

# REBUILDING THE ANGLO-AMERICAN ALLIANCE

by

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**I**t can be argued that the most important factor in international relations in the half century beginning with America's entry into World War I and ending with the British decision some 50 years later to join the European Common Market was, as Kaiser Wilhelm ruefully remarked, that both Great Britain and the United States spoke the same language. The long-standing partiality of many Americans for the British to which the German Emperor referred was reflected in the decision of the United States to depart from its traditional policy of non-involvement in European affairs by joining the Allied side in 1917 and even more by United States assistance to Britain before US entry into World War II, assistance that played a key role in London's ability to fight on alone after the French surrender. The close Anglo-American cooperation that developed during the war continued into the immediate postwar period, as the United States worked closely with Great Britain in seeking to block postwar Soviet expansion.

A common language, shared culture and traditions, and a reasonably close identity of interests were instrumental in fostering this special relationship, to which many in France and elsewhere on the Continent understandably objected. Of equal importance, however, was the military capability that the British could bring to the partnership. Despite the widespread impression that London's military strength declined so rapidly after the close of World War II that it almost immediately ceased to be of signi-

ficance, in reality the British armed forces remained a key factor in international affairs for more than a decade after the close of that conflict. Aided by the United Kingdom's wartime role in the joint Anglo-American program to develop a nuclear bomb, the British exploded their own nuclear device in October 1952, becoming the world's third atomic power after the United States and the Soviet Union. While the British nuclear capability was obviously less impressive than that of the Americans or the Soviets, Britain was nonetheless established as the possessor of an independent force that could serve as a deterrent to any Soviet threat to the British Isles.

In terms of conventional forces, London's position was no less important. In 1952, seven years after the war, Great Britain was still the world's third-ranking military power. The Royal Armed Forces numbered some 857,000 regulars, many deployed at trouble spots around the world. With 12 aircraft carriers, the Royal Navy was the second most powerful in the world. Sizable British contingents were stationed in the Far East, including over 40,000 men fighting the communist insurgency in Malaya and a brigade participating with the United Nations forces in Korea.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in their joint consultations senior Anglo-American military planners assigned to Britain primary responsibility for defending Western interests in the Middle East. As the deployments in Singapore, Malaya, and Korea testified, London was also ready to play a significant

role in dealing with any security threats in the Pacific. A far-flung network of British bases in Suez, Malta, Cyprus, Aden, and Singapore and a multitude of lesser installations indicated that Britain, even if less formidable than before the war, was still a military power to be reckoned with.

A far different situation exists today. In the intervening three decades the British armed forces have shrunk to a total strength of some 330,000. Handicapped by financial limitations and by a dependence on an all-volunteer force, that once-vaunted British military establishment now stands seriously short of modern materiel and has been surpassed in size by the forces of such nations as West Germany, Turkey, France, Italy, Spain, Egypt, and Pakistan. Virtually all of Britain's former overseas bases have been relinquished. The Royal Air Force has totally given up its strategic nuclear weapon delivery capability, and the Royal Navy is no more than a shadow of its former self, possessing only three antisubmarine carriers and announcing plans in June 1981 to phase one of those out of service. The ground forces have been similarly emasculated, with the bulk of the troops stationed in Northern Ireland or committed to the 55,000-man Army of the Rhine, and with scarcely a corporal's guard available for service elsewhere.

Although the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher entered office in May 1979 intending to strengthen British military power, serious financial difficulties have prevented any such accomplishment and may well force further reductions in defense expenditures. Indeed, it is problematic whether the Conservative government will be able to carry out its plan to purchase Trident-missile-equipped submarines from the United States to replace the four obsolete Polaris submarines whose nuclear missiles are all that remains of the independent British nuclear deterrent.

