CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

By the late 1940s, the colonial legacy and the successful culmination of the Second World War together placed Britain in a situation of having to defend too much without the economic and the military means to do so effectively. With her enormous commitments across the world, the British government, at the end of the War, was obliged to maintain force levels far in excess of what was necessary for the defence of the British homeland and beyond what the war-ravaged British economy could sustain. The Second World War had demonstrated to the world at large, particularly to those who were in the thick of it all like Britain, who had to face great odds to safeguard her freedom and integrity, the limit of individual State power to face up to the threats from heavily armed and powerful States. It was, therefore, inevitable for them to organize collective security arrangements against the perceived threat to national security and interests. This became a matter of major priority for the immediate post-War British government.

The aggressively expansionist policy of the Soviet bloc made matters worse for the post-War government. With an economy heavily dependent on overseas trade, and with its commitments to liberal democratic political traditions, defending the world against Communist expansionism became both an economic and a political imperative for Britain. This objective, however, was too big for a country of the size and strength of Britain to have accomplished single-handedly. The only way in which this could have been achieved was by entangling the United States into a Western security framework. This was achieved in 1949 when the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was established.

Although NATO provided an effective mechanism to counter the perceived threat to Western Europe from the Communist world, Britain still had to care for the security of her own exclusive economic and strategic interests outside Europe – in the colonies, in the Commonwealth and in other friendly territories across the world. Hence, Britain continued to maintain her global interest and a defence policy to match that interest. The compelling factors for Britain to pursue a global policy was its keenness to avoid yet another global
war, to keep peace, to keep Communism away, to make the world safe for democracy, and to safeguard her own exclusive economic, political and strategic interests.

The avoidance of another global war has, undoubtedly, been the overriding consideration. Having seen the worst of wars, including two devastating World Wars in a period of a little over three decades, Britain was determined to pursue her foreign policy objectives based on a strategy of deterrence in which military strength mattered as much as did an effective diplomacy. Since deterrence was largely based on the 'overkill' capacity of the nuclear weapons in the possession of both the power-blocs, pursuing mutually opposing foreign policy interests, in fact, contributed to war-like situations – conveniently called the 'Cold War' – without the nuclear weapons or the guns directed against each other actually having to be fired.

The fact of not having had to fire them did not mean that the powers concerned could stop producing them. On the contrary, their production had to be sustained all along, almost on a war-footing, each trying to outwit the other, a process again conveniently described as the 'arms race,' in which quality mattered as much as did the quantity. Imagination was the only limit in this race. In this battle of nerves, both military might and economic strength mattered. And so did the moral and material support of nations and groupings not directly involved in it. Therefore, friends and allies and spheres of influence also were important here. Proxy wars for retaining friends and sustaining such spheres were taken to be an acceptable part of the 'Cold War' between the major players. And so were wars in defence of the territorial integrity or for sustaining the regional status quo in which the global players had special interest.

In a world which was getting increasingly polarized around two mutually opposing ideologies – the Communist and the Capitalist – posturing had to be matched by commitments and capacity to defend the respective ideologies as the stake involved was national security, on the one hand, and winning over the minds as well as the means across the world, on the other. Not surprisingly, therefore, when the lines were finally drawn, the world found itself divided between the two powerful blocs and a third, posturing to be neutral. For the lead players, identifying the enemy was as important as was identifying the friends. Therefore,
alliances of defensive and offensive natures were established. The post-War history of the world was taking shape around this physical framework.

For the four decade period after the War through to the period under study, it appeared it was a battle without any result — without a winner or a loser. Those who provided the leadership in this shaping of history had much more at stake than the ones who were led. Britain, undoubtedly, was among those who led from the front.

The early post-War years had identified three principal tasks for Britain's defence policy. These were: defence in the Cold War and discharge of her peacetime obligations, which essentially meant protecting the colonial interests; building up the deterrent; and the preparations against the contingencies of a global war.¹ As part of these tasks, Britain had been maintaining a highly dispersed military presence across the world, particularly at all the potential 'choke points' which could prove to be crucial in a crisis situation.

