itself for the second round of the cold war. In fact, even before leading her Party to victory in mid-1979, on

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61 Cmnd. 5976, n.58, para,17.
assuming the leadership of the Conservative Party, Margaret Thatcher had given sufficient hint of the direction the country’s defence policy would be taking under a Conservative administration. At a meeting in January 1976, she said: “This is not a moment when anyone with the interests of this country at heart should be talking about cutting our defences. It is a time when we urgently need to strengthen our defences. Of course, this places a burden on us. But it is one that we must be willing to bear if we want our freedom to survive.”

Mrs. Thatcher entered office determined to be a full participant in that new cold war and thereby for ‘putting the world to rights.’ This was to have its impact on all principal elements of defence policy – on the conventional and nuclear forces, on the Anglo-American relations, on the European element and even on the NATO policies themselves. For the first time in over a quarter of a century Britain now had a government committed to increase rather than to reduce spending on defence.

Thatcher believed that “a skillfully conducted foreign policy based on strength can magnify a country’s influence and allow progress to be made in dealing with thorny problems around the world.” What the world witnessed for more than a decade that she remained at the helm of affairs in Britain – one of the longest ever for any British Prime Minister – was the fruitful translation of this belief into action through a real pro-active policy in the international arena. In every region of the world, at every flash point, on all the major events that impacted upon the world in those ‘Thatcher years’, Britain remained a notable player. The interest and inclination

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63 The Times (London), 20 January 1976.
64 The reference is to the heading given to Chapter XVII of Margaret Thatcher’s Memoirs, The Downing Street Years (London, Harper Collins, 1993), p.486.
65 Francis Pym, the new Defence Secretary confidently told the House of Commons in July 1980: “We remain determined to uphold and, where necessary, strengthen our all-round defence capability, and that applies to our conventional forces, no less than to our nuclear forces”, See, UK, Commons, Parliamentary Debates, Vol.988, 15 July 1980, Col.1236.
66 Chichester and Wilkinson, n.59, p.18.
67 Margaret Thatcher, n.64, p.486 (emphasis added).
to play a global role was clearly evident in the 1980 Statement on the defence Estimates:

In common with our NATO allies, we also have wider interests outside the NATO area which we cannot afford to neglect. We depend on the developing world for many raw materials. The security of our trade routes is therefore of vital importance to our economy and we have a substantial practical interest in the stability of the countries with whom we trade.\(^{68}\)

Taking a realistic account of the strategic situation Britain was faced with in the early 1980s, the Conservative government initiated a Defence Review in 1981. The review took off from the premise that ‘the international scene is in several areas unsettled and even turbulent’. Though 95 per cent of the British forces were committed to NATO,\(^{69}\) Britain believed that taking advantage of the flexibility of her forces, she could use these forces to meet ‘both specific British responsibilities and the growing importance to the West of supporting our friends and contributing to the world stability more widely...’.\(^{70}\) That the British thinking was global was further evident from the observation:

Changes in many areas of the world together with growing Soviet military reach and readiness to exploit it directly or indirectly, make it increasingly necessary for NATO members to look to Western security concerns over a wider field than before, and not to assume that these concerns can be limited to the boundaries of the Treaty area. Britain’s own needs, outlook and interests give her a special role and a special duty in efforts of this kind.\(^{71}\)

Therefore, with a view to increase the intervention capabilities, several major and minor policy changes were announced through the Review. This included the up-gradation of the parachute battalion, increased defence assistance to friendly forces, resumption from 1982 onwards the practice of sending a substantial naval task group on long detachment for visits and exercises in the South Atlantic,

\(^{71}\) Ibid., para.32.
Caribbean, Indian Ocean or further East, etc.\textsuperscript{72} In order to enhance the out of area flexibility of the ground forces, the Review proposed improvements in the airlift capability of British transport aircrafts. To give more teeth to the global policy it was also decided to co-ordinate all the out of area activities with the forces of the United States and other Allies.\textsuperscript{73}

Though on the face of it, it appeared to be a reversal of the 1968 Review decisions, in reality, it meant only a demonstration of the renewed interest in global affairs arising more out of the perceived growing threat from the Soviet bloc as was seen in Afghanistan and elsewhere. The Defence Secretary provided the rationale for this renewed global interest when he said: "In reviewing our defence programme the government have had to look far beyond the confines of our small corner of Europe. We must recognize the threat to our peace and prosperity from the other side of the globe."\textsuperscript{74}

