THE EVOLUTION OF BRITISH STRATEGIC THOUGHT IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1945-71

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By

Tristan C. Abbey, B.A.

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“Behold, my son, with how little wisdom the world is governed.”

— Count Axel Oxenstierna (1583-1654)1

Introduction

Just six months separated the 1945 Japanese surrender on the USS Missouri and Winston Churchill’s visit to Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, the following year. The speech Churchill delivered will forever be remembered for presaging both the East-West rivalry and the enduring Anglo-American alliance, but students of great-power decline may find the former prime minister’s concluding point more poignant: “Let no man underrate the abiding power of the British Empire and Commonwealth.”2 Churchill’s statement was not without foundation. Wm. Roger Louis, dean of British imperial historians, writes: “In 1945 the independence of India could be seen on the horizon, but no one would have guessed that within the next two decades the British Empire would be in a state of dissolution.”3 London wielded its imperialist club rather assertively over states like Iran, India, and Egypt during the war, and Allied troops managed to recover the colonies captured by the Axis.4 In relative terms, Britain outpaced most of its devastated rivals economically and militarily, and undertook an expansion of its influence in the developing world shortly after the war.5

The British sought to effectively modernize their Empire, created as it was in the context of an international system that no longer existed. David Reynolds identifies four

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5 Reynolds, p. 31.
basic strategic concepts Britain employed during this process. First, the British expanded the Commonwealth, previously the exclusive preserve of “white dominions” such as Canada and South Africa, to include India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and eventually dozens of other newly-independent states in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.6

Second, altruism and deference to the anti-imperial United States elevated the status of economic development to “a central theme of colonial policy.” By focusing on improving the livelihoods of their colonial subjects, the British hoped to prepare them for independence, inoculate them against the lure of communism, and “strengthen Britain’s economic position against that of the United States.” This latter aspiration was to be achieved, in theory, through the maintenance of the Sterling Area, a trading and currency bloc based on the British pound (see below).7

Third, Britain pursued a devolutionary process by which it “might show itself a progressive imperial ruler and also ensure an orderly transfer of power to stable, pro-British governments.”8 This concept acknowledged the powerful role of nationalism in many dependencies; the plan was to gradually combine economic prosperity with Western-style governments, “yielding control before the initiative passed to irreconcilables,” as Louis notes.9 Federations frequently resulted from the policy of devolution, as British officials strove to avoid the creation of independent states too weak to defend themselves. Examples include the failed union of Singapore and Malaya in

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6 Reynolds, pp. 174-76.
7 Reynolds, pp. 176-77.
8 Reynolds, p. 178; emphasis added.
1963 and the aborted East African Federation, and, as we shall see, the successful formation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971.\textsuperscript{10}

Finally, the British government aimed to create an “informal” imperial system, whereby Britain retained its influence with minimal expenditure of resources and energy. As Glen Balfour-Paul notes, this framework “envisaged restructuring the Empire on the basis of equal partnerships in a grand design for the betterment of its peoples, coupled with their strategic collaboration against suspected Soviet expansionism.”\textsuperscript{11} Essentially, in exchange for various kinds of assistance (including financial), Britain could rely on regional (mostly Middle Eastern) partners to enable it to project power in the event force against the Soviet Union or its allies became necessary.\textsuperscript{12}

The four concepts should be seen as complementary and occasionally overlapping, rather than mutually exclusive, thematic elements within the larger endeavor to guide the evolution of the Empire. Throughout the period of decolonization, the complex motivations that characterized British behavior alluded to above—financial gain, Cold War concerns, altruism, the quest for soft power—interacted with other more nebulous rationales, such as imperial prestige and heritage. Louis writes: “The British aimed to control their own destiny, presiding if possible over the rebirth of the Imperial system rather than its dissolution…The goal was not that Britain should sustain the Empire but that the Empire, in a new form, should continue to sustain Britain.”\textsuperscript{13} A combination of Commonwealth expansion, colonial development, controlled devolution, and partnership-making would, it was hoped, enable Britain to achieve that sustenance.

\textsuperscript{10} Reynolds, p. 178.
\textsuperscript{12} Reynolds, pp. 178-80.
This paper examines British efforts in one corner of the Empire, the Middle East, and analyzes the evolution of strategic thought from 1945 to 1971, focusing specifically on their military presence in that region. It does so by: 1) establishing the strategic logic that dictated Britain’s posture in the region after 1945; 2) analyzing British thought with respect to Egypt and Palestine, viewed as vital to their broader regional presence; 3) analyzing the withdrawal from Iraq and Aden; 4) analyzing the withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971; and 5) offering policy implications in light of recent developments in British defense policy.