The primary defence policy objective of post-War Britain was the avoidance of yet another global conflagration 'at any cost'. The cost they were ready to pay included smaller wars, if that was necessary to avoid bigger ones. The preservation of global peace also warranted Britain to play an active role in the management of international affairs. Her peculiar economic circumstances, which involved a heavy dependence on global trade, also warranted Britain to continue to retain a global perspective and to sustain a global defence policy. And the most effective way in which global peace could be sustained, with an effective British say in it, was by directing her economic, military and diplomatic expertise towards this objective.

The British post-War defence policy, in a nutshell, is the story of how she pursued the objective of avoiding yet another global war without compromising on her vital political and economic interests, and, at the same time, making intelligent adjustments in policies in pursuit of such larger interests. These adjustments, however, remained largely cosmetic for almost the first two decades of the post-War years. It took the humiliating experience of the Suez crisis and the severe economic crises of the 1960s to dawn on Britain conclusively that in the emerging bi-polar post-War world order, led by two ideologically
opposed superpowers, Britain could no longer afford to be adventurous on the international stage, either politically or economically, on her own effort.

By the mid-1960s, economic circumstances combined with several other national and international developments compelled Britain to seriously rethink about the need and the feasibility of maintaining a global presence. Besides the own declining economy, internal developments in Britain precipitated by the Irish problem and the consequent need to deploy a large number of forces on internal security duties there, combined with the flexibilities in policy options provided by the advances in the weapons technologies, prevailed on Britain to consider a withdrawal of her military from most of the areas East of Suez.

This was a period of reckoning for Britain, forcing an inevitable final transformation of ‘Great Britain’, one of the big three in the Councils of the world, to that of an effective, middle rank European power. This difficult choice between an ‘overstretched’ world-wide commitment and of a realistic existence within the confines of the NATO area – all that the British economy could afford at that point – had to be made sooner or later. This was sought to be achieved through the Defence Review announced by the Labour Government in January 1968.

Yet another factor that influenced Britain in deciding to increasingly concentrate on Europe and NATO for its defence strategy was the growing realization that her fate is inseparably linked to that of the rest of Europe. This logic was reaffirmed especially after the consolidation of the European Economic Community, which provided an added impetus to view Europe as the mainstay of Britain in the future. This also reinforced the British inclination to play a dominant and effective role within Europe. Within the Euro-group of the Alliance, Britain has been the most influential member. Her nuclear status and still formidable defence forces could ensure for Britain a dominant role within the Alliance.

What the world has been witnessing since then is a Britain playing this role effectively, making a significant contribution towards maintaining global peace, in and

through the Atlantic Alliance, reinforced by her special relationship with the United States, through her diplomatic skills, backed by her strategic deterrent forces and her formidable armed forces. The extra-European role was to be given lesser emphasis thereafter.

However, the British withdrawal from East of Suez did not mean an abandonment of her world-wide interests. This was apparent from the fact that most of what has been seen or pursued as Britain’s exclusive strategic interests were sought to be projected as the Western 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 retreated. The Cold War was not yet over and the major Cold War issues were yet to be settled. That no one was ready to lower the guard was evident from the British responses to developments in various parts of the world, ever since the British withdrawal.

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 intrusion 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 of Britain. As Calleo rightly observed, essentially, the Atlantic Alliance is not merely a set of political and military connections between Europe and America, it is also the ‘centerpiece of a global economic system’. Britain found in NATO an important spring-board of action against various Soviet moves in Europe and elsewhere.

It was also significant that the major Defence Reviews involving the decisions to effect military withdrawals were carried out in the backdrop of the negotiations for détente in which Britain was an active participant from the Western side. 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 adventurist 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.

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With the emerging crisis of détente in the late 1970s, Britain was found appearing once again committed to counter the Soviet activities in various parts of the world. With her commitment to preserve the status quo, which was apparently in favour of the Western Alliance, Britain 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's military planning which is also designed to operate in such areas in times of crisis. Thus, it may be found that as there was physical withdrawal, arising out of economic compulsions from certain areas, Britain continued to maintain serious interests in those areas where her economic and other interests were involved. Britain also showed the inclination to act militarily under the aegis of the Alliance, if the situation so warranted.

