

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE UNITED STATES' SECURITY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNITED KINGDOM

BY
ANDREW SCHOLLE

Andrew Scholle is a senior and a Military History major at the United States Military Academy. He wrote this paper in partial fulfillment of course requirements for a course on War since 1945. He is interested in how states develop their national security strategy.

The United Kingdom emerged victorious from the Second World War, but it no longer dominated the world order. Post-war geopolitics revolved around the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. The United Kingdom was no more than a junior partner to the Americans in that struggle. Nevertheless, the post-war U.K. defense budget did not reflect its reduced status. This level of spending proved untenable and forced the British to choose between social programs and defense expenditures.¹ The U.S. nuclear guarantee allowed the United Kingdom to find savings through defense cuts at a time when frugality was at premium because of a series of crises and recessions in the British economy. In the long run, these defense cuts significantly reduced the United Kingdom's ability to use military force on distant objectives, as proved by the near-defeat in the Falkland Islands War of 1982.

The post-war United Kingdom initially demonstrated a much higher tolerance for defense commitments than the rest of Europe. Britain spent a higher percentage of its Gross National Product on defense than the European average every year from 1954 through 1969.² Nevertheless, this percentage steadily fell through the 1960s and 1970s as a number of factors converged to reduce British defense spending and consequently weaken British conventional arms. The British government's official Statements on Defense Estimates echoed with a common theme of economic strain. Savings had to be found somewhere. British strategic planners redefined national interests and altered perceptions of the characteristics of future war in order to justify cuts in the British military. Meanwhile, the

¹ Michael Chichester and John Wilkinson, *British Defence: A Blueprint for Reform* (Trowbridge: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1987), 3-4.

² G. C. Peden, *Arms, Economics and British Strategy: From Dreadnoughts to Hydrogen Bombs* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 306.

confidence in the security guarantee provided by the Americans through NATO soothed those who feared that deep cuts would have serious consequences.

With the continual budget problems becoming the new norm, a new consensus arose in the British government. Members of government started to view defense spending as fundamentally opposed to British social welfare programs and economic health. A “weapons versus welfare” battle developed inside of the United Kingdom.”³ The 1966 Statement on the Defense Estimates presented two equal governmental objectives: to relax the nation’s economic strain and shape the new defense program for the future.⁴ The report argued that military strength could not come at the cost of economic vitality.⁵ To protect the economy, the government set a ceiling of £2,000 million for defense expenditures. By 1968, in the wake of the devaluation of the British pound, the government stated its position even more bluntly: “There is no military strength, whether for Britain or our alliances, except on the basis of economic strength.”⁶ In 1974, the Labour Party platform set a goal of reducing British defense spending to the same level as the rest of Western Europe.⁷ Throughout the time period, continuing economic troubles absorbed the focus of British politicians. Instead of increasing taxes or cutting non-essential spending, defense spending became the government’s piggy bank to be broken into whenever social programs required money. The argument that economic and military powers were simply two sides of the same coin rationalized the cuts.

The defense cuts had a definite impact on British military forces. Immediately after the Second World War, British servicemen could be found across the globe. But by 1976, all the remaining British warships could be found in the Eastern Atlantic.⁸ This drastic change in deployments was the result of a redefinition of British interests as budget cuts slashed capabilities. Leaders in the United Kingdom now perceived overseas territories and bases as encumbrances, not assets. Therefore, the 1966 Defence Review recommended reducing commitments because deployments were expensive and overstretched British forces.⁹ The review quite optimistically asserted that minor island territories would be easy to protect from major forward bases.¹⁰ The 1966 strategy document also

³ Chichester and Wilkinson, *British Defence*, 3.

⁴ Healy, "Defence Review: The Statement on the Defence Estimates 1966, Part 1," 11 February 1966, CP and C, 1(66)-50(66): 221, Records of the Cabinet Office, British National Archives, London.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Public Expenditure: Post-Devaluation Measures. Draft Parliamentary Statement, 15 January 1968, CM and CC, 1(68)-37(68): 236, Records of the Cabinet Office, British National Archives, London.