Turning the clock back to 1945, it is clear that the Great Britain that emerged from World War II was markedly different from the proud empire that had gone to war in 1939 to prevent Germany from dominating Europe. New conditions both at home and

abroad had created pressures that could not be ignored for the independence of Burma, India, and other restive possessions. Once the process of granting independence began, the fragile fabric that had held the empire together rapidly unraveled, leading to the withdrawal of virtually all of the colonies, which in their entirety had created both the substance and the image of Great Britain as a world power. The extent and speed of the devolution was compounded by the reluctance of large segments of the British population to bear the costs of retaining that nation's prewar role in international affairs.

Under these circumstances, some alteration in British policy was inevitable. Many on both sides of the Atlantic anticipated that it would take the form of a continuation of the close Anglo-American cooperation that had characterized the war years. Few could have prophesied the eventual outcome: Britain's association with the Continent at the expense of its former special relationship with the United States, the surrender of its capability for independent action, and acceptance of the status of a third-rate military power.

The abdication by Great Britain of its former role as a great power was not entirely a matter of London's choice—the United States was a leading actor in the events that produced this result. The American policies that led to such an outcome were a major

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blunder; it is now essential for the United States to rectify them by assisting Britain to resume a more significant responsibility in protecting the security of the Free World.

**T**he actions and policies through which the United States shaped the current character of its relations with Britain can be divided into three broad categories. The first centered on the decision of the Eisenhower Administration in 1953 to refashion American defense policy. Rather than building sufficient conventional forces to be able to resist Soviet aggression without recourse to nuclear weapons, the new Republican Administration instead adopted a policy of massive retaliation, confident that US nuclear superiority would deter a Soviet attack or at least insure that this country would defeat the Soviet Union without suffering an unacceptable level of damage. Numerous arguments were offered in support of this policy, but essentially it was designed to reduce the cost of the American defense effort and to reduce the number of men who might otherwise have to be kept under arms. Prime Minister Winston Churchill's Conservative government, elected in 1951 and facing pressure for a reduction in defense expenditures similar to that encountered by President Eisenhower, could hardly fail to follow the American lead by reducing its own conventional forces.

Even more influential than America's new look in national defense, however, was a second aspect of US policy—the process by which succeeding administrations in Washington undercut the close Anglo-American relationship that had developed during the war. The baldest example of that process occurred in November 1956, when the United States joined with the Soviet Union in condemning the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt and subjected London and Paris to massive pressure until those two nations capitulated. Clearly, Washington had good cause to be angered over the failure of its close allies to inform it beforehand of so important a step as the attack on Egypt. Nevertheless, the consequence of America's action was not an agreement by the allies that

they would henceforth coordinate their policies with the United States. Rather, so far as London was concerned, the unmistakable conclusion was that an independent foreign policy was no longer a workable alternative for Britain. Under such circumstances, a significant British military capability became an unnecessary luxury: If the United States shared a common interest with London, then the United States would provide the forces necessary; alternatively, as the Suez experience had shown, if the United States disagreed with the British assessment, then the United States would veto a unilateral attempt by London to respond militarily.

Unquestionably, Suez had a profound effect on British defense policy. Although a measure of Anglo-American cooperation was subsequently restored, the consequences of that event were apparent in the British Defense White Paper of 1957. This document signaled London's intention to relinquish its conventional military capability and to follow the United States down the road of reliance on a nuclear deterrent.

While the course Britain was to follow was probably set by Suez, much of Washington's subsequent behavior seems to have been practically designed to lessen the special relationship between the two countries and to push Great Britain toward the Continent. If anything, the Kennedy Administration appeared less disposed than its immediate predecessor to give major weight to British considerations. In December 1962, without giving London any advance notice, the Defense Department informed the press that it was canceling the Skybolt missile program, which the British had planned to use as the basis for their nuclear deterrent force. Coming only a few days after a widely publicized speech by former Secretary of State Dean Acheson in which he suggested that Britain had no alternative but to become part of Europe, it is understandable that London regarded the two events as part of a concerted American effort to terminate the close Anglo-American relationship cemented during the war. Indeed, President Kennedy made this intention seem even clearer in a secret discussion with newsmen in January