**Strategic Logic**

In 1945, the British Empire spanned the world. It incorporated a handful of territories in South and Central America, along with dozens of islands scattered across the Pacific, Indian, and Atlantic Oceans. A number of valuable colonies were found in Southeast Asia, including Malaya, Borneo, and Singapore, and the Union Jack flew over large swathes of Africa, including Kenya and Nigeria. The remainder comprised an assortment of city-sized possessions such as Gibraltar and Hong Kong. The British originally acquired and designed many of these possessions to support the “crown jewel” of the Empire, the Indian subcontinent. Territories along the African coast provided a pathway around the Cape of Good Hope, while the Suez Canal provided a much shorter gateway to India. A substantial network of military bases in the Middle East supplemented the Suez presence. This network encompassed airfields in Libya and Iraq, garrisons in Palestine and Aden, and naval support facilities in the Persian Gulf.

Based on this strategic logic, Indian independence in 1947 should have called Britain’s continued presence in the Middle East into question. In fact, it briefly did—but
more as a result of the Cold War than as a reassessment based on the rationale of prior
decisions. Senior Cabinet members met with Prime Minister Clement Attlee in February
1946—by which time the loss of India was a foregone conclusion—to discuss London’s
view of Moscow, in light of growing uncertainty over the future direction of Soviet
policy. (That same month, George Kennan would author his famous Long Telegram.) Sir
Hugh Dalton, Chancellor of the Exchequer, reported the minutes in his journal:

We should pull out, he [Attlee] thinks, from all the Middle East, including
Egypt and Greece, make a line of defence across Africa from Lagos to
Kenya, and concentrate a large part of our forces in the latter...We should
put a wide glacis of desert and Arabs between ourselves and the Russians.
This is a very fresh and interesting approach, which appeals to me.14

As provocative and appealing to Dalton as it may have been, Attlee’s position was
completely disconnected both from the mainstream and, mostly importantly, from the
view of the Chiefs of Staff. The latter ultimately prevailed. In their view, the Soviet
Union’s failure to withdraw its troops from Iranian territory in March 1946, sparking a
major diplomatic crisis mere days before Churchill delivered his “Iron Curtain” speech in
Fulton, ruled out the massive pull-out from the Middle East envisioned by Attlee. Rather
than facing a demotion in strategic importance as a result of Indian independence, the
region assumed an even greater significance in light of the Soviet threat.

The Chiefs of Staff laid out their grand strategy on April 2, 1946, in a report
entitled “Strategic Position of the British Commonwealth.”15 It was signed by the
respective heads of the British Army, Royal Navy, and Royal Air Force, all but one of
whom retired by year’s end. The critical innovation was their endorsement of the fear that

15 Chiefs of Staff, “Strategic Position of the British Commonwealth” (2 April 1946), reprinted in British
defence policy since 1945, ed. Ritchie Ovendale (Manchester University Press, 1994); pp. 24-27.
any vacuum created by the withdrawal from British imperial possessions would be quickly filled by the Soviet Union:

We must, therefore, establish and maintain our influence in other areas of strategic importance [outside of the UK, the US, Australia, and South Africa] since we must assume that, if we do not, our influence will be supplanted by that of Russia, whom we must at present consider as our most probable potential enemy.

The Chiefs identified five reasons why the Middle East, in particular, held “strategic importance.” First, as a geographic linchpin and gateway to the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean, the region provided the Soviets a pathway into Africa. Second, in the event of a successful Soviet invasion of the Middle East, the loss of Egypt and Palestine to the communists would “enable them to extend their influence both westward and southward into Africa.” Third, the region’s sheer size provided strategic depth in the defense of South Africa and India. (At the time, some British officials remained optimistic that the Indian partition would proceed smoothly and that the “crown jewel” would serve as a staunch ally in the Commonwealth.) Fourth, the Middle East could serve as an offensive base of operations against the Soviet Union:

Of those areas in which we can reasonably expect to maintain our influence in peace, the Middle East is the nearest to the important Russian industrial and oil-producing areas of Southern Russia and the Caucasus. It is also an area from which many other important industrial centres of Russia could be subjected to long-range attack. Our Middle East air bases are therefore a valuable deterrent to Russian aggression.

Fresh in the minds of British planners, undoubtedly, was the Allied strategic bombing campaign of World War II. In 1943, for example, the American Eighth and Ninth Air Forces launched a combined mission against German oil fields in Ploiesti, Romania. Nearly two hundred B-24 Liberators launched from Allied airfields in Libya and flew over the Mediterranean Sea to reach their targets. In the early years of the war, Allied air
planners also considered launching a raid from Iranian, Syrian, and Turkish bases against Soviet oil facilities at Baku in Azerbaijan, lest they fall into Nazi hands. (The Ploiesti raid was of questionable effectiveness and the Baku operation aborted entirely.) The Chiefs identified Middle Eastern oil as the fifth and final reason. “We should clearly do our utmost to maintain our position in the area as long as we can in war and should certainly do so in peace,” concluded the report. For his part, Clement Attlee urged the Chiefs to reconsider their view, describing it as “a strategy of despair” and urging, instead, negotiations with Moscow.\(^{16}\) However, the military prevailed.

