CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
BASES OF BRITISH DEFENCE POLICY, 1945-1968

World-wide Interests and Reduced Capabilities

When the Second World War ended in 1945, on the Allied terms, Britain was unquestionably one of the top three to be reckoned with in managing the world affairs. The Labour government, led by Clement R. Attlee, that assumed power in Britain, soon after the War, was determined that Britain would continue to play a role in the world commensurate with her global image. Besides her imperial interests across the world, end of the War bestowed even larger peace-keeping responsibilities on Britain. The end of the War, while neutralizing some of her old enemies within Europe, also created new rivals for Britain. Even the other two principal War-time Allies, the United States and the Soviet Union, themselves appeared to be charting separate courses once the War was over. In the late 1940s Britain still had about a million and a half-strong defence forces, and a defence role requiring even greater force levels.

In winning the War, Britain had sold a substantial proportion of her foreign investment, run down her gold and dollar reserves and incurred a huge debt, while a third of her merchant fleet lay at the bottom of the sea and exports were one third of the pre-War level. The capital equipment of industries such as electricity supply and railways were facing near breakdown. The housing situation was quite poor as 250,000 houses had been destroyed and 3 million damaged and almost none had been built for over five years. Schools and hospitals had also suffered. The population had been starved of consumer goods. Yet defence commitments in a war-torn world were still very heavy.¹

When the War was finally over, Britain was carrying the largest external debt in its history.²

This critical economic position of Britain pointed to the need to minimize the size of her armed forces and to cut down military commitments. But unfortunately the unsettled conditions in the aftermath of the War reinforced the need for sustaining the existing military commitments which in turn accentuated the economic difficulties. Pre-War defence responsibilities had been supplemented by new commitments in Western Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and South-East Asia. This was also the time when Britain was engaged in a struggle to maintain order in the Indian sub-continent, Palestine and Greece, while providing forces for the occupation of large part of Germany and Austria. Furthermore, troops were required to end the continued Japanese occupation of South-East Asia. As a result, even an year after the end of the World War, armed forces still numbered almost two million, more than a quarter of whom were stationed outside Europe.³

However, in the immediate post-war years, Britain was compelled to devote nearly 10 per cent of her GNP to defence. The British economy had already become increasingly dependent on the American largesse. On the national security front, however, to begin with, the United States did not fully share the British fears about Communist expansionism. In the British perception, the threat from the Soviet bloc was real and, therefore, it was imperative to be prepared to defend the British interests everywhere even if it meant doing it all alone. The United States was yet to reveal her intent on whether or not to entangle herself with the British in managing the trouble-torn European affairs and the larger global issues. Therefore, while continuing her effort to draw the Americans into the European conundrum, Britain pursued her own


alternative programme for the collective defence of Western Europe against the perceived threat emerging from the rapidly expanding Communist bloc led by the Soviet Union.

In just about a year after the end of the War, Britain had come to the conclusion that checkmating Soviet expansionism was fundamental for West-European security. With the end of the Second World War, the United States came to enjoy an overwhelming economic and military predominance in the world. In order to be able to play an effective role in the changed international environment, Britain now had to make major compromises and adjustments in its foreign and defence policies. This situation actually pushed Britain towards increasing dependence on the United States in the pursuit of its foreign and defence policies.

However, adjusting to this decline and the contraction of Britain’s role had to be a gradual process, if the British people were not to lose confidence in the political system. After the World War II the real British situation was disguised by a number of factors: Britain was the only victorious European power much less damaged by the War than any of the others; it was a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it was one of the ‘Big Three’ in the Council of War and in the Ministerial Conferences which followed it. The Empire was still there, though on the brink of breaking up. It was one of the three ‘peace makers’ at Yalta and Potsdam and remained a major actor in world politics at the end of the War. Britain, thus, found itself in the unenviable position of being a country with the responsibilities of a great power, without the economic and military capability to play such a role.

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As early as in February 1946, almost six months after the end of the War, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, argued that Britain's economic position precluded a continuance of existing spending patterns. He cautioned the Cabinet: "...unless we can reduce our overseas military expenditure drastically and rapidly and avoid further overseas commitments, we have no alternative but to cut our rations and reduce employment through restrictions in the import of machinery and raw materials. There is no way round this arithmetic and all our overseas policy must be conditioned by it." 8

In the midst of this grave domestic economic situation Britain was compelled to grant independence to some of her major colonies in Asia, including the so called 'Jewel in the Crown', India, and to Palestine in the Middle East.9

Britain no longer had the resources at its command to hold on to her positions as she had done in the nineteenth century. There were two ways out of the dilemma: one was to relinquish these obligations to the only power capable of fulfilling them, the United States; and the other was to attempt to bring in to play one factor which might conceivably bridge the gap between Britain's assumed obligations and its resources, namely atomic weapons. But Britain sought to escape from the dilemma by pursuing both the courses.10

The growing tension between the Western powers and the Soviet bloc further narrowed the British options. Tense relations persisted between the British and the Soviet governments on a wide variety of questions. There were disputes between them on issues concerning Germany, Greece, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Far East. Britain felt that Russia was 'anxious to discredit' British social democracy among the European working class.11 These developments only reinforced the rift between the

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8 PRO (1946a), Balance of Payments for 1946, Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 8 February, 1946. Cab. 129/7 CP(46)53 (Cited in, M. Asteris, n.3, p. 196).
9 M. Asteris, n.3, p. 197.
11 Kenneth O' Morgan, n.4, p. 244.
Eastern and the Western parts of Europe, with the Soviet Union leading the former and the United States supporting the latter.

This perception was well reflected in Winston S. Churchill’s Fulton Speech, on 11 March 1946, in Missouri. Here Churchill, in the presence of the American President, Harry S. Truman, declared that there exists an iron curtain across Europe: “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent” (of Europe).\(^\text{12}\) Though Churchill was then only the Leader of Opposition in Parliament, his observations largely reflected the perceptions of the Labour Government as well at that time.

Reconciling Interest With Capabilities: Search For Collective Security Mechanisms

The political turmoil aided by the Communists in France, and the Communist infiltration into Greece further worsened the situation, confirming the perceived emergence of a cold war between the East and the West. The most vital case of all, the issue around which the cold war centered, however, was Germany. At the end of the War Britain wanted to ensure that Germany, while restored socially and economically, could never again become a military threat to her, as had happened in the past. Britain, therefore, was opposed to doing anything that would have contributed to the resurgence of the spirit of war among the Germans.\(^\text{13}\)

However, the Soviet policies in Eastern Europe, especially in the Eastern Zone of Germany, steadily brought American and British occupation policies in Germany into even closer rapport. By May 1946, Ernest Bevin, presented the Cabinet with the opinion that the danger of Russia has become greater than a revived Germany.\(^\text{14}\)


\(^{13}\) See British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin's Speech in the House of Commons on 22 January 1948; UK, Commons, *Parliamentary Debates,* Session 1947-48, Vol.446, Col. 386.

worst fear of all, for Britain, was the possibility of a revived Germany making common cause with Russia on the lines of the Rappalo Treaty of 1922.¹⁵

In fact, to avoid the recurrence of the German threat, the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences of the four big powers— the USA, USSR, UK and France— had agreed to strive for the demilitarization, dismemberment (division of Germany and cutting it to size) disarmament and de-Nazification of Germany.¹⁶ But differences emerged shortly at various levels between the occupying powers, which had resulted in the abandonment of a unified approach to the German problem.