1963, eventually leaked to the public, in which he stated that unilateral American actions overseas might anger this country's allies, but the United States nevertheless would pursue its own vital interests and other nations would simply have to accept this.<sup>2</sup>

A third manner in which the United States contributed to a lessened British defense posture was through acts of omission, most prominently through a failure to provide the United Kingdom with financial support sufficient to forestall or reduce drastic defense cuts that Whitehall felt compelled to implement. The most critical moment came in 1968. After incurring serious balance-of-payments difficulties throughout the 1960s, Prime Minister Harold Wilson's Labor government announced in January 1968 that it would withdraw all British forces east of Suez by 1971 and evacuate the base on Malta by 1979. The ramifications of this decision were far-reaching, especially when compared to the savings that were anticipated. Not only was the great British base at Singapore to be relinquished, but the forces that provided the only effective Western protection to the oil-rich areas bordering the Persian Gulf were also to be withdrawn. From a total of 417,000 men in 1968, the British armed forces were to be reduced by some 37,000 men in the following three years and by another 40,000 by the mid-1970s. And the total savings expected to accrue from these reductions was only about \$300 million!<sup>3</sup>

Whether the United States could have averted these moves by offering London emergency financial assistance is uncertain, but there is no indication that such a course of action was ever considered. Despite, and probably because of, the huge amounts the Johnson Administration was devoting to the conduct of the Vietnam War, the United States was disinclined to offer London \$300 million or any similar sum to help finance the continuation of a British military presence east of Suez. As had been the case during the Eisenhower and Kennedy years, the Johnson Administration simply accorded far greater priority to fostering British association with the Continent than it did to maintaining a

special Anglo-American relationship or to preserving a worldwide British military capability that would permit that nation to share with the United States the responsibility for protecting Western interests outside of Europe. In light of recent developments, Washington appears to have been almost criminally shortsighted in its ability to appreciate the significance of the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf and the fact that the United States would ultimately have to shoulder the burden.

**T**oday, as the United States belatedly moves to improve its defense capability in renewed appreciation of the Soviet threat and to acquire the capability for projecting military force to protect access to the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf, it is time to reassess the role that Great Britain could play in helping to protect Western interests. Far more than the United States or any other Western nation, Britain possesses the trained personnel and experience needed to provide a permanent presence in the Persian Gulf area with a minimum deployment of manpower. Moreover, the development of a refurbished British ability to send conventional forces to the Indian Ocean, or elsewhere in the Third World, would considerably improve Western defense capabilities.

Such a reassessment could well start with an examination of the factors that influenced adoption of the previous American policy but that no longer apply. If, as the Eisenhower Administration estimated, US nuclear superiority in the 1950s deterred Soviet aggression, then the United States needed only such conventional forces as were necessary to handle other contingencies. In a period of oil surplus, when US domestic production had to be protected from cheap foreign imports, it is not surprising that Washington did not offer to assist the British in maintaining their capability for defending the Persian Gulf. Similarly, when it was deemed advisable to insure that West Germany would not again gain a position of military superiority in Western Europe, it was logical for the United States to encourage Britain to establish closer ties with the

Continent in order to, in association with Italy and France, balance Bonn's influence.

Unfortunately, these conditions have been overtaken by events. The United States' position of nuclear superiority, upon which so much of the West's defense strategy was based, no longer exists. Rather, the likelihood that the United States and its allies would suffer an unacceptable amount of destruction in any nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union greatly increases the desirability of an American capacity to oppose a Russian attack by employing only conventional forces. In turn, this expands the importance of any conventional forces that Britain could contribute to the Western alliance.

A similar change has occurred with regard to the world petroleum glut, which caused the United States to dismiss so cavalierly the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf. The rapidly escalating oil prices of the 1970s and the increased dependency of the West on Middle East petroleum have finally brought home to America the realization that its close allies in Western Europe and the Far East cannot survive without access to Persian Gulf oil. Further, unless and until those allies are able to help protect the supply, Washington has no alternative but to assume that burden. Under these circumstances, any assistance that the United States can obtain greatly eases its task. Britain, which maintained a role in the Persian Gulf until the 1970s, is clearly the nation best qualified to lend a hand. Indeed, without the facilities provided by the British Indian Ocean base at Diego Garcia, even the limited capabilities projected for American forces in the Middle East during the next few years would be unattainable.