Building from the report above, the Chiefs further codified their thinking in the “Three Pillars” strategy. As laid out in a confidential policy planning document dated January 15, 1947, the three pillars were: first, Britain itself, operating in the same manner as it did during World War II; second, secure seaborne communication with the Commonwealth, the United States, and other allies (clearly mindful of the battle for the Atlantic just years earlier); and third, the Middle East.\(^{17}\) If one pillar fell, “the whole structure would be imperiled [sic].” In retrospect, such thinking based on the World War II experience seems antiquated; the advent of nuclear weapons rendered forward-deployed bases defenseless and largely useless, due to the fact that a single atomic bomb was destructive enough to erase almost any base from the map. But modern-day readers should bear in mind that it was not for another two years that the Soviets tested their first nuclear weapon, and not until 1952 that the British did likewise. Albert Wohlstetter and his colleagues at the RAND Corporation did not publish their pioneering work on

\(^{16}\) Memorandum by Clement Attlee (5 January 1947), reprinted in Ovendale, pp. 33-35.

\(^{17}\) Confidential Annex (15 January 1947), reprinted in Ovendale, pp. 36-37.
strategic air bases until 1954. The technology was new and its ramifications for modern warfare poorly understood.

**Palestine and Egypt**

As the policy process unfolded, it became clear that the most important British possessions in the Middle East region were Palestine and Egypt. The January 1947 policy document that laid out the Three Pillars strategy elaborates:

> Palestine was of special importance in this general scheme of defence. In war, Egypt would be our key position in the Middle East; and it was necessary that we should hold Palestine as a screen for the defence of Egypt. In peace, since we had undertaken to withdraw from Egypt, *we must be able to use Palestine as a base* for the mobile reserve of troops which must be kept ready to meet any emergency throughout the Middle East. [emphasis added]

The withdrawal from Egypt refers to the redeployment of British troops from bases in Egypt proper to the Suez Canal Zone. At first glance this might seem significant, but the Suez base was roughly half the size of Wales. The importance of Palestine was reaffirmed as late as February 1947 by the Chiefs, who declared: “The preservation of our strategic position in the Middle East as a whole would be *gravely prejudiced* if our right to station British forces in Palestine were not retained.”

In context, the Chiefs were responding to the notion that the British trusteeship over Palestine might expire in five years, which would threaten the continuity of Britain’s military presence. The Chiefs recommended that the trusteeship’s duration “be left indefinite” in order to preserve the

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bases. Faced with a vicious Jewish-Arab civil war and under attack from the Irgun and others, however, Britain referred the problem to the United Nations in April.20

Based on the strategic rationale laid out by the Chiefs in 1947—Palestine was a necessity for Britain’s position in the region—the final withdrawal from Palestine in May 1948 should have occasioned a strategic reassessment. Instead of questioning the continued viability of the British military presence, British leaders reaffirmed the importance of it. The Suez Canal Zone would supposedly become the main launching platform for offensive strikes against the Soviets in the event of World War III. The air bases would be prime targets for Soviet invasion, however, as outlined by the Chiefs above; the Middle East constituted the passageway to Africa and the Russians would have to annihilate the British presence first. The primary defensive line against Soviet ground forces would run across the new state of Israel, which declared independence as the British withdrew. The “screen” of Palestine could still be held even absent the British bases. The British themselves recognized that they did not have sufficient forces to defend this line.21 Without sufficient Commonwealth forces, Britain would have to rely on Israeli and American support in the event of war. Aid from Israel was questionable; the Israelis would fight an invader, but might not follow the British plan in so doing. The latter was recognized as doubtful in a region considered by the Americans to be a “side show.” The Chiefs of Staff, as Michael Cohen notes, “doubted whether they could count on any Commonwealth or American reinforcements within the critical first six months of

the war.” The British plan amounted to little more than hoping resources became available in the future.

Despite the infeasibility of this defensive strategy, Permanent Under Secretary William Strang reaffirmed the importance of the Middle East and of Egypt in particular. In a top secret report dated April 30, 1949—mere weeks after the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO)—Strang’s committee reiterated most of the original rationale for British interest in the region, as laid out by the Chiefs of Staff in 1946. It singled out the Canal Zone for special recognition: “The strategic key to this area is Egypt, to which there is no practical alternative as a main base.” It is important to note that the argument for Egypt’s importance was not the Suez Canal as a transportation hub; after all, it was widely believed that the canal would be closed or sabotaged in the earliest days of the putative World War III, just as it had been during periods of World War II. The argument was that Egypt would function as an offensive base from which to strike the Soviet Union. Two events occurred that would seriously undermine this argument: first, Turkey signed a protocol to join NATO in October 1951 (and officially gained membership in 1952); second, the Russians tested their first thermonuclear weapon in August 1953. The first provided the Western allies with Turkish military bases that were much closer to the Soviets, such as those envisioned as the launching point for the Baku air raid in 1940. The second rendered forward bases such as the Canal Zone extremely vulnerable to devastating attack, as did the Soviet Union’s 1949 test of its first atomic bomb (albeit to a lesser extent).