The British government thought that unifying the British and the American zones in Germany might force the Russians to lift the iron curtain and open up the Eastern Zone. But, in reality, it institutionalized the division of central Europe into East and West - at least for the time being. The British and the American Zones in Germany were finally fused towards the end of 1946, as it was perceived that it was the most effective way of ensuring its security as also of facilitating the economic recovery of the British Zone. One of the long term implications of the German settlement was that it contributed to the permanent stationing of the US troops on the European continent— something Britain was keen to accomplish even otherwise. This proved to be a decisive turning point in the post-War history of Europe.

Britain, during this period, was also faced with the problems of Communist infiltration elsewhere in the world, particularly in South-East Europe. Britain's own economic constraints did not allow her to play any effective role in containing the Soviet activities there. Hence it decided to terminate large-scale military aid to Greece and Turkey, after taking the Americans into confidence about it. In the light of the British announcement, the Truman Administration made rapid preparations for American

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 267. Rappalo Treaty: Treaty signed on 16 April 1922 between Germany and Russia which extended recognition to each other and clandestinely, provided for German rearmament against the provisions of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles.
intervention in the Eastern Mediterranean and announced the famous Truman Doctrine. This effectively meant the United States accepting the obligations in different parts of the world, which Britain was relinquishing.

Faced with the pressing problems of German economic and political recovery and European economic problems in general, the American Secretary of State, George Marshall, offered the Marshall Aid Programme, in a famous speech at Harvard, on 5 June 1947. It was to inaugurate a new era in the foreign policy of the United States and in the history of the world. Ernest Bevin and his French counterpart, Georges Bidault, acted like, what Groom called, 'midwives' to the Marshall Aid Programme and the economic recovery of Europe.

The Soviet Union, predictably, decided not to participate in the Marshall Aid Plan and the European Recovery Programme and persuaded the East European countries under its hegemony not to do so either and, in turn, revived the Communist International in the form of the Cominform. The Cominform declaration, published in October 1947, had proclaimed the doctrine of a world divided into two opposing and conflicting camps.

Thus the prospects of Soviet expansionism, coupled with the Western counterstrategy of containment, finally led to the division of Europe into two hostile blocs, with the border passing through the heart of Germany. And Germany geographically in central Europe became the centre of East-West confrontation also. The cold war was already set in motion. The British and American governments were now convinced that the Russians intended to retain permanent control over the Eastern Zone of Germany to build up their own armed strength and for other economic and political reasons. Thus

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17 The *Truman Doctrine* as announced by President Harry S. Truman read: “I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free people who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way.”


on issues centred around Germany both the countries were beginning to have shared perceptions. This identification of growing common political and military interests between the United Kingdom and the United States was also to contribute to the further consolidation of the relationship between the two countries with serious implications for the post-War world.

The British government, however, believed that if Britain and the United States succeeded in presenting a strong enough front, Russia would not pursue her policy beyond a point at which war could be prevented. The United Kingdom, nevertheless, was concerned that it was particularly vulnerable to military aggression by the Soviet bloc. Being aware of the disastrous consequences of yet another major war, Britain felt that the primary object of her policy must be to prevent war particularly by deterring aggression which might lead to war.

In a memorandum entitled, Atomic Energy: An Immediate Policy for Great Britain, prepared by P.M.S. Blackett, one of the leading British nuclear physicist, it was argued:

...it is essential that Britain’s foreign policy be based on a realistic appreciation of our actual military and strategic position. Now it is generally recognized that British sea power is now, and probably will be, permanently very much weaker than American sea power, and consequently that British interest, say in the Pacific, would be defenceless against American attack. Similarly, it is equally impossible for Britain alone to defend her interest in Europe by force against the Soviet land forces; nor are there likely to be any potential allies in Europe strong enough to allow her to do so within the next ten years. Only a full participation by America in a large scale land war in Europe might be effective... In these circumstances it is essential for Britain to formulate a realistic defence policy. In particular, the value of atomic bombs for the defence of the United Kingdom must be carefully assessed.

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20 Ibid., p. 187.
21 This concern for deterrence is an idea that runs through the entire history of post-War defence policy of Britain. This is elaborately dealt with in Chapter III.
22 Cited in, Margaret Gowing, n.19, pp. 195-96. In fact, the memorandum was pointing towards the two cardinal elements of Britain’s post-war defence policy namely, the Anglo-American relationship and the independent nuclear deterrence for Britain.
In January 1947, the British government had finally embarked on manufacturing its own nuclear deterrent, thus attending to one of the concerns expressed in the memorandum above. But Britain had to still strive to achieve the second major requirement, namely that of coupling the American defence mechanism to the defence of Western Europe. Since the stake involved was the defence of the realm, Britain could not afford to wait. Rather than waiting for the American initiatives, Britain began to explore immediate alternative options within Europe. The British forces were already far too overstretched.

By the late 1940s British forces were present in over 40 countries across the world, some of them necessitated by the commitments arising out of the end of the War and others partly out of colonial commitments and a few as part of the preparations to checkmate Communist expansionism. The Statement Relating to Defence of February 1948 revealed the rationale for such a massive and overextended British presence across the world:

The objectives of our policy derive directly from our obligations and commitments as a great power. It remains the firm intention of His Majesty’s Government to maintain the forces which are needed to support its international policy, to ensure the security of the UK, to maintain its interests throughout the world, and to enable it to play its full part in the preservation of world peace...

All these duties are the inescapable responsibilities of a great Power intent on preserving peace.

Soviet expansionism still remained a matter of serious concern for Britain. Already, Bevin was speaking of the ‘doctrine of containment’ which was beginning to receive favourable response from the Americans. He was now talking, of a possible new political grouping in the West including, besides Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Ireland, Portugal and Italy.

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23 Ibid., p. 241.
The Council of Foreign Ministers Conference held in New York in December 1947, had signalled the total break in all formal dialogue between the Soviet Union and the Western Powers. Both sides felt that such dialogues were not serving much of any diplomatic purposes. This reinforced the need for Britain and other West European powers to fill up the 'power vacuum' in Western Europe all the more urgent. On 13 January 1948 Ernest Bevin told George Marshall and President Truman of Britain's plan to establish a new political and defence arrangement between herself and France and the Benelux countries represented by Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg. A few days later, on 22 January 1948, in a major speech in the House of Commons, Bevin publicly launched the idea of the Brussels Treaty. During this speech, Ernest Bevin elaborated at length the British vision for a peaceful Europe. According to him, the British policy for Europe has been based on three principles:

The first is that no one nation should dominate Europe. The second is that the old fashioned conceptions of the balance of power as an aim should be discarded... The third is that there should be substituted Four-Power cooperation and assistance to all the States of Europe to enable them to evolve freely, each in its own way.26

In the speech, Bevin spoke forcefully of the spread of the Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. He recalled the refusal of the Soviet Union to join the European Recovery Programme (ERP) and the creation of the Cominform as a centre for international espionage to punish Britain and France for launching the ERP, and spoke eloquently of the political, economic and spiritual unity of Western Europe.27 Elaborating on Britain's plans for post-War Europe, Bevin stated:

...the free nations of Western Europe must now draw closely together. How much these countries have in common. Our sacrifices in the War, our hatred of injustice and oppression, our parliamentary democracy, our striving for economic rights and our conception and the love of liberty are common

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27 Ibid.
among us all... I believe the time is ripe for a consolidation of Western Europe. 28

Later Bevin himself called his idea of a united Europe 'the Western Union. 29

The immediate solution to Western Europe's security concerns was addressed in the form of the Brussels Treaty 30 signed between Great Britain, France and the Benelux countries, on 17 March 1948 at Brussels, through which they agreed on a fifty year pact of mutual cooperation in a wide variety of activities including defence.