⁷ Chichester and Wilkinson, *British Defence*, 12.

⁸ Roy Mason, "Defence Review: The Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975," 25 February 1975, CP and C, 1-25: I-2, Records of the Cabinet Office, British National Archives, London.

⁹ Healey, "Defence Review," 11 February 1966: 224-232.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

recommended ending further aircraft carrier production, citing an analysis that carriers were only necessary to support amphibious operations outside the range of friendly land-based aircraft. The review predicted that such operations were unlikely due to the United Kingdom's powerful allies.¹¹ In the wake of more serious financial problems in 1968, the British withdrew from almost all overseas bases.¹² The Defence Review of that year stated that British defense efforts would focus on Europe and the North Atlantic.¹³ By 1975, the Royal Navy was withdrawing even from the Mediterranean and the Army was endeavoring to maintain its fighting ability in Europe alone.¹⁴ As the financial crises mounted, it became impossible for the United Kingdom to maintain the military might necessary to station forces around the globe. Cuts to the Royal Navy implied that the government believed the United Kingdom would not take violent action far from home. Gradually, the sphere of British influence was redrawn closer and closer to London as the British military abandoned first some, then practically all, overseas bases. Eventually, the re-deployments restricted major British defense operations to the vicinity of Europe.

As the United Kingdom's combat power shrank, the American security guarantee was a constant reassurance for British strategic thinkers. British leaders felt confident in the United States' nuclear deterrent because the American commitment to use thermonuclear weapons in defense of the United Kingdom was now enshrined in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) policy.¹⁵ The 1966 Defence Review even suggested cutting British strategic bombers to use the funds elsewhere because the Americans would be able to deliver all the nuclear weapons necessary.¹⁶ The review approvingly noted that the British nuclear forces "will enable us to share fully in maintaining the political solidarity of NATO."¹⁷ British planners knew that their meager nuclear weapons stock was negligible compared to the vast American arsenal. They also knew that the Americans would protect the United Kingdom. British defense commitments were now more political than practical, which gave the United Kingdom the ability to cut defense spending whenever it seemed to make economic sense.

British strategists did not only change the theaters in which they expected British forces would fight. They also began planning to fight different kinds of wars. The 1966 Defence Review predicted that any war in Western Europe would

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹² "Public Expenditure," 15 January 1968: 237.

¹³ Denis Healey, "Statement on the Defence Estimates, 1968," 29 January 1968, CP and C, 1(68)-37(68): 286, Records of the Cabinet Office, British National Archives, London.

¹⁴ Mason, "Defence Review," 25 February 1975: I-23, I-26.

¹⁵ Peden, *Arms, Economics and British Strategy*, 316, 318.

¹⁶ Healey, "Defence Review," 11 February 1966: 229.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 242.

soon involve unlimited use of nuclear weapons. Therefore, it argued, it was unnecessary to stockpile supplies for a war of several months duration, since all “organized land warfare” would be impossible.¹⁸ Rather, the British military needed only be prepared for the “day to day task of keeping the peace.”¹⁹ The review also gave consideration to working with the United Nations (UN) on future operations.²⁰ The United Kingdom was on its way to reorienting its forces to a new and different kind of limited warfare.

The numerous British Defence Reviews of the 1960s and 1970s changed the force structure of the British military, its likely area of deployment, and its mission. Obviously, these changes had significant effects on the capabilities of the British armed services. The most far-reaching consequences were that the British military became something of a “hollow force” and that its ability to project power at a distance declined. In this usage, a hollow force is one that maintains an outward appearance of great combat power by retaining combat units at the cost of cutting service support capabilities. Such a force is formidable until it confronts logistically difficult campaigns. British politicians seemed to be doing their best to inflict this status on their armed forces during this time period. Support facilities were the first target of budget cuts in early 1968.²¹ Royal Air Force (RAF) transport aircraft were quickly added to the list.²² In 1975, proportionally greater cuts were still occurring in the support services.²³ By 1982, these reductions had taken their toll, and the hollow force that was the British military made itself known to the world in the Falklands.