22 Cohen, p. 32.
In short, Britain lacked the troops to defend the Suez base in the event of conventional warfare, could not defend the base against nuclear weapons in any event, and with its Western allies was permitted access to Turkish facilities better suited to the supposed mission of the Suez base (i.e., offensive operations). Given growing unrest in Egypt, it would have been logical for the British leadership to reconsider the desirability of a continued presence at Suez. An internal Foreign Office memorandum dated January 10, 1951, reveals some of the discussion that did take place. The document is written in reply to a suggestion from an assistant undersecretary of state that the Persian Gulf oilfields constituted “the only vital interest we have in the Middle East,” and that organizing their defense from Egypt made little sense. (The undersecretary’s suggestion that the Gulf defense be organized from East Africa was not significantly more sensible.) The memorandum is emphatic: “In a word, Egypt still remains the essential central point from which to defend the Middle East and all that the Middle East entails.” It repeats the 1946 rationales—defense of Africa, importance of oil, an offensive base to strike the Caucasus, etc.—and describes the Canal Zone as “the back door to Egypt,” suggesting it might also serve as a logistical hub between Britain, its Far Eastern dominions and the rest of the Commonwealth (principally Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa). Documents like this demonstrate that dissent surfaced on occasion over the strategic direction of the Empire, but was generally overruled by various repetitions of establishment policy.

Later in 1951, Egyptian Prime Minister Mustafa Pasha denounced the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, which permitted the imperial troop presence. The Canal Zone itself came under periodic attack from Egyptians. Despite the Egyptian denunciation, the

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25 Memorandum by R. J. Bowker (10 January 1951), reprinted in Ovendale, pp. 86-87.
British actually reinforced the base. Some 80,000 men were stationed at the base by the end of 1952. The Foreign Office openly queried whether the troops were there for any reason “except to maintain themselves” and whether the true mission was imperial prestige rather than deterrence against Russia.\textsuperscript{26} As if in answer to the query, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden suggested in December 1952 that “the whole problem of Middle East defence” had changed as a result of Turkey’s entry into NATO.\textsuperscript{27} Churchill agreed in July 1954 when, as Prime Minister, he announced a withdrawal from the Canal Zone by 1956.\textsuperscript{28} Nonetheless, the nationalization of the Suez Canal by the Egyptian leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, prompted Eden—now Prime Minister—to invade Egypt with Israel and France in 1956 and reclaim the Canal, only to be forced to withdraw by President Dwight Eisenhower.\textsuperscript{29} The stated rationale for Eden’s stunning policy reversal was Nasser’s nationalization program, but Eden also invoked the Munich precedent, comparing Nasser to a power-hungry Adolf Hitler who simply had to be stopped.\textsuperscript{30}

In the aftermath, Nasser remained in power until 1970. Brian Lapping writes: “The Suez operation wrote \textit{finis} not only to the British Empire but to all the empires of western Europe.”\textsuperscript{31} British prestige was irreparably damaged, its bases in Egypt lost forever, and its continued position in the Middle East very much in doubt.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Iraq and Aden}

The Chiefs of Staff had originally envisioned quick Soviet advances once Britain abandoned any of its imperial possessions in the Middle East. Yet the withdrawal from

\textsuperscript{26} Cohen, pp. 33-34.
\textsuperscript{27} Memorandum by Anthony Eden (4 December 1952), reprinted in Ovendale, p. 103.
\textsuperscript{28} Memorandum by Winston Churchill (7 July 1954); reprinted in Ovendale, pp. 105-106.
\textsuperscript{29} William Jackson, \textit{Withdrawal from Empire: A Military View} (B. T. Batsford, 1986), pp. 125-64.
\textsuperscript{30} Daniel Yergin, \textit{The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power} (Free Press, 2008), p. 469.
\textsuperscript{31} Lapping, p. 277; emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{32} Balfour-Paul, pp. 508-11; Reynolds, pp. 191-194.
both Palestine and Egypt occasioned nothing of the sort. Palestine was viewed as an essential shield for Egypt, but the British presence in Egypt actually grew after the loss of the Palestinian bases. The status of the Canal base as “the strategic key” to the region might suggest that the loss of it would entail a significant reappraisal of Britain’s continued presence in its remaining bases in Aden, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf. It did not.