Simultaneously with the conclusion of the Brussels Treaty, negotiations were going on apace to create the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), later to become the OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – with the inclusion of Canada, Japan and the United States, the machinery to implement Marshall's ERP. This was mainly in response to Marshall's plea that the countries of Western Europe must show what they were prepared to do for themselves and for each other before asking for further American assistance. 31

But the Labour government in Britain was not so much enthusiastic about the closer economic integration of Western Europe. In addressing the economic issues, Britain's preference, during this phase, was for loose cooperative arrangements rather than strong integrative structures, so that it could derive the benefits of free trade and other economic benefits that came with it without compromising on British sovereignty. 32 Its order of priority was first, the economic restoration of Western Europe without too much of integration which could imply some supranational institutional arrangement to which Britain was always averse, and then to secure a more lasting American military commitment so as to help preserve the existing national

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., Col. 398.
31 Allan Bullock, n.14, p. 531.
identity and reduce the increasing sense of insecurity. The Brussels Treaty powers, under the British initiative, continued to put pressure on the Americans for their long term military commitment to Europe. The British, French and the Belgian Foreign Ministers gave strong support to the idea. Some influential people within the American administration, like the Secretary of State George Marshall, also supported the European case. In due course, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was formally established at Washington on 4 April 1949. This was a major milestone in Britain's post-War defence policy.

For the British, the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty meant the realization of a major objective of their foreign and defence policies - that of coupling the American defences with those of Western Europe. Soviet diplomacy had antagonized the United States beyond a point and the British attempted to turn this to their own advantage.33 The inevitable outcome was this mechanism which was to guard the security of the entire Western world united in their political and economic ideology and sharing a common distaste for the Soviet system.

With the establishment of NATO, Britain no longer assumed the major responsibility for containing the Soviet Union. With the Berlin crisis (1948) the American Strategic Air Command had already established bases in Britain and its atomic capability vis-à-vis the USSR was now available in the defence of Western Europe. With the British expressing their inability to sustain its interests in the Mediterranean, the United States had taken over the British hegemonic position there particularly in Greece and Turkey.34

By mid-1950s the North Atlantic Treaty arrangements were well established. Within them the United States had expressed their wish to regard the United Kingdom as a country with which they must have the most intimate possible relations. By now Britain also became an active participant in the Cold War. She realized that an open

33 A.J.R Groom, n.7, p.41.
34 Ibid., pp. 41-42.
war would bring about mutual destruction whereas in a cold war, using only offensive political and economic strategies the Soviets were bound to be the losers as they were economically weaker. As far as the British share in the Military side of this strategy was concerned, the top priorities were her own air defence, security of the North Atlantic sea routes, and her commitments to Western Europe's land defence. 35

Though the first post-War Labour government had the political conviction and courage to dissolve most of the British colonial empire, it did not visualize a total break with its former colonies. So it pursued a very cordial relationship with them through the Commonwealth of Nations. And this Commonwealth connection also became a cardinal element in Britain's post-War foreign and defence policies. 36 The 1948 Defence White Paper clearly stated the role and importance Britain attached to the former colonies, now the Commonwealth:

The security of the United Kingdom is one of the keystones of Commonwealth defence, but equally, the United Kingdom alone without the support of the Commonwealth, would lose much of its effective influence and power. If war should ever be forced upon us, besides defending these islands, we should have to play our part in defending the resources on which the Commonwealth should rely. The control of communications and of strategic key points is essential to the achievements of this aim. 37

Thus, the period of the first post-War Labour Government marked a turning point in Britain's relations with the North Atlantic powers, Western Europe, the Commonwealth countries, and the Soviet Union and its Satellites. Internally, it was following more of a Socialist policy, with programmes for social security, nationalization, etc. But there was little socialist content in her foreign policy. The Attlee Government of 1945-51, defined, laid down and pursued a defence policy which, in

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35 This was made the basic thrust area of British defence policy in the Defence Review of 1968. For details see Chapter II.
37 Cmd.7327, n.25, p.10.
content and in principle, had a global perspective. The cardinal elements of that policy were:

i) The creation and maintenance of an independent nuclear force.

ii) A major military role East of Suez

iii) A continued contribution to the defence of the Central Front

iv) Continued political, economic and military links with the former colonies, now the Commonwealth, and

v) A 'special relationship' with the United States.

Despite Labour's known hostility towards armaments and arms manufacturers, the defence expenditure remained at a high level throughout the 1945-51 period. In 1948 British forces began extensive anti-insurgency operations in Malaya which were to last until 1958. In 1950 Britain also took active part in the United Nations' (UN) effort to settle the Korean crisis. During the first winter of the Korean War in 1950-51 the proportions of the budget spent on defence rose from 6 per cent to 10 per cent.

In general, the Labour administration accepted the military aspects and the financial costs of Britain's status as a great power, but at the same time, recognized that Britain's own capability to sustain the great power status had already declined considerably and that it was possible to maintain a great power image only with the American connection and the Atlantic Alliance. Britain's own experience in the World War II was enough to warn her of the dangers inherent in a policy of appeasement or in an optimistic policy rooted on the potential aggressor's good sense, mercy or moral values. The lesson Britain learned from the 1930s was that neglect of defence can lead to disaster, as it almost did in 1940. Britain's own historical experience is that when they have taken appropriate defence preparations seriously, they have been largely successful in their use of force.

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39 Ibid.
By the time the Labour Party gave way to the Conservative government, again under Winston Churchill, in 1951, those in government had begun to feel that a war with the Soviet bloc in Europe was unlikely if the cold war which was likely to be prolonged was conducted by the Allies in a patient, level-headed and determined manner and if the United Kingdom were to use her influence to this end. The main reasons, according to the Chiefs of Staff, why war was unlikely were the increased strength of Western Europe as shown in NATO, and the American atomic deterrent already in place. The British part in this strategy was four-fold: to exercise influence on cold war policy; to meet NATO obligations; to prepare for war in case the deterrent failed; and to play a part in the main deterrent, the air offensive. This four-fold role had to be played without ruining the economy.

Britain still could not think in terms of loosening the guard against Soviet adventurism in different parts of the world but wanted to ensure that her strategic, economic and political interests were not adversely affected by forces inimical to the West. Therefore, she remained in the forefront, along with the United States, in checking Communist expansionism everywhere in the world. In 1953 the British army intervened against the Mau-Mau nationalist uprising in Kenya, and, in the same year, bound itself by treaty to come to the aid of Libya in the event of it being attacked. In 1954 sizeable British forces were stationed in the Mediterranean; in West Africa; in the Middle East; in East and Central–Southern Africa and in the Far East.