Withdrawal was also based on the conviction that the functions which her presence served in those areas could very well, and with added assurance, be served without presence, by projecting a posture to the rest of the world, especially to the potential adversaries, that British interest in those areas was equally live and that any attempt to change the status quo would be resisted more vigorously with the collective strength of the Alliance. Thus for Britain, it was 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, as for example, in the Indian Ocean.

American presence in such areas was intended to serve, or in effect, actually sub-serve 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 of Governments did not mean any compromise of such vital interests. If economic compulsions forced Britain to withdraw military forces from certain areas, the same compulsions forced her to keep these areas under the watchful eyes of the Alliance so that her economic interests could be pursued uninterrupted.

After the review decisions were announced the British global interests have been sustained by being part of the effective regional collective security arrangements, by encouraging special relationships with individual countries, by extending special training assistance to their armed forces and through a very vibrant and professional diplomacy, and, at times, banking on the coercive power of her military forces. British political and
military leadership has always been aware that an overriding interest in world affairs could not have been lessened without compromising on her vital economic and political interests.

All segments of the British society – the political leadership across the political spectrum, the academics and the policy-makers, the media and the general public – are all equally conscious of this fundamental fact about modern Britain today. Every one appears to be prepared to pay the price for this as also to derive the benefits from such a globalist policy, provided the game of power-politics is played by the accepted rules and in a transparent way, taking the public into confidence about it.

By the early 1960s, Britain had a whole range of nuclear weapons systems and a well defined political and military rationale to retain them. In all the Defence Policy Statements since the early fifties, the British government claimed that its nuclear force had played a crucial and indeed unique role in enhancing the security of the NATO by providing a nuclear deterrent capability committed to the Alliance, yet fully under the control of a European member. It was assumed that the existence of a separate nuclear force under the full command of a European State, like Britain, capable of inflicting enormous damage would cause the Soviet Union to think very seriously about the desirability of venturing an aggression on Western Europe. Thus it provided an extra-insurance for the Alliance to the extent that it represented an additional centre of decision making which could complicate the calculations of a potential aggressor.

Economically also, it was found that nuclear deterrence was cheaper as compared to the required level of investment to match Russia’s conventional strength, while militarily it made Britain appear stronger. Politically, it was felt that it was the policy of deterrence based on the nuclear weapons that has helped Britain to reduce the strength of her much expensive conventional forces and to abolish conscription without risking national security.

The central theme of all these arguments was that the British dependence on nuclear weapons was the most cost-effective deterrent against potential aggressors at all levels. To remedy the existing gap between capability and the task imposed, Britain had to depend on the United States’ nuclear weapons. Deterrence could not have succeeded in an unequal military equation. For Britain, the strategy of deterrence being non-negotiable and given its inability to provide its own effective deterrence, it had, inevitably, to depend on the
American nuclear and conventional forces to supplement her own efforts. Its strategy of defensive deterrence was made possible mainly by its existing range of nuclear weapons, reinforced by the protective American nuclear umbrella and their technological and material support in areas where Britain's own capabilities lacked credibility.

This British position, which is apparently the NATO position as well, is equally valid then and now. It also explains why the West refuses to make a categorical 'no first strike' commitment. To Britain deterrence is meant not only to avoid a nuclear exchange but equally to avoid a conventional war which could eventually lead to a nuclear war which both parties want to avoid. An undertaking not to strike first would not in itself deter all wars, but, on the other hand, a policy posture that a conventional attack would be responded with a nuclear counter-attack would, out of fear of mutual destruction, deter not only a conventional war but a nuclear war as well.

The post-War defence policies of the two major British Political Parties suggest that there has been more of continuity rather than breaks in their defence policy choices when in office. Normally what the Labour in office began, the Tories pursued when they replaced Labour and vice-versa. The Labour Party, however, when in office, consistently failed to carry out many of the policies they had enunciated while in Opposition.

The continuities seen in the weapons programme prove this beyond doubt. It can now take ten or more years to develop a major weapon system from the drawing board to their entry into production. This implies that a single project may have to survive two or three changes in government and several changes in the top levels of the bureaucracy before it reaches the stage of field deployment. Party-ideological differences could not have been allowed to come in the way of equipping the armed forces with the most modern and reliable weapon systems that would also ensure the best value for money. British policy makers have always been mindful of the fact that stability in decision making is an important requirement for the effective functioning of the forces.