The situation soon worsened for the British. They fostered the formation of the Baghdad Pact in 1955. This defensive alliance included Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. On the map, it looked like a barrier or “outer ring” against Soviet aggression, much like how the Suez Canal Zone might resemble Egypt’s “backdoor”; in practice, Moscow easily circumvented it and engaged in a variety of activities in the Middle East.\(^\text{33}\) The spirit of Nasser, too, had spread like wildfire through the younger officer ranks of several Arab armies, especially in the wake of Britain’s embarrassing 1956 Suez withdrawal. As Michael Eppel has noted, “the Baghdad Pact did not provide a response to the challenge of increasingly leftist-nationalist radicalism, whose influence on the new urban social strata throughout the Arab world, and primarily in Iraq, was constantly growing and expanding.”\(^\text{34}\) Reliant on support from a narrow conservative ruling elite, the British were blindsided when, in December 1958, several Nasserite officers in the Iraqi military launched a pan-Arab coup and overthrew the Hashemite dynasty in Iraq.

The Hashemite king and Iraqi prime minister had been dependable British allies in the region. Along with these allies, the British also lost their air bases at Habbaniya


\(^{34}\) Michael Eppel, “The decline of British influence and the ruling elite in Iraq,” in Cohen and Kolinsky, pp. 185-197; p. 194.
and Shuaiba. The Chiefs of Staff identified two purposes for these bases during defensive planning in 1954: first, tactical air support in the defense of the Middle East as Soviet tanks poured through the northern tier, and second, the waypoint—in a similar manner to the Suez Canal Zone—between Britain, its possessions in the Far East, and the primary Commonwealth partners.\(^{35}\) By 1958, Suez had already been lost, so the loss of the Iraqi bases was unfortunate, but not tragic from the British perspective.

Against this backdrop, Defence Minister Duncan Sandys launched his 1957 defense review. Among the reforms he implemented were the elimination of the draft, which had actually been extended well after 1945; significant manpower reductions; and an increased emphasis on nuclear deterrence, as opposed to conventional forces.\(^{36}\) Most importantly for our purposes, Sandys also reaffirmed all imperial commitments east of Suez. These included not only Aden and the Persian Gulf, but also East Africa, Malaya, Singapore, Borneo and Brunei, Hong Kong, and several South Pacific islands. As his review stated:

> Apart from its own importance, the Middle East guards the right flank of NATO and it’s the gateway to the African continent. In the Arabian Peninsula, *Britain must at all times be ready to defend Aden Colony and Protectorates [Yemen] and the territories on the Persian Gulf for whose defense she is responsible.* For this task, land, air and sea forces have to be *maintained in that area* and in East Africa.\(^{37}\) [emphasis added]

In short, the Gulf bases and Aden would be retained and defended if attacked. The British military was essentially instructed to fulfill their commitments with fewer resources.\(^{38}\)

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\(^{37}\) 1957 Defence White Paper, reprinted in Dockrill, pp. 139-145.

\(^{38}\) Dockrill, pp. 65-81.
Interestingly, despite apparent setbacks to its position in the region, Britain actually increased its operational tempo in the region and reinforced its remaining bases. In July 1958, British troops invaded Jordan to bolster the monarchy in the wake of the Iraqi coup. (American troops invaded Lebanon concurrently for the same mission.) In January 1959, the Special Air Service, deployed in support of the Sultan of Oman, defeated a Saudi-backed insurgency. According to former defense ministry official Sir William Jackson, “their remarkable feat” in Oman “probably saved the SAS from extinction” as Sandys trimmed the defense budget.\(^{39}\) In July 1961, British troops deployed to Kuwait to defend against a potential Iraqi invasion, which did not occur.\(^{40}\) Finally, in December 1963, Britain declared a state of emergency in Aden to combat a growing insurgency backed by Nasser.

To a large degree, Aden had replaced Suez as the primary British base in what was left of the basing network. As Jackson notes:

> Efforts were to be made to ensure that Aden did not become yet another vulnerable British base, but its strategic position drew more and more essential command and logistic units to its black rocks and dirty silver sand as the months of the post-Suez period rolled by: there was simply nowhere else to put them.\(^{41}\)

Situated at the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, Aden’s story is complex. Ruled by India until its establishment as a separate colony in 1937, the port was surrounded by a number of tribes and small sheikhdoms that, to varying degrees, were brought into the British orbit by membership in the Aden Protectorate. Britain sponsored the union of Aden and the Protectorate into the Federation of South Arabia in 1963. Meanwhile, civil

\(^{39}\) Jackson, p. 172.
\(^{41}\) Jackson, p. 173.
war raged to the north in Yemen, as Nasser sought to bring all of southern Arabia into his newly-formed United Arab Republic, and contributed to the destabilization of Aden. A hybrid of civil war and insurgency erupted in Aden; unable to contain the violence, the British decided on total withdrawal. As Defence Minister Denis Healey explained in his February 1966 Statement on the Defence Estimates:

South Arabia is due to become independent by 1968, and we do not think it appropriate that we should maintain defence facilities there after that happens. We therefore intend to withdraw our forces from the Aden base at that time, and we have so informed the Federal Government. We shall be able to fulfill our remaining obligations in the Middle East by making a small increase in our forces stationed in the Persian Gulf.43 [emphasis added]

Over the next couple years, Healey presided over substantial cuts to the defense budget and reductions in overseas garrisons. Britain also saw a general shift away from the Empire to the European continent, an exclusive club Britain was desperately trying to enter; it applied for membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) in December 1967, only to be barred from entry by France. (The EEC finally admitted the UK in 1973).