In September 1954 Britain undertook treaty obligations for the defence of Philippines, Thailand, Malaya and Singapore under the terms of the Manila Pact which established the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). In February 1955, by signing the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) she was committed to the defence of Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Again, in June 1955, under the Simonstown

40 M. Gowing, n.20, p.440.
41 Ibid., p. 441.
43 Later, the United States, France, Australia and New Zealand also joined the Treaty. Eventually member countries left the organization one by one before it was formally dissolved in June 1977.
Agreement, Britain agreed to hold joint naval operations with South Africa to protect the shipping lines around the Cape and the Indian Ocean. These networks of treaties were meant primarily to guard the British and Western interests in those regions, most of which could have proved to be choke-points against British trading interests in the event of yet another global conflagration, as also as a defence against possible Soviet adventurism in those areas.

Thus, taking into account the nature and extent of the perceived threat against her interests, Britain tried to secure them across the world through regional military alliances. NATO, SEATO, CENTO and the Simonstown Agreement fall into a pattern – Britain was trying to make up for the deficiencies in her own capabilities and force levels in dealing with her global security interests individually. They also arose out of the Western powers’ keeness to retain as many smaller countries as possible under their spheres of influence, without letting them fall in to the rival camp. These treaties were also part of the policy of deterrence against Communist expansionism.

**Nuclear Deterrence**

The other important element of this policy of deterrence was the nuclear weapons. In spite of its bitter experiences with the United States on the atomic research collaboration front in the 1940s and 1950s, Britain persisted with her own independent research for the production of nuclear weapons. The superiority of the Warsaw Pact in conventional weapons having become an accepted reality, the Western Alliance knew that only a policy posture based on nuclear retaliation against a potential aggressor could effectively deter war in Europe. Though already covered under the American nuclear umbrella since 1948, Britain did not want to find itself in a situation

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44 David Sanders, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: British Foreign Policy Since 1945* (London, Macmillan, 1990), p.227. CENTO was designed specifically to counter Communist aggression and the provisions relating to defence were not operative in the event of a conflict with non-communist countries. In 1975 Britain decided not to designate any more forces for CENTO.

45 For a detailed analysis of the history, rationale and relevance of the British independent nuclear programme, see, Chapter III of the present study.
of having to be totally dependent on the US for the security offered by this ‘decisive weapon’ for the defence of Europe. Britain’s persistent effort paid off finally when it became the third country to join the ‘nuclear club’ in October 1952.

Britain was all along convinced of the role and relevance of nuclear weapons in a military strategy based on deterrence. Britain had several reasons for keeping its own independent nuclear forces:

i) Firstly, it was seen as an important symbol for a big power status which could enable it to enjoy a dominant position in an otherwise American dominated Alliance within Europe. Only a nuclear Britain would have been able to influence the American nuclear strategy which had a crucial bearing on the security of the entire Western Alliance.

ii) Secondly, it was a question of prestige among nations. If Britain wished to retain its great power status and wanted a continued say in global affairs, it was felt that it had to have its own hold over this new weapon of decisive capabilities. It also ensured for Britain a place in the global disarmament negotiations.

iii) As the ultimate deterrent against Soviet adventurism. In case the Soviet Union entertained any doubt about the credibility of American nuclear guarantee for Western Europe based on the assumption that ‘Washington may not want to trade Chicago for Hamburg’, a British nuclear weapon provided yet another independent center of decision in the hands of the Europeans that the Soviets would have had to reckon with before it ventured on any adventure against specifically West European targets.

iv) The independent deterrent provided an insurance policy against an eventuality of any future American withdrawal from Europe. In such a scenario the British deterrent, together with the French nuclear weapons, provided a counter threat to any possible Soviet nuclear blackmail.

v) Britain also felt that its nuclear weapons could be used to trigger the use of the much bigger American nuclear arsenal. If the American government were hesitant in a crisis, or in case both the superpowers agreed to try to limit a conflict to Europe, the British deterrent could be used as a catalyst to force the American hand.

vi) Economically also it was found that the nuclear deterrence was cheaper as compared to the required level of investment to match the Warsaw
Pact’s conventional strength, while militarily it made Britain appear stronger.

In 1954, in the wake of the American and Soviet explosion of thermo-nuclear weapons (the Hydrogen Bomb), the British government also announced its decision to proceed with the development of thermo-nuclear weapons as well. On this issue also there was bi-partisan consensus within Britain. The National Executive Committee of the Labour Party at its meeting on 30 March 1955, adopted a Resolution on the hydrogen bomb which declared: “...pending world disarmament, weapons of mass destruction were a deterrent against aggression. Because of the disparity of forces in the conventional field between the Western powers and the Soviet bloc unilateral disarmament is folly. It is equally foolish to suggest that these weapons (thermonuclear) will only be used if an aggressor uses them first.” Nevertheless, to supplement the deterrent, the Resolution argued that “conventional forces must be maintained to deal with small-scale or localized disturbances... . The choice today is between world cooperation for peace and annihilation in another war.”

In the immediate post-War years the British attitude towards West Germany (The Federal Republic of Germany, FRG) was characterized by considerable distrust. But by early 1950s, Britain felt that Germany, entangled with the Western alliance, would be safer to the other Europeans both economically and militarily. Britain, therefore, supported the admission of West Germany into the NATO alliance. In fact, it was the British who laid the diplomatic foundations for FRG’s entry into the NATO in 1954. On this issue also Britain found support in the United States, though the French were not very enthusiastic about it. One of the British considerations for this was to use the German economic power and their military potential for the defence of Western Alliance against the already identified common enemy – the Communist bloc.

The 1954 Defence White Paper stated that within a limited budget, Britain may not be able to afford both new weapons and conventional forces of the existing size.\(^{48}\) The government was, therefore, moving towards a position in which it was giving priority to the aims of keeping the defence budget under control and developing nuclear weapons, at the expense of the conventional capability, and a full spectrum of delivery vehicles. It was not, however, reducing the commitment, which the British forces had to fulfill.\(^{49}\) This approach was largely endorsed by the Opposition Labour Party also.

With the exception of Denis Healey, who advocated *graduated deterrence* and Clement Attlee, who had reservations about *Massive Retaliation*, the leading defence spokesmen of the Labour Party were in fair agreement that the government should be encouraged to cut its conventional capability and attempt to strengthen the deterrent effect of thermonuclear weapons. The political argument in support of this was presented by Attlee. He said:

> I think that we have an influence in the world. That influence does not depend solely upon the possession of weapons, although I have found in practical conversations that the fact that we do possess these weapons does have an effect upon the rulers of other countries. It is quite an illusion to think that it does not have an effect.\(^{50}\)

In the mid-1950s, Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, had initiated a discussion on Britain’s long-term defence needs and its role in world affairs with a group of his senior colleagues in the government. Eden had come to the conclusion that the main threat to British position and influence in the world was emerging from political and economic factors rather than military, and, therefore, it was necessary to adapt its policies to meet that changed situation. This could be accomplished only by shifting the focus of policy from military preparation to the maintenance and improvement of Britain’s political and economic position in the world. Eden also felt that continued dependence on foreign aid is not going to be a prudent option and, therefore, it was

necessary to find means of increasing, by £400m a year, the credit side of British balance of payments. According to him another major war was the least likely possibility. On the basis of this perception Eden proposed to reduce the strength of the armed forces and to bring the National Service to an end.\textsuperscript{51}

When the 1956 Defence White Paper was published the government felt that there were two further economic factors to be taken into consideration. The first was the progressive reduction in the external economic aid on which Britain has been able to rely for quite some time. Second was the probability that from 1956-57 onwards the bulk of the local costs of British forces in Germany was to be met by British defence budget rather than by FRG itself.\textsuperscript{52}

Stating that the objective of Western powers is defensive, the White Paper declared that the Western Powers will “never be the aggressors but they must have and be known to have the power of instant and overwhelming retaliation, if attacked. It is the retaliatory power which is the vital factor.”\textsuperscript{53} The White Paper also revealed that a seven year defence review was in progress in order to ensure four major immediate considerations of defence policy decisions:

(i) to ensure that the development pattern of the services over the next few years conforms to the needs of the new strategic situation;

(ii) to provide for the services reasonably long term plans on which their production training and building programmes can be based.