That Britain meant what it said was proved on different occasions during the long period of Conservative administration since 1979. The best case of all was the Falklands episode.\textsuperscript{75} The Falklands campaign was an eye-opener for many in Britain who had begun to be complacent about British security matters. Some observers feel that if Britain had carried out the decision taken in 1968 to eventually phase out the carrier forces, by the time-table set originally, Britain would have found it difficult to retake the Islands from the Argentines by using her own capabilities.\textsuperscript{76} More than anything else the crisis in the Atlantic helped in reinforcing in the policy makers and the people at large of Britain’s world-wide interests and responsibilities at a time when the general inclination was for Euro-centric policies. This increased interest in ‘out of area’ was reflected in the defence Budget also. Between 1979 and 1985 the

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., para 34. Also see, Michael Chichester and John Wilkinson, \textit{The Uncertain Ally: British Defence Policy, 1960-1990} (Aldershot, Gower, 1982), p.91.
\textsuperscript{73} Cmnd, 8288, n.70, paras.,34-35.
\textsuperscript{74} John Knott’s observations in the Parliament, see, \textit{UK, Commons, Parliamentary Debates}, Vol. 7, 8 July 1981,Col.276.
\textsuperscript{75} For details, see, Chapters IV and V of the present study.
\textsuperscript{76} Observations by Sir Arthur Hockaday and Sir Michael Quinlan, former Permanent Under Secretaries in the MOD, in separate interviews with the present researcher, respectively on the 6\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th} June 2003 in London.
defence expenditure rose by 18 per cent in real terms, with 46 per cent of the defence budget spent on equipment.\textsuperscript{77}

Besides, the camaraderie and cooperation between the United Kingdom and the United States witnessed throughout the Thatcher period was also indicative of pronouncements matching actions in foreign and defence policies. Britain’s effort to evolve a collective response to the Soviet adventures in the Third World in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, its support to the United States in the latter’s assault on Libya in 1986, its support to the American SDI project, and several other instances of cooperation between the two ‘special friends’ on major political and economic issues of the time,\textsuperscript{78} amply demonstrated this British intent to continue to play a global role.

The military posturing for a global policy was equally matched by the increasingly proactive diplomatic initiatives that the Thatcher government had taken. Her initiatives in settling the Hong Kong issue with China, responses to the crises in various parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, East of Suez and Eastern Europe amply demonstrated Britain’s global vision.\textsuperscript{79} The defiant firmness with which she dealt with the communist world, standing by the side of an equally defiant and determined US leadership, was to contribute in a big way to the undoing of the Communist bloc itself in later years.

As Chichester and Wilkinson put it, Britain maintains the “triad of capabilities from the strategic nuclear through the theatre nuclear to the conventional and also geographical responsibilities from central Europe, the Atlantic and Channel, to the Northern and Southern Flanks of NATO to the protection of far-flung dependent territories and overseas trading interests.”\textsuperscript{80} Even while initiating the major defence reviews, the governments have recognized the importance of a

\textsuperscript{78} These issues are dealt with in more detail in the previous Chapter.
\textsuperscript{79} For Thatcher’s own perceptions on the developments in all these areas, see, Margaret Thatcher, n.64, pp.486-535.
\textsuperscript{80} Chichester and Wilkinson, n.59, p.92.
capability to intervene overseas in defence of perceived Western interests, as without this the flexibility in policy that Britain has enjoyed over the years could have been seriously compromised.

It is in the backdrop of this thinking that one has to see if there is any merit in the views expressed by British defence economists like David Greenwood. According to Greenwood, the conventional view that the British defence policy has suffered from a continuous process of diminution and contraction since 1945 does not represent an objective analysis, is incomplete and too simplistic and 'buttressed by familiar quantitative indicators', ignoring the element of qualitative improvement taken place over the years.\(^{81}\)

If one goes only by the quantitative indicators like the levels of manpower and equipment, the deployment of British forces and the allocation of resources to defence, the conclusion that British defence capabilities have drastically declined over the years is obvious. From over 3 million strong forces at the end of the War in 1945 to just about 825,000 in 1955 and to about 320,000 in 1985, the reduction in force levels has been consistent. The same process of pruning was witnessed in the deployment of forces also, culminating in the large scale withdrawal of forces from areas East of Suez after 1968. If one looks at the entire post-War period, there were considerable reductions in the budgetary allocations to defence over the years.