In the event, the final British pull-out from Aden occurred in November 1967. Nonetheless, as late as 1966 the British still insisted on retaining their last possessions in the Persian Gulf. One recalls the Foreign Office debate in 1951, centered on whether, in the end, these Gulf bases were all that mattered.

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44 Jackson, pp. 241-43; Dorman, pp. 15-17.
The Persian Gulf

Britain’s Persian Gulf presence primarily consisted of two naval bases, one on the island of Bahrain and the other at the port of Sharjah, along the coast of the modern-day United Arab Emirates. “The Gulf resembled a British lake,” Wm. Roger Louis explains.46 The Protected States of the Gulf included Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial Sheikhdoms, which encompassed the states that now comprise the UAE and Oman. Treaty obligations bound Britain to their defense; in return, Britain received assured access to the region’s oil supplies.47 These Protected States feared Shia Iran, even if ruled by the US-backed Shah across the Gulf, and the Sunni Arab states of Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Steven Galpern writes, “Britain demonstrated a certain measure of control in the Middle East through its role as the central banker to the many countries that traded and held reserves in sterling.”48 As members of the aforementioned Sterling Area, these Middle Eastern states buttressed Britain’s financial position by holding their reserves of foreign exchange in sterling and, through the sale of oil, making a positive contribution to the British balance of payments, otherwise a source of financial woes.

It was much to the surprise of the Gulf Arabs, then, when Healey announced in January 1968 that Britain would withdraw from the region in just a few years. Addressing the House of Commons, Healey stated:

There is no military strength whether for Britain or for our alliances except on the basis of economic strength…our security lies fundamentally in Europe and must be based on the North Atlantic Alliance….We have accordingly decided to accelerate the withdrawal of our forces from their stations in the Far East…and to withdraw them by the end of 1971. We

47 Balfour-Paul, pp. 511-12.
have also decided to withdraw our forces from the Persian Gulf by the same date.\(^{49}\)

As late as November 1967, the British government had assured the sheikhs that Britain had no intention of withdrawing in the near future. As Healey explains, the decision was driven by both the economic necessity of drawing closer to Europe and the need to reduce expensive overseas burden. Under the sterling system, British overseas expenditures were frequently recycled through the system back to Britain, which operated as a major exporter to its imperial commitments. Also in November, however, the British, under severe financial pressure, devalued the pound and the Sterling Area began to crumble.\(^{50}\) The Gulf Arabs offered to pay for the upkeep of the bases and cost of the garrisons, and the United States—foreseeing a massive vacuum into which the Soviets might plunge—protested strenuously, but to no avail.\(^{51}\) Britain’s rejection of the Gulf Arabs’ offer is curious because a similar offer from the Sultan of Brunei was accepted.\(^{52}\)

The vast majority of British forces withdrew on schedule. British diplomats succeeded in organizing the Trucial Sheikhdoms into the modern UAE.\(^{53}\) The SAS returned to Oman to fight a different insurgency at the request of the Sultan, but its footprint was minimal.\(^{54}\) The Dhofar insurgency was quashed in 1975. A miniscule naval presence in the Gulf also remained. In 1969, Libya—among the last British-friendly states in the region—succumbed to a military coup that toppled the king. Originally intended to support the Suez base in its offensive air operations against the Soviet Union, and later proposed as a base for British troops after the loss of Suez, it now swerved

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\(^{49}\) Parliamentary Debates (16 January 1968), reprinted in Ovendale, pp. 144-45.

\(^{50}\) Reynolds, p. 216.

\(^{51}\) Reynolds, p. 217.


\(^{54}\) Balfour-Paul, p. 511-12; Jackson, pp. 250-52.
firmly into the anti-Western camp under the leadership of Muammar Qaddafi, a self-described disciple of Nasser. The British Empire in the Middle East was gone.

**Policy Implications**

One day after assuming office in May 2010, British Prime Minister David Cameron convened the first meeting of the newly-formed National Security Council (NSC). Modeled after its American counterpart, the NSC comprises the heads of the full panoply of the British defense, diplomatic, and intelligence establishment. It was quickly charged with undertaking a comprehensive review of British security policy in light of the nation’s record peacetime budget deficit. The Strategic Defense and Security Review (SDSR) released in October outlined a less-than-expected eight percent cut over the next four years. Alongside increases in spending for special operations, cyber capabilities, and other areas, the cuts included substantial reductions in troop levels and armor and artillery forces, as well as the retiring of the Harrier vertical/short takeoff and landing jets and the decommissioning of the flagship aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal*.