(iii) to ensure that the reduction in manpower is achieved with least military risk; and

(iv) to ensure that the cost of defence, whether in terms of manpower, materials or money, does not overload the economy... \textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., para 5.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., para 13.
Accordingly, the *Statement on Defence Estimates* fixed the manpower target for 1960, or one year later, at the outside, for a Navy of 90,000, an Army of 200,000, and an Air Force of 155,000 men. This was to be facilitated by the civilianisation of the tail. The Reserve Army too was to be reorganized.\(^{55}\) George Brown, then the chief Opposition spokesman on defence, urged the government to seek economy by “streamlining the forces and obtaining greater efficiency...by abandoning irrelevant forces, irrelevant arms and irrelevant commitments...”\(^{56}\)

**The Suez Crisis: A Turning Point In Post-War Defence Policy**

The Suez crisis, precipitated by the nationalization of the Suez Canal by President Abdul Nasser of Egypt, on 26 July 1956, was a test case for British post-War defence policy. Britain had been drawing enormous economic benefits from the canal. But now as this interest was undermined and Egypt appeared adamant about its decision, Britain had no option but to use military means against Egypt. Britain, France and Israel joined together in the operations against Egypt which proved to be too costly for Britain militarily, economically and diplomatically.\(^{57}\) Ignoring the serious voices of dissent from the Commonwealth and other sources, including the United States, against the intended British and French military intervention to take over control of the Suez Canal, the Anglo-French and Israeli forces launched an attack against Egypt in late October 1956. However, much against the British calculations, almost all sources, from where she expected support, disapproved the military intervention.

In this crisis both British diplomacy and the armed forces found themselves caught off guard and ill-equipped to come up to the requirements of the task expected of both. Since neither Britain nor France had the necessary conventional forces ready to intervene in the canal zone immediately, it took several weeks to prepare and

\(^{55}\) Ibid.  
\(^{56}\) UK Commons, *Parliamentary Debates*, Session 1956-57. Vol. 564, Col. 1294-5 (emphasis added) This was something that the Labour government attempted to do in the 1968 Defence Review. (See, Chapter II).  
\(^{57}\) For a detailed analysis of the circumstances leading to the crisis, its management and the British experience in it see, B. Vivekanandan, n.36, Chapter VI and Andre Fontaine, *History of the Cold War: From the Korean War to the Present* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), Chapter II.
assemble the necessary forces in the Mediterranean area. Finally they mobilized a force after withdrawing forces from internal security duties in Cyprus and Algeria.\textsuperscript{58}

In spite of its serious efforts to win their support, none of the Commonwealth countries, except Australia and New Zealand, supported the British position. In fact, leading Commonwealth countries like India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Pakistan and Canada, took openly hostile stand towards Britain in the dispute\textsuperscript{59}. According to Vivekanandan, “lack of support from most of the countries of the Commonwealth, as well as the US attitude, considerably weakened Britain’s position on the diplomatic front.”\textsuperscript{60} Most members of the Commonwealth and the larger international community saw the British action as an evidence of London’s preparedness to resort to intimidation if it failed to get its way by persuasion.\textsuperscript{61}

Finally, mandated by a UN Resolution, passed with the support of the United States, the Soviet Union and most of the Commonwealth countries, and against British opposition, Britain and France were forced to effect a cease-fire and the eventual withdrawal of their forces from the Suez Canal area and the Egyptian territory. The unhelpful position taken by the United States and the leading members of the Commonwealth, particularly India, which described the British action as an act of ‘naked aggression,’\textsuperscript{62} was crucial in the humiliating British withdrawal from Egyptian territory. President, Dwight D. Eisenhower took the position, contrary to the British expectation and to their embarrassment, that the United States was “committed to a peaceful settlement of this dispute, (and) nothing else.”\textsuperscript{63}

The Suez crisis contributed to a serious reassessment of Britain’s defence policy and standing in the world. As Roger Ruston put it: “On the strategic side it had exposed

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{A.J. R Groom, n.7, p. 190.}
\footnote{Graham Spry, ‘Canada, the UN Emergency Force and the Commonwealth’, \textit{International Affairs} (London), Vol.33, no.3 (1957), pp.289-300.}
\footnote{B. Vivekanandan, n. 36, p.218.}
\footnote{David Sanders, n.44, p. 102.}
\footnote{Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s Speech in Hyderabad, India, on 1 November, 1956, reported in \textit{The Hindu} (Madras) 2 November, 1956.}
\footnote{Cited in, B. Vivekanandan, n. 36, p.219.}
\end{footnotes}
Britain’s vulnerability to pressure from the superpowers…. On the political side it had revealed to many just how far down the scale of powers Britain had slid since the War.”64 Once the crisis took such an ignominious end one very important realization dawned on Britain that she cannot pursue an effective defence policy without the support of the United States. This has prompted some experts to comment that “after Suez Britain hardly had any independent defence policy.”65

The Suez crisis represented a case of diplomatic defeat for Britain. She was, in fact, caught in a serious dilemma between persisting with its belligerent posture vis-à-vis Egypt and seeking to secure her objective of having a say in the management of the Canal forcefully, and of risking the disintegration of the Commonwealth which many members had threatened. Besides, Britain learnt the lesson that Commonwealth solidarity could not be taken for granted, that the member-countries’ perceived national interests would dictate their policies rather than any notions of ‘special bond’ with Britain. It was also the first serious test-case for Anglo-American solidarity on which Britain had placed a lot of hope in the post-war years. And it was the absence of this solidarity that proved to be the crucial factor against Britain. When Britain was finally forced to withdraw from Suez, there was a general perception that it was the “unholy alliance” of the United States, India, and strangely the Soviet Union, in the United Nations, that forced the British to retreat.66

However, one of the major considerations that prevailed on Britain in succumbing to international pressure was an overriding concern to sustain the emotional and the political bond with the Commonwealth – one of the three concentric circles, along with the Atlantic and the European circles, around which Britain’s post-war foreign and defence policies revolved. This concern has been repeatedly reinforced by the media and the academic and the political circles - both the ruling

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64 Roger Ruston, n.6, p. 132.
65 Comments by Sir Arthur Hockaday, a senior officer in the British Ministry of Defence (MOD) in the 1950s and who later became the Permanent Under Secretary in the MOD in the 1970s, in his interview with the present researcher on 9 June 2003, at IISS, London.
66 The Hindu (Madras), 5 December, 1956.
and the Opposition - in Britain throughout the crisis.\footnote{For a detailed picture, see, B. Vivekanandan, n.36, pp.226-234.} Indeed, Suez crisis actually vindicated the correctness of this ‘three circles’ policy. Therefore, in spite of such a humiliating experience, Britain continued her ‘three circles’ strategy, something necessary to sustain the waning ‘great power’ image of Britain.