However, if these factors are seen in the context of the redefined role of the defence forces, the remarkable advances in the defence-related technologies and the more or less consistent pattern of budgetary allocations – between 5 and 6 per cent of the GDP from early 1960s to mid-1980s\(^{82}\) – it would become apparent that the so

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\(^{82}\) Yearbook of World Armaments and Disarmament [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)] (Different years) and, David Fouquet, ed., JANE'S NATO HANDBOOK, 1988-89 (Surrey, Jane's Information Group, 1988), pp.135-139.
called continuous 'diminution' and 'contraction' in Britain's defence capabilities has been exaggerated. 83

If one looks at the British defence capabilities per se it would be difficult to establish that Britain 'disposed of less military might' in the 1970s than in the 1950s. 84 On the contrary, Greenwood claims that "the UK probably mustered as much military might in the late 70s as at any other time in the preceding 30 years— but in rather different forms and in different places." Whatever perceptible changes have happened is, in fact, in Britain's status rather than in the actual military strength. This is attributed more to the changes in the international environment than in Britain's own decline. 85

Further, according to Greenwood, what was essentially reflected in the Labour-initiated defence reviews of the 60s and the 70s was the Labour's sense of history and realism to relocate the British defence policy in consonance with the changing world and the economic conditions of the country without diluting the fundamental strategic interests of Britain. 86 Essentially, the changes have to be seen as part of a process of "continuous adjustments to new circumstances and conditions" based on more "rational considerations" rather than sticking on to traditional commitments ignoring the changes taking place around. These adjustments have not actually reduced the overall standing of Britain as a top level military power. In spite of the financial difficulties, Britain maintains a remarkably balanced, effective and a sizeable regular forces. In the mid-1980s, Britain still occupied the fourth or fifth position in the global military league. 87

Similarly, applying Greenwood's logic, it could be argued that the withdrawal of British forces from various parts of the world has enabled Britain to concentrate

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83 Greenwood, n.81, p.8.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., p.9.
86 Ibid., p.11.
87 Ibid.
88 Michael Dockrill, n. 77, p.125.
89 Ibid., p.126.
its strength in Europe where it mattered the most. Instead of dividing Britain's military strength in 'penny packages' all over the world, concentration on Europe has significantly enhanced the British contribution to European security.  

Conclusion

Changes in the domestic and the international environment interacted in different ways in compelling Britain to adapt from a leading world role to a diminished status. Since the 1960s there has been prevailing an unproven assumption among some circles that Britain's special interests outside Europe were transitory and could eventually wither away. The defence reviews of the sixties and the seventies, undoubtedly, had removed some of the essential capabilities required to project major military force outside the NATO area. But through the Falklands war of 1982 Britain could once again prove for itself and for the rest of the world that it was still capable of taking care of its exclusive interests even outside Europe and the NATO area without an active military presence in those areas. The Falklands war also demonstrated Britain's inclination, readiness, the tradition and the military and bureaucratic expertise which still remained within its defence establishment, if a military role beyond the North Atlantic had to be revived.

As a matter of fact, Britain never abandoned her claim to have a 'say in the settlement of international questions in any part of the globe' at any point of time since the end of the Second World War. As F.S. Northedge puts it, "most British administrations since 1945, Conservative and Labour alike, have claimed the right to be consulted, to encourage and to warn ... in almost any international problem in almost any part of the world." This global interests has been sustained by being part of regional collective security arrangements, by cultivating special relationships with individual countries and through a very vibrant and professional diplomacy, and, at

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93 Ibid.
times, banking on the coercive power of the still formidable military strength. British political and military leaderships have always been aware that an overriding interest in world affairs could not have been reduced without compromising on her vital economic and political interests. The quality of that interest, however, was expected to be graded since the early 1970s.

The Duncan Report, while identifying a realistic position for Britain in the world affairs, in some ways, laid the road-map for her future foreign and security policies. Once having identified the areas of strength and weakness for Britain it was only a question of re-orienting her diplomatic and economic policies in the service of a new role Britain was expected to play. One of the significance of the Duncan Report lies in the fact that it recognised a transformation in the rules and principles by which Britain's international relations, particularly her relations with the countries in the area of concentration, were to be managed thereafter. The categorization of the world, for the purposes of the management of Britain's foreign policy, into areas of concentration and the rest of the world also implied that, thereafter foreign policy was to be managed by using different qualitative approaches, guided by the importance each category served for Britain. It, however, did not imply an abandonment of interest in the rest of the world.