Mixed reaction greeted the review’s publication. “Britain is, or should be, more than a super-sized Belgium,” Thomas Mahnken argued. Max Boot described the SDSR as “bad news for anyone who believes that a strong Britain is a vital bulwark of liberty.” *Time* wondered whether Britain, famous for historically “punching above its weight,” would soon drift “into a lightweight league.” Across the Atlantic, meanwhile, *The Economist* concluded: “Britain may not be quite so willing to throw itself into every

fight going as it has been in the recent past, but this SDSR should be seen more as a tactical retreat than a surrender.”

Amid the flurry of criticism, Britain’s ambassador to the United States insisted that “in an era of fewer resources, we can strike the right balance in our security posture.”

The debate over the future direction of British defense policy intensified when Prime Minister Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced the signing of a defense pact between the two countries. The chief innovations were agreements to jointly operate their aircraft carriers and to collaborate on nuclear weapons research and design. The Economist greeted the announcement warmly. In a letter opposing the new agreement, a group of retired senior British defense officials warned of the potential threat to “British prestige” in the event of another Falklands war.

These debates are nothing new. Fiscal belt-tightening has long dogged British defense planning. All four major defense reviews of the Cold War period—led by Duncan Sandys in 1957, Denis Healey in the mid-1960s, Roy Mason in the mid-1970s, and John Nott in 1981—proposed cuts in spending and reductions in military resources. Neither weapons systems nor personnel were immune. These cuts persisted until the late 1990s, when the Blair government reversed the trend. Determining the appropriate security posture amid these cuts has historically proven even more challenging. It

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requires matching up strategic commitments with limited resources and striving to find a balance. The recent SDSR, for example, does not entail any significant realignment of British overseas commitments (e.g., Afghanistan).

The process of decolonization that reduced the British Empire to little more than the United Kingdom illustrates the difficulties of serious strategic reassessment. Events in far-flung corners of the globe occurred with a rapidity that left London exasperated and frequently outmaneuvered. Louis writes: “The British lurched from one crisis to the next, sometimes turning adversity to advantage.”\textsuperscript{63} Nowhere was this first clause more than true than in the Middle East and the long process of decision-making that led to Britain’s final withdrawal from its military bases in the region in 1971.

As we have seen, the relationship between strategic decision-making and defense budget cuts is far from simple. Initially, the Chiefs of Staff drew upon their World War II experiences to formulate a grand strategy that far exceeded the resources and capabilities of the British Empire. The British lacked the troops and tanks to defend the Middle East against a Soviet invasion, as well as the airplanes to conduct the sort of long-range bombing campaigns they envisioned. Later, after Suez, these resources were cut even further in 1957, but their commitments remained largely the same. The surviving bases, it was thought, would serve logistical and offensive strike functions during World War III. Only in 1968 were hard choices made about reevaluating commitments in light of resource constraints. The result was a total withdrawal from a region once deemed a pillar of British security.

On the strategic side, it is clear in retrospect that British policymakers grasped at straws to retain their network of military bases in the Middle East. Each of the rationales

proposed were plausible at the time, but traced over time the evolution of strategic thought shows a Britain that repeatedly pursued policies in contradiction to these rationales. Palestine was the absolutely essential shield of Suez, but the Canal Zone was reinforced after its loss; Suez was the best site for an offensive air capacity, but it retained its importance even after Turkey’s NATO membership and the dawn of the Soviet nuclear program undercut its utility; the commitment to the Gulf was renewed after the pull-out from Aden only to be reversed mere months later.

At every turn, British policy evolved in a manner that was inconsistent with the strategic logic that had dictated its original decision. Some of the inconsistency is understandable. The original rationale for the Middle Eastern bases to begin with was India, but oil and Cold War calculations ensured the region remained a vital interest even with the loss of India; similarly, while the creation of Israel entailed the withdrawal of British troops, it also meant a potential regional ally could help defend Suez, and so the British withdrawal from Palestine did not necessarily dictate a withdrawal from Suez. The construction of bases and the acquisition of influence is not an easy task, and abandoning a region is a decision not to be made lightly. Nonetheless, the fact that those who reevaluated the situation were ignored suggests the role of a cognitive bias, perhaps the “escalation of commitment,” that encouraged the British essentially to find reasons to retain their bases.