The Conservative Party has been more consistent in pursuing a pro-Atlanticist, pro-nuclear and a globalist defence policy. Though it gave an impression that it would have been more comfortable with a continued British military presence at the pre-1968 level, it was realistic enough to recognize the practical constraints, and the effectiveness of the new approach towards safeguarding British interest, evolved by the 1964-70 Labour
government. It, however, always reserved more room for exploring the possibility for an increased British role in the global affairs, as was seen during the Thatcher years in the 1980s.

The Labour Party has also been equally aware of the importance of the Atlantic connection for Britain. Faced with the looming threat from the Soviet bloc in its Eastern neighbourhood, it was the Labour government which took the lead in entangling the mighty American forces with the defence of Europe and laid the foundation for post-War British defence policy on the Atlantic special connections. The Labour-initiated Defence Reviews did not dilute this Atlanticist commitments. Even after the Reviews, there was a strong commitment to work closely with the United States, despite Party Conference Resolutions, while in Opposition, in the 1960s opposing the Vietnam war, and in the 1980s calling for the abandonment of British nuclear weapons, for the removal of American nuclear weapons from Britain, etc. Once in power, in the 1960s and the 1970s, there was an equally strong commitment to maintaining the independent nuclear deterrent. The Labour government then, like the Conservative government in the eighties, admitted no inconsistency between Atlanticism and an independent nuclear policy.

The American warning in the mid eighties that "if a future Labour government went ahead with its pledge to remove American nuclear weapons from British soil, then the United States would have a pressure from the American people to shut all its military bases in Britain", in fact, had only academic relevance. Both the United States and the United Kingdom have always been aware of the vital role that their ‘special relationship’ plays in each other’s security. The British need the American military commitment for its security more than the other way around. And the nearly half-a-million or so American troops stationed in Europe are more in the service of European security than that of the United States of America. The United States, on its part, is also equally aware of the fact that in the post-War world, in a broad sense, Europe constitutes the United States’ first line of defence. It is difficult to visualize a situation of this relationship fizzling out in the foreseeable future.

The fundamental problem for post-War Britain has been one of resources. But economic weakness could not have been used as a reason to sacrifice defence efforts always.

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For even the sustenance of this relatively weak economy necessitated a strong defence establishment. Reductions on defence spending might have helped in solving immediate domestic economic problems but, in the long run, it is known to be counter-productive. This would explain why Britain, though relatively economically weak, remains militarily superior to other European countries.

Defence policy, according to John Baylis, is to facilitate not only the protection but also the pursuit of the perceived national interests of the State which includes protecting the political and economic interests and furthering the international aim of the State. National security is defined as the ability of a society to perpetuate its existence and to sustain its values in the face of threats and challenges from internal or external sources.

As a matter of fact, Britain never abandoned her claim to have a say in the major international questions in any part of the globe even after the announcement to withdraw her forces from different parts of the world. To assume that Britain can stay aloof from an activist role in the world arena would amount to detaching her past nearly four centuries of history from her as also of belittling the role and relevance of the politico-economic and military system that dominate the global arena today and of which Britain is one of the principal pillars. Whatever could happen in Britain's domestic political and economic environments, it is difficult to visualize a scenario, in the near future, without some degree of special interest being shown by Britain beyond Europe and the NATO areas. Even while initiating the major Defence Reviews, successive governments have recognized the importance of a 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.

British defence policy in the mid 1980s revolved around the belief that Britain was and would continue to be a power at the top of the world league of nations, next only to that of the two Superpowers. Within NATO, Britain has been the most important power after the United States and a nuclear power whose main focus since the late 1960s has been shifted considerably to Europe, but still keeping enormous interest and influence across the world. If one views objectively at her own perceived global role and the capacity and the

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5 Ibid., p.25
willingness to play such a role, no other nation has come forward on the world stage to replace the role that Britain has been playing in the post-War world. She has remained a formidable force on the side of peace, in maintaining global stability, in defending the Western economic, political and strategic interests during the Cold War years and later, in articulating the opinion of the democratic world and in greatly deciding the course of the world bodies. It will be difficult to see Britain in any other role in the world stage in the near future.