Analyzing the lessons of the Suez crisis for Britain, Michael Howard wrote:

> Often in military history defeats have paradoxically been the salvation of nations. It was the French who learned most from the Seven Years War, the Germans from the First World War, and though we ultimately emerged victorious from the Crimea and from the Boer wars, our humiliating reverses in those campaigns led to ruthless enquiry and radical reform. So one hopes it will be with Suez. It is by our ability to conduct such operations as this with promptness and skill that the world will judge our claim to be a great power, and few episodes in our history have done so much to shake the faith of our friends and the respect of our enemies as did the delay, the uncertainty and the ambiguity of that operation. If we can learn as much from that humiliation as we learned from the Boer war and emerge as we did from that with a new model force, we will really justify our claim to rank as a great power. If we do not, then no amount of bombers and no conceivable scientific progress will save us from a well-merited eclipse.\footnote{Michael Howard, ‘Strategy in the Nuclear Age’, \textit{RUSI Journal} (London), November 1957, p. 482.}

Post-Suez Turn-around

One of the most remarkable aspects of British thinking on defence until 1957 was the relative lack of serious concern with the economics of defence expenditure. Despite recurrent economic crises and the expenditure of a considerable proportion of the GNP and an even larger percentage of government expenditure on defence needs, it was not until after the Suez crisis that there was a serious realization that the relationship between commitments and resources was crucial. In fact, from the end of the War up to the end of the Suez Crisis, Britain was too preoccupied with issues after issues of global military and political concerns that it could not seriously think of the economic implications of the defence policy it has been pursuing. Seen in the context of the cold war, in which Britain was a leading participant, it was inevitable for Britain to have pursued a pro-active defence policy.
However, by late 1950s Britain had begun to realize the unsustainability of such a policy. The period between 1951 to 1964 witnessed thirteen years of uninterrupted Conservative Administration with four Prime Ministers – Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan and Alec Douglas-Home. Throughout these thirteen years substantial cuts were effected in the defence expenditure.

Significant cuts, including the phasing out of conscription, were announced in the 1957 Defence White Paper presented by Duncan Sandys. The change of Defence Policy brought about in 1957 was described by Harold Macmillan as the biggest change in military policy ever made in normal times. The Defence Policy Statement made in 1957 promised a less costly defence force, and, at the same time, pledged to restore Britain's lost status by staking everything on its nuclear weapons. It proposed to almost halve the size of the armed forces by 1962 and to reduce the manpower of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) and to make up for it with the fire power of atomic artillery, to reduce the number of aircraft in Germany and offset this by providing squadrons with atomic bombs, to abandon the advanced bomber then being developed and to rely on ballistic missiles to be bought from the United States or developed with its help. Politically, the most important move was the proposed major reduction in manpower which could come about through the abolition of National Service. The end of conscription was conditional on the acceptance of nuclear weapons.

Making a realistic assessment of Britain's defence posture, the 1957 Defence White Paper said:

Britain’s influence in the world depends first and foremost on the health of her internal economy and the success of her export trade .... Without these, military power cannot, in the long run, be supported. It is, therefore, in the true interest of defence that the claims of military expenditure should be considered in conjunction with the need to maintain the country’s financial and economic strength.

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The aim of the force, according to the Paper, was to play their part with the forces of allied countries in deterring and resisting aggression and to defend British colonies and protected territories against local attack, and undertake limited operations in overseas emergencies.\(^{72}\) In this, whatever the yardstick to measure, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that Britain has been bearing a disproportionately large share of the total burden of Western defence.\(^{73}\)

The 1957 White Paper was based on the assumption that a sound economy was a basic element in British security, and a high defence cost could weaken the country which it was trying to secure. The Paper attributed most of Britain's economic difficulties to the disproportionately high spending on defence. It said:

...over the last five years, defence has, on an average, absorbed 10% of Britain's GNP. Some 7% of the working populations are either in the services or supporting them. One-eighth of the output of the metal using industries, upon which the export trade so largely depends, is devoted to defence. An undue proportion of qualified scientists and engineers are engaged on military work. In addition, the retention of such large forces abroad gives rise to heavy charges which place a severe strain upon the balance of payments.\(^{74}\)

Indicating the government's intention to rely increasingly on the nuclear deterrent without ignoring the importance of conventional defence, the White Paper emphasized that while Britain cannot, by comparison, make more than a modest contribution, there is a wide measure of agreement that she must possess an appreciable element of nuclear deterrent power of her own. It said:

The possession of nuclear air power is not by itself a complete deterrent. The frontiers of the free world, particularly in Europe, must be firmly defended on the ground. For only in this way can it be made clear that aggression will be resisted... .However, Britain cannot any longer continue to make a disproportionately large contribution... . Thus BAOR is to be reduced... .The force will be reorganized in such a way as to increase the proportion of fighting

\(^{72}\) Ibid., para 8 (emphasis added).

\(^{73}\) Ibid., para. 11 (emphasis added). This is a sentiment repeated in most of the Defence Policy Statements since then and particularly with the 1968 Statement, which had brought about major changes in British defence policy. For details, see, Chapter-II of the present study.

\(^{74}\) Cmnd. 124, n.71, para., 7.
units; and atomic rocket artillery will be introduced which will greatly augment their fire power.... The Tactical Air Force in Germany would be reduced... .This reduction will be offset by the fact that some of the squadrons will be provided with atomic bombs.75

There were also to be squadrons with a nuclear capability based in Cyprus.76 It was also planned to reduce the size of the armed forces from 690,000 to 375,000 by the end of 1962 and it was planned to end National Service in 1960.

The Labour Party leader, Richard Crossman, criticised the White Paper, calling it, “a reckless gamble - a gamble on the nuclear deterrent and a gamble on regular recruitment.” He argued:

When the plan was implemented, we shall have jeopardized the power to defend ourselves in the only kind of war this country can wage and this for the illusion of status equal to that of the USA and the USSR. Nothing, moreover, would be added in terms of security. All the evidence of the last two years is that for a country of our size and geographical situation the wisest defence policy would be to renounce along with our European neighbours...the production and use of nuclear weapons; and to build up with them small conventional forces - streamlined and extremely mobile for the defence of the NATO area. Their role would be to deter conventional attack while the United States continued to provide the nuclear deterrent.77

The main significance of the White Paper lay in the proposed restructuring of the armed forces for greater reliance on nuclear weapons and in the anticipated economies of manpower and conventional weaponry that this allowed. According to Roger Ruston, in doing that, it deepened Britain’s commitment to early use of nuclear weapons in any future war.78 Independent observers believed that the 1957 defence review “was the first post-war attempt to define a defence policy which the country could afford and which endeavoured to foresee the role of conventional forces in the thermo-nuclear age which was just beginning.”79

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75 Ibid., para. 20-23.
76 Ibid., para 27.
77 The New Statesman (London), 27 April, 1957.
78 Roger Ruston, n.6, p. 134.
In the period 1955-56 to 1958-59 defence research fell from a proportion of two-thirds to half of the research done by private industry, and the number of Scientists and Engineers working on defence projects fell from 40 per cent to about 25 per cent. On the whole, however, the economy benefited from Duncan Sandy’s cut back in defence expenditure.