Returning to the themes laid out at the beginning of this paper, we can see that the British utterly failed to direct the evolution of their Empire in the Middle East. There were other actors involved, of course, such as the indigenous peoples of the region with ideas of their own. Of all its territories and dependencies in the region, only the island of
Cyprus joined the Commonwealth. Colonial development also failed to achieve much of lasting value. While the oil-producing nations have amassed great wealth in recent decades, the vast majority of this growth occurred well after the British departure. In terms of devolution, Western political concepts still clash frequently with more traditional modes of governance. The tribal structures the British had sought to cast aside in favor of Western democratic institutions, for example, continue to dominate much of the Middle East (e.g., Iraq and Yemen); sheikhs still rule in Bahrain and the UAE, and the current president of Egypt has been in office since 1981. Finally, while friendly ties remain between Britain and some of its former subjects, the relationships fall well short of the “equal partnerships” envisioned by proponents of informal empire. To a large extent, the United States has also supplanted Britain as the primary Western power in the region.64

As Americans asked themselves what role they should play in the new international order after World War II, Britons questioned the future role of Britain. Although they failed, the commitment of British policymakers to the preservation of the Empire best explains the persistence of the military basing network in the Middle East. For a quarter-century, Labour and Conservative leaders alike offered rationales that were at times both complementary and contradictory in light of past and future decisions. Absent the Soviet threat, it is difficult to imagine the British not investing more resources, rather than less, in the Middle East. In the final analysis, as the imperial stalwarts saw the old structures begin to crumble, it almost did not matter whether the Empire was formal or informal as long as it was preserved in some form. The bases

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64 Ritchie Ovendale, Britain, the United States, and the Transfer of Power in the Middle East, 1945-1962 (Leicester University Press, 2010).
remained and they simply had to be kept because that was how an imperial power projected itself; to abandon the bases meant abandoning the empire. It is not a coincidence that the British pull-out occurred in the late 1960s, by which time a new generation of political leaders unencumbered with the baggage of imperial memory had taken the reins of the Labour Party.

History affects decision-making in profound ways. It does so at a personal level, shaping how any given leader—Churchill, for instance—responds to an international development, and it does so at a bureaucratic level, largely determining how a government agency—the Foreign Office, for example—responds to dissent from established and time-honored policy. The specter of Vietnam continues to haunt the US military and political system, as it is seemingly compared against every new military conflict in which we find ourselves engaged. The well-documented disaster of post-war Iraq and, perhaps, prolonged counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan may soon supplant Vietnam as the reigning paradigm.

This study raises a number of questions relevant for US policymakers. First, the global reach of the US military is often compared to the prior expanse of the British Empire.\(^{65}\) American troops are deployed in well over 100 countries around the world. The largest clusters, excluding on-going military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, are in Japan, Germany, and South Korea. All three are highly-advanced polities with gross domestic products in excess of $1 trillion each.\(^{66}\) As we have seen, the British maintained expensive military bases overseas despite changes in the strategic environment that


invalidated at least their original purpose. Long after successful post-World War II reconstruction and the end of the Cold War, what is the current rationale for maintaining these bases?

Second, the power of inertia and tradition are frequently underestimated in policy analysis. The British cared so much about the Middle East partly because of the longevity of their presence in the region; the North Africa campaigns that defeated General Erwin Rommel and other Axis forces during World War II, for instance, were primarily led by the British and not easily forgotten by them amid disastrous campaigns elsewhere. More than 5,000 US troops have been killed in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001. The US has made use of military bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and elsewhere in the region since the Persian Gulf War, and the former US military presence in Saudi Arabia predated that conflict by decades. How will the memory of both these losses and the long-term duration of the US presence in the region affect future decision-making in Washington and the Pentagon?

Third, the US is bound presently by tacit or explicit defense pacts with a vast number of countries around the world. The most prominent of these is probably the NATO alliance, while the most controversial are likely the relationships with Israel and Taiwan. The reader will recall that treaties with the Gulf Arabs compelled the British to defend them against military threats, as in the case of Iraq’s putative 1961 invasion plans for Kuwait. As the conflicts that created both Israel and Taiwan recede into the past—the generations that remember the birth of the Jewish state and Mao’s revolution are literally dying off—the American population’s appetite for war on their behalf will probably diminish significantly. How reliable are these US defense commitments?
Finally, a number of developing economies are rising in stature and power around the world. Several of them, including Brazil, China, India, and even Turkey, operate according to their own versions of national exceptionalism. Britain struggled after 1945 to redefine its global responsibilities in an international system dominated by the two superpowers and an alliance structure in which it played a junior part. As these rising powers evolve into great powers, is the US prepared to redefine its global role?

To date, US policymakers demonstrate an aversion to addressing these difficult questions. A fundamental reconsideration by the British of their strategic position in 1948 instead of 1968 could have altered the course of the Middle East and the imperial denouement in profound ways. Britain’s experience after 1945 suggests that avoiding the types of issues raised by these questions will, more often than not, constrain the capacity for sound judgment and lead to situations where there are no good options remaining.

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Appendix: Map of the Middle East

Source: CIA World Factbook
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