Branding the dominant Parties in Britain as of sustaining 'Victorian imperial dreams,' or as of entertaining 'illusions of grandeur' about British power in the World or of being of 'myopic views' or of suffering from 'little Englander' notions, may all sound academically impressive. The assumption that Britain is no longer interested in the global affairs and that she is increasingly Europeanised is not

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94 While considering withdrawal from areas East of Suez, the dominant thinking among the British defence policy makers was to have a thoroughly professionally organized strategically mobile force, capable of using in any kind of crisis involving British interest in any part of the world which would have been an effective alternative to regular physical military presence especially in the context of the growing nationalist sentiments in the areas where Britain has been traditionally present. The fact that this idea was first mooted by a Labour government in the mid 1960s go to prove how reluctant even the Labour Party was to abandon Britain’s global interests. For a detailed analysis of this idea, see, Philip Darby, n.34, pp.662-669. Darby's observations (Ibid., p.667) made more than three decades back that “outside Europe the utility of military power remains high, and that diplomacy unsupported by military capability is unlikely to be very effective”, continues to influence British thinking even today.

95 F.S.Northedge, n.1, p.194.
a realistic one. Britain has continued interest in developments in various parts of the world and has an overriding concern for the maintenance of global peace. One of the principal concerns of Britain since the end of the Second World War has been the avoidance of yet another global war. British policy makers, at different levels, are aware of the fact that this objective cannot be effectively realised by staying aloof from global affairs.

Though Britain had withdrawn most of its forces from various non-NATO areas in the sixties and the seventies, it was always sensitive to any intrusions by hostile powers in areas where it had political or economic interests. Its concern for the safety of the oil supply sources and routes was as much an Alliance concern as was for Britain. Essentially, the Atlantic Alliance is not merely a set of political and military connections between Europe and America, it is also the ‘centrepiece of a global economic system’.96

In some ways, Britain’s physical withdrawal from various parts of the world involved a transformation of her individual interests to the Alliance’s collective interests based on the belief that on matters of security, British interests were inseparably linked to and would be collectively and more effectively protected by the Alliance to which Britain had actually effected the retreat. The British responses to developments in various parts of the world, ever since NATO was established, have reinforced these arguments.

It was also noticeable that the major defence reviews were carried out free from the tensions of the past, and when the world was moving towards détente in which Britain was an active negotiator for peace. The essence of détente was the express recognition of status quo in Europe and an implied hope that this recognition would extend to the other areas, especially to the Third World. But when the Soviet Union found that keeping intact the status quo in Europe, an adventurous policy could be pursued in other parts of the world, NATO showed its readiness to abandon détente and stand up to the new threat to their political, military and economic interests. In shaping the collective NATO response Britain had played a significant role.

With the emerging crisis in détente in the late 1970s, Britain was found once again committed to counter the Soviet activities in various parts of the world. Britain, with her commitment to preserve the status quo, which was clearly in favour of the Western Alliance, has been closely following the developments in areas where her economic and political interests lay, which at one time she pursued through her physical presence, and taking part in the Alliance Military planning, which is also designed to operate in such areas in times of crisis.

For Britain, it was thus a cost-effective measure as well as an austerity measure without renouncing her security and other vital interests. This was also evident from the fact that British withdrawal from certain areas was compensated by American presence in such areas, for example, the Indian Ocean. American presence in such areas is intended to serve, or in effect, actually sub-serves British interest equally. For Britain in the past, military presence outside NATO area was one of her vital national interests and the Defence reviews or changes in Governments did not mean any compromise of such vital interests.

By 1978 Britain had reached the probable limit of withdrawal from geographically defined military commitments as a way of reducing the economic burden on defence. But the actual record of the post-War years suggest that Britain will try to avoid any radical adjustments of its strategic role. Since the early eighties, once again, we see the presence of British forces, in various parts of the world, either under NATO commitment or under the UN responsibilities or out of singularly British commitments. In 1985 British forces were present in twenty-two different places spread across all the continents. These were – Canada, West Indies, Western Atlantic, Belize, Channel, Central Atlantic, Ascension Islands, Falklands Islands, Cyprus, Gibraltar, Eastern Atlantic and North Sea, Norway, Berlin, West Germany, Sinai, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sardinia, Indian Ocean, Diego Garcia, Brunei and Hong Kong, besides an ice-patrol ship in Antarctica, besides the British homeland.77 British presence in each of these places was meant to serve Britain’s

world-wide economic, political and strategic interests. Seen in quantitative terms, Britain's capability to play a global military role may have been somewhat reduced, but, undoubtedly, this quantitative reduction has been considerably offset by the qualitative improvements in their military capabilities over the years.