In the subsequent Defence White Paper, the Conservative Government backed off from the extreme position it had taken in 1957 although this was more a matter of changing declaratory policy in the face of public concern than of any real change in the substance of strategy. The 1959 Defence White Paper contained no statement on deterrence policy nor did it make any announcement of major shift in Britain’s defence strategy and outlook. The Statement of 1960 further appeared to be moving in the direction of emphasizing on conventional forces. The Report on Defence stated: “...the nuclear power of the West is only one component of the deterrent. Because of the need to meet local emergencies which could develop into a major conflict, conventionally armed forces are a necessary complement to nuclear armaments.”

The 1961 Defence White Paper laid out that the primary purpose of Britain’s defence policy is “...that it should protect us, our allies and our friends against the whole spectrum of possible aggression and military threats, from the small local action which might be the beginning of larger and more dangerous adventures through nuclear blackmail to nuclear war.”

The 1962 Defence White Paper, outlining the policy for the next five years, proposed a return to the idea of a conventional force capable of meeting acts of aggression without bringing about the rapid end of Britain. In addition to the return to a broader notion of deterrence, away from exclusive reliance or massive instant nuclear

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80 Cited in, A.J.R Groom, n.7, p. 264.
response, there was also a recognition that an era of strategic balance between the West and the East was being entered in which threat of a massive nuclear attack no longer seemed rational in a military sense. The 1962 Statement probably reflected the change in thinking which had been occurring in the United States since the beginning of the Kennedy Administration. For Britain, and for the rest of NATO Europe, the cardinal principle of deterrence was that any military adventure by the Warsaw Pact in the NATO area would risk bringing down the American strategic weapons on their cities. The conventional armies were to act as trip-wires, for the American tactical nuclear weapons, which, if need be, would provide the essential linkage with strategic weapons also.

The Conservative Administration began to think in terms of doing away with the national service, and to rely on an all regular volunteer force, prompted by a realization that the massive preponderance of Warsaw pact conventional forces, all along the NATO front in Europe, would inevitably lead to an early use of nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet attack. Already the 1955 Defence White Paper, presented by Harold Macmillan as Defence Secretary, had concluded: “If we do not use the full weight of our nuclear power, Europe can hardly be protected from invasion and occupation.” It was this thought that was later revealed as a strategy of substituting manpower for fire power, by the Macmillan government.

It was again this policy posture of heavy reliance on nuclear fire power that made it possible to finally end the national service in 1962. The strategy of a rapid transition to a nuclear exchange after only a brief period of conventional warfare would make it militarily unnecessary for large reserve forces to reach the battle theatre before the nuclear phase had begun, thus invalidating the military need for conscription. Similarly, as the pre-nuclear phase was to be short, there was scope for economies in

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84 R. Ruston, n.6, p. 138.
85 Ibid.
87 Roger Ruston, n.6, p.134.
the number and size of systems and organization designed to cope with prolonged conventional warfare. Hence the government placed greater faith for the future in the guided missile than in the manned aircraft.

Seen in the context of the economic difficulties Britain was experiencing those days, this shift in strategy was particularly convenient. As Chichester and Wilkinson put it: "It justified the continuation of the strategic nuclear deterrent capability and weakened the case for the simultaneous maintenance of substantial numbers of conventional forces and reserves neither of which the country could afford in the quantities needed to defend Europe alongside the USA against the growing Soviet threat." 88

As a follow up of the shift in emphasis, many fighter squadrons, both in the fighter command at home and in the Royal Air Force, Germany, were disbanded. The other causalities of the new policy were the Royal Auxiliary Air Force, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Air Divisions and the Army's Anti-Aircraft Command. 89 One could also see the beginning of the end of the civil defence organization which virtually ceased to exist in 1968. 90 But all these 'salami slicing' proved insufficient to match the continuing weakness of the British economy. 91

When the national service finally ended in 1962, there were visible signs of overstretch in the Army. Also, by 1962, the government had taken a decision to limit the annual defence budget to not more than 7 per cent of the GNP. It was becoming clear then that the strategic nuclear deterrent force, overseas commitments in many parts of the globe, and the post-War undertaking to maintain a significant presence in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), could not all be effectively supported within

88 Michael Chichester and John Wilkinson, n.79, p.5.
90 Ibid.
91 Michael Chichester and John Wilkinson, n.79, p.4.
the prescribed financial ceiling. The 1962 Defence White Paper, therefore, to meet the contingency, introduced the concept of the amphibious Joint Service Task Force to be stationed East of Suez capable of putting ashore in a threatened area, on short notice, a brigade group and its heavy equipment, and of providing air and communications support. The object of the Task-Force was to reinforce units stationed permanently in Aden and the Gulf in an emergency. The lessons of the Kuwait operations, of 1961, had been drawn upon in establishing the task-force plan.

Recognizing the importance of peace and stability in the oil producing States of Arabia and the Persian Gulf for the Western world, the 1962 White Paper had emphasised the need to take measures to improve British military effectiveness in those areas so that British responsibilities to provide military assistance to those States to which the United Kingdom was bound by Treaty or which were otherwise under its protection could be discharged effectively. The Conservative Party, in one of its longest periods in office from 1951 to 1964, however, did not make any serious attempt to reduce the problems arising out of the perceived over-stretch of the British forces with almost world-wide commitments and faced with a falling manpower.

The decision to substitute manpower for firepower was one of serious consequences. It did not confine itself to the level of strategic force, but extended to the level of tactical forces as well. As an extension of this policy, in 1958, the BAOR was being trained in the use of nuclear weapons in the early phases of the battle itself. Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, also admitted this shift in emphasis when he said, "...the Defence White Paper makes it clear that all our defence and the economics of defence expenditure are founded on nuclear warfare..."
This change of emphasis was reflected in the initiatives taken for upgrading the technology for the delivery of nuclear weapons. Taking advantage of an amendment to the McMahon Act, by the US Congress in 1958, the British nuclear technology was advanced by sharing information with the United States. The advanced Polaris missiles, provided by the US, left in British hands a highly sophisticated delivery system for their own nuclear weapons, at an affordable cost.\textsuperscript{98}

It should be noted that this shifting of strategy at that point had more to do with Britain's domestic political and economic conditions rather than with any change in the global strategic environment. By the mid-1960s defence spending had fallen as a percentage of public expenditure from 25 to 10 even though as a percentage of GDP it continued to remain fairly constant.\textsuperscript{99} The size of the armed forces fell from 702,000 in 1957 and 580,000 in 1959 to 423,000 by April 1964.\textsuperscript{100} At the administrative level, with a view to controlling inter-service rivalry, a unified Ministry of Defence was established in 1963.\textsuperscript{101}

This period also had witnessed large-scale decolonisation. Between 1956 and 1964, 18 colonies were granted independence by Britain – the largest figure in any eight year period.\textsuperscript{102} And during the six year period of the Labour government that followed, twelve more were added to the list of countries freed by Britain.

By the mid-fifties most colonial powers had come to realize that keeping the colonies, though strategic assets for their global policy, was, in fact, an economic liability. Recent research in the United States has concluded that as early as in 1880 the British Empire was producing an economic return lower than investment in Britain itself while to preserve it the British tax payer was paying two and a half times more

\textsuperscript{99} Christopher Coker, \textit{A Nation In Retreat?: Britain's Defence Commitment} (London, Brassey's, 1986), p.3.
\textsuperscript{100} Michael Pinto- Duschinsky, n.100, p.155.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} David Sanders, n. 44, p. 106-7.
than the citizens of other developed countries. According to Denis Healey, "if its military administrative and financial costs were added together, the empire was a bad economic bargain." Since European security already having been anchored around collective security arrangements, and the security interests of all the major conceivable choke-points across the globe having been taken care of, it did not make much economic or strategic sense for Britain to continue to retain direct authority over most of her colonies, especially in the light of the growing nationalist sentiments among the local population.