Finally, the factors that caused successive American administrations to weaken the relationship with Great Britain and to nudge that country into close ties with the Continent have substantially altered. The specter of a reunified and remilitarized Germany once again threatening the peace of Europe has been laid to rest. Not only has the Soviet Union made it clear that it is not prepared to surrender its control over East Germany, but Bonn has indicated its own

preference in pursuing a separate existence. With an additional 20 years of democratic government behind it, the likelihood of a revanchist regime coming to power in West Germany has abated. While such an eventuality can never entirely be ruled out, it would be scarcely more probable if London were to give reduced emphasis to its relations with the Continent and more to those with the United States. The prosperity and unity of Western Europe remain important American objectives, but the incorporation of Great Britain into the Continent is not a necessary prerequisite. Given the enormous military responsibilities facing the United States outside Western Europe and the assistance that Britain could furnish in partnership, it seems obvious that America should now give priority to the more critical need of reestablishing the close military and diplomatic Anglo-American cooperation that existed during World War II.

What then should the United States seek from Great Britain? It is hardly expected, nor would one wish, that we will see a return to the days when London exercised paramount power in the Middle East. Rather, in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere in the world, the United States should encourage Great Britain to play a role proportional to its size and power in meeting Western defense responsibilities and to take on those missions it is best equipped to handle. A good example of an appropriate military effort would be that of France. Defeated early in World War II and then obliged to liquidate a colonial empire second in size only to that of the British, France today supports a far more effective military establishment than does its neighbor across the English Channel. With a smaller population, the French field a force some 50 percent larger, aided by military conscription. Compared to the four British Army divisions, France has 15 available, including one marine division. Similarly, with two medium attack carriers, the French Navy far surpasses the British in its ability to project naval power around the world.<sup>4</sup> If the new French Socialist government of President Francois Mitterrand were to reduce the French defense effort—and it is by no means

certain that it will—such a move would only increase the need for a greater British contribution.

**T**he British population is unlikely to be any more willing than its American counterpart to accept a return to compulsory military service, and, in truth, Great Britain's precarious economic situation imposes greater constraints upon London's embarking on an increased defense program than would be the case in the United States or France. This said, there are specific areas where the British possess unique entree or experience, where the job could be carried out within the existing force structure, where the United States could more efficiently assist the British to assume responsibility than do so itself, and where Great Britain would see such a role as advancing its own vital interests, particularly if assured of gaining a stronger economic position in the area.

As the first order of business in achieving this goal, Washington should initiate high-level talks with Great Britain aimed at restoring the wartime Anglo-American partnership. The United States should make it clear that such discussions would constitute a renewal of the periodic meetings between senior British and American officials to coordinate their defense programs which began during World War II and continued into the early postwar period. Meetings of heads of government, while helpful, simply do not promote the close working relationships between senior uniformed and civilian counterparts that previously existed and that would be revived by a renewal of the periodic consultations in Washington and London. Admittedly, an increase in military cooperation between the two countries is feasible without a return to the special wartime relationship. The psychological effect of a return to the World War II Anglo-American partnership, however, would be a positive one for both countries. For Great Britain, it could help to kindle a renewed sense of national pride and a willingness to accept additional responsibilities for helping to protect the security of the West.

In these meetings, the British could be urged to reestablish a command authority for the Middle East and to permanently assign to it military units that would then cooperate with the American carrier task forces deployed to the Indian Ocean and with other US forces that might be sent to the Persian Gulf region. Once implemented, such a policy would demonstrate to the Soviet Union, to other West European nations, and to the Third World that defense of Western security does not rely solely upon the United States and that the nations of the West are able and willing to protect their vital interests together.