The Labour Realism Coming To Prevail

After nearly thirteen years in opposition, the Labour Party, under the leadership of Harold Wilson, was voted to power in Britain on 15 October 1964. The Labour had a different perception of the future course of the world events and a more realistic view of Britain’s economic position and the standing in the world. The Labour leadership shared a belief that the Conservative government was attempting to do too much on the defence front and that the country’s economic pressures called for a reduction in the range of its commitments. It, therefore, wanted to put an end to the extended British military presence in different parts of the world. Soon after assuming office the new government announced its determination to introduce a review of its public expenditure. One of the major considerations for the review was to relate British military expenditure to a deliberately chosen set of policy objectives and to keep it within the limits which the country could afford.

In 1964-65 the defence budget was still the second largest single item of government spending. The Labour Party, with its socialist commitments, wanted more money to be diverted to the programmes for housing, health, education, etc. With the Polaris nuclear submarine programme, initiated by the previous government, already at an advanced stage, wherein even the cancellation charges could have amounted to 50

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104 Ibid.
per cent of the cost of the whole programme, the government had to turn its eyes on the conventional forces and their extended commitments, particularly those which incurred foreign exchange costs, and on future weapons programmes particularly the fighter aircrafts. In terms of commitments the obvious choice before the government was between NATO Europe on the one hand and the overseas commitments, particularly in the Middle East, Singapore and Malaysia, on the other.

Throughout 1967 the British economy remained in poor health. As the balance of payments problem and economic pressure increased there was no option left for the government but to effect further cuts on defence spending again, without specifying Britain’s perceived future strategic role. Up till the end of 1967 the government’s effort was to devise a cheaper strategic formulation which would allow them to cover the existing range of overseas commitments within the confines of a smaller budget. This having failed, it was realized that only major foreign policy decisions could open the way to economies in defence expenditure. This was sought to be achieved through a radical defence Review, the result of which was announced by Prime Minister Harold Wilson on 16 January 1968.

Conclusion

For more than two decades after the end of the Second World War, and even as the process of decolonisation had taken an irreversible trend, Britain continued to think that it had global interests and global responsibilities to be sustained through global defence commitments. The British policy makers continued to believe that control over major strategic bases and resource-rich territories in different parts of the world, many of which formed part of the vast British Empire at some point of time, was essential for Britain’s own future security. This entailed continued deployment of the British forces across the world, either on her own or as part of some regional security arrangements.
For almost two decades after the end of the War, Britain managed to keep up such deployments, despite the visible decline in the performance of the economy. The large number of British colonies, which at some point were seen as economic mines, were also beginning to be economic liabilities while still serving important strategic objectives, especially in the context of the struggle for expanding the spheres of influence by the two major power blocs into which the world found itself soon after the War.

Britain, one of the major actors in the global arena before the War, during the War and at the end of it, found herself actively in the midst of the chaotic conditions that emerged in the immediate post-war years. Britain had so much at stake in standing up to the new political, military and ideological threats posed by the Soviet Union and her other communist allies.

The onset of the nuclear age, in the meantime, made physical resistance to this threat suicidal for both sides. The only way out was to try to outwit each other by harping on the areas where each side felt stronger than the other. Whereas the Soviet Union and her allies thought that the aggressive nature and the intrinsic merit of their ideology, with its humanitarian underpinnings, would prevail over the so-called 'exploitative capitalist system', Britain and her allies felt that its impracticality and the inherent contradictions within the communist system would undo it in the long run. The cold war that followed for the next few decades was fought bitterly by both the parties. Britain, along with the United States, was one of the leading players in that.

Since the basic strategy in the cold war was eternal vigilance against each other, neither side could afford to reduce the guard at any stage. This inevitably involved an arms race, and some times, low intensity proxy wars in different parts of the world to retain or win over spheres of influence. The perceived deficiency in the strength of the British forces to meet the threat posed by the Warsaw Pact was sought to be made up by forming large scale military Alliances like the NATO and the
Brussels Treaty and smaller regional ones like the SEATO and the CENTO. Given the tradition of hostility and mutual mistrust among the European countries, Britain wanted to be doubly certain that the post-War defense arrangements were fool-proof and, therefore, cultivated a very special relationship with the United States within the Atlantic Alliance itself. This relationship was expected to survive even if the larger Alliance broke up.

As a third level of insurance against any possible blackmail, by friends and foes alike, Britain painstakingly pursued her own independent nuclear programme and maintained a credible level of deterrence, with a convincing strategic doctrine. Deficiencies in the technology, weaponry and armaments were sought to be addressed through cooperation and collaboration between allies and through import on favourable terms. Cooperation in the field of missile delivery systems, the positioning of the nuclear-capable bombers and the deployment of nuclear warheads in Europe are the best cases in point.

Ultimately, however, the one crucial element that was to decide the course of the cold war was the performance of the economies of the respective participating countries. These exercises were not to carry on endlessly without their adverse consequences, especially on the economic front. The war-ravaged British economy did not get a breathing space, after the War, for an uninterrupted effort at recovery. However, the liberal economic aid from her prosperous special Ally in the prosecution of the ‘cold war’ strategies and the opportunities grabbed by the capitalist economy in a growing world economy, sustained Britain through the first two decades after the War. By the mid-1960s, however, Britain found herself in a situation of overstretch – both economically and militarily.

Another aspect that merits the attention of the post-War defence policy analyst is that of the politics of defence policy making in Britain. For almost two-third of the first two decades of the post-War governance, the Conservatives were at the helm of affairs. Throughout this period, substantial cuts were made in the men and materials as
well as the research programme of the British military forces, without making any corresponding adjustments in the tasks to be accomplished by them. This, inevitably, had created a situation of over-stretch.

This mismatch of commitments and capability became a serious issue to be dealt with by the end of the second decade of the post-war period. Given the economic reality of the country by then, a solution had to be found politically rather than militarily. It called for the political will to realistically deal with the reduced position of Britain. By the second half of the 1960s the options were clearly laid down before the political leadership – trimming down of the overstretch was to become a *fait accompli*. The Labour Party that assumed power in late 1964 had its tasks clearly cut out before it.

The cold war divisions having been largely sealed and the fundamental security of the homeland and the immediate European neighbourhood already having been secured in the Western Alliance – and most other options having exhausted – Britain found herself in a position to gamble a little bit on the safety and security of the areas over which she had been keeping a watchful eye, with military support, ever since the end of the War. To provide teeth to that policy, strategic doctrines were modified and made it sound more aggressive, so that the potential aggressors could be deterred without actually having to fire the guns and the nuclear missiles. And to reassure those who felt were being left at the mercy of the potential aggressors, regional security alliances were also established, with the participation and involvement of Britain and some of her better-off allies. This was to mark a turning point in British diplomatic, military and political history. The Chapter that follows will analyze the implications of the changes effected in the British defence policy since the beginning of the third post-war decade.