There are some countries, such as Israel and Egypt, where historical factors would continue to make the governments far more ready to coordinate their defense with America than with Britain. And, again, London has even fewer conventional forces to commit to the Persian Gulf area than does the United States. Nonetheless, within its current force levels, the United Kingdom could send units to the region that would significantly augment the American forces currently available. A helpful step in this direction was the June 1981 announcement by the British government that beginning in 1982 it would deploy to the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean a carrier battle squadron to reinforce the American units now in the Indian Ocean.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in selected areas such as Bahrein, the Trucial States, and Oman, the British possess both experienced personnel and expertise in providing security to the region. Given the small population of the area, only modest forces would be needed; for example, it would be more efficient for the United States to fund a reestablishment of the British-led Trucial Scouts, which would require only a handful of British personnel, than to attempt to organize, train, and deploy its own forces to the area.

Probably the most valuable contribution the United Kingdom could make to strengthen the Western position in the Persian Gulf, however, would be to put to greater use its unique relationship with Oman. That nation, which touches on the Persian Gulf, overlooks the crucial choke

point of the Strait of Hormuz, and is in a commanding position along the Gulf of Oman, has offered to provide the United States with facilities for defense of the region. British personnel still retain considerable influence within the Omani armed forces, and there exists the strong possibility of rivalry flaring as the American presence increases, particularly with regard to whether Britain or the United States will be the primary source of military equipment for Oman. As part of a greater Anglo-American cooperation in the Persian Gulf, the United States should offer London primary responsibility for the sale of arms to Oman, and the financial benefits that would accrue, in return for British assurances that its personnel in Oman will fully promote Omani cooperation with the United States.

While the Persian Gulf deserves priority in any revitalization of British defense efforts, the United States should not overlook the possibility of encouraging increased participation by the United Kingdom elsewhere in the world. In the Far East, for example, the British still retain control of Hong Kong and station there a 7000-man force comprising one British and three Gurkha infantry battalions.<sup>6</sup> Since the American withdrawal from Southeast Asia, Hong Kong represents the best available base from which to project a Western presence into the South China Sea area and along the coast of Vietnam, where the Soviet Navy has recently established itself. Within the context of a revived Anglo-American defense relationship, the United States should invite London to resume an appropriate share of the responsibility for protecting Western interests in the Far East. If necessary, Washington should offer to contribute toward the cost of maintaining the Hong Kong base and the Gurkha force, contingent upon London's agreement to make them available to handle problems of mutual Anglo-American concern in the region.

Again, the United States has provided military assistance to a large number of nations around the world, most of which have far different political systems than that

of the United States and which are accordingly far less able to effectively use the arms to the West's best interests. It would make much greater sense for the United States to provide Great Britain with such funds as are appropriate and acceptable to the British to acquire weapon systems or to maintain military forces that would effectively increase the security of the West.

**I**n sum, the United States today is faced with the urgent necessity of building with a minimum of delay a stronger defense capability against the Soviet Union and, simultaneously, of projecting sufficient force to the far-off Persian Gulf to protect Western access to that region's petroleum. Given these requirements, even America's great existing power and enormous economic potential may be insufficient to meet the task. While many of America's allies cannot take over a significant part of the burden, the United States is fortunate that one nation—Great Britain—both shares many of its interests, traditions, and objectives and has effectively worked together with the United States in the past to protect the security of the West. For reasons that seemed valid at the time, successive American administrations weakened this special relationship and forced Britain away from its ties with the United States and toward closer relations with the Continent. In no way, of course, does the United States desire to weaken Western Europe or to drive a wedge between the United Kingdom and the other European nations, but it is time for the United States to recognize its own folly. The security of America and Great Britain alike requires that the British resume more of their former responsibilities as a major power defending Western interests around the world. To accomplish this will require a revitalization of Britain's defense effort and probably significant American financial support. The wartime Anglo-American partnership should be refashioned. The sooner this is achieved, the better—for the United States, for Britain, and for the rest of the Free World.

#### NOTES

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