The United Kingdom also substantially reduced its ability to use military force to influence states and protect its interests across the globe. The 1966 decision to cut the carrier fleet rendered the United Kingdom dependent on the goodwill of local countries for air support.²⁴ In 1966, the United Kingdom canceled its new TSR-2 strike aircraft,²⁵ and in 1968 it canceled the 50 F-111s ordered from the United States to replace the TSR-2.²⁶ With earlier recommendations to cut strategic bombers, the cancelation of all aircraft designed for the interdiction and strike mission meant that the RAF’s ability to hit long-range targets was steadily decreasing. In 1975, the government cut the new amphibious assault ships and the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 242.

²⁰ Healey, “Statement on the Defence Estimates, 1968,” 29 January 1968, 287.

²¹ “Public Expenditure,” 15 January 1968: 242.

²² Healey, “Statement on the Defence Estimates, 1968,” 29 January 1968, 286.

²³ Mason, “Defence Review,” 25 February 1975: I-23.

²⁴ Healey, “Defence Review,” 11 February 1966: 236.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁶ Healey, “Statement on the Defence Estimates, 1968,” 29 January 1968, 286.

United Kingdom's future ability to seize distant territory was in grave doubt.²⁷ Cumulatively, the British military was losing its traditional global reach.

The decay of the British military's capability to project power at a distance is evident in the 1982 Falkland Islands War. The United Kingdom, a first-world nation and historically a great sea power, should have been able to crush the Argentinean military with ease. But the defense cuts had taken their toll. According to Admiral Sir John Woodward, commander of the British task force sent to recapture the Falklands, the war was "a lot closer run" than usually believed.²⁸ Of the many factors that jeopardized the success of the British effort, several in particular can be traced directly to the defense spending cuts and strategy changes in the two decades preceding the conflict. In particular, a lack of carriers and amphibious warfare vessels, a lack of transport vessels, and a lack of helicopters and aircraft nearly precluded the British victory. Admiral Woodward stated that he had decided before the first combat action that major damage to either of the British aircraft carriers would have meant the end of the entire operation.²⁹ Even though the carriers were unharmed, the British were unable to muster more than thirty Sea Harrier fighters to protect the fleet and provide air support for the landings.³⁰ Cuts in amphibious assault ships, especially crucial in a mission to land on hostile territory, had their effect as well. The British boasted only two purpose-built assault ships available, one of which had to be quickly repossessed immediately prior to its scheduled decommissioning, while the other was promoted from its normal role as the midshipmen's training vessel.³¹ Clearly, defense cuts had eroded the Royal Navy's power projection ability. Because they possessed so few of the key types of ships, the British had no choice but to risk the success of the entire war as long as the fleet was in range of Argentinean air attack.

Reductions in funding of support services also made themselves apparent throughout the operation. Even two of the shipyards quickly fitting out Royal Navy ships for war were slated to be closed.³² Due to a lack of military transport vessels, the British government used many commercial transport vessels to carry soldiers and equipment south.³³ Of course, such ships were not designed to survive combat, and the loss of one in particular, the *Atlantic Conveyor*, severely hampered the British war effort. The loss of nine helicopters forced 3 Commando Brigade to

²⁷ Mason, "Defence Review," 25 February 1975: I-23.

²⁸ Alex Bellos and Jeevan Vasagar, "Falklands Victory a „Close Run Thing,“" *The Guardian*, 2 April 2002, accessed 21 September 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/apr/03/falklands.world>.

²⁹ Sandy Woodward and Patrick Robinson, *One Hundred Days: The Memoirs of the Falklands Battle Group Commander* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 270.

³¹ David Brown, *The Royal Navy and the Falklands War* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), 65.

³² *Ibid.*, 64, 75.

³³ Brown, *The Royal Navy*, 68-69.

foot-march across the island instead of ride. With fewer helicopters, the infantry received less ammunition, food, and other supplies, which slowed the campaign. As a result, they suffered more casualties and were forced to fight on into a severe winter.³⁴ If the government had taken the opportunity to fund more transport vessels, the critical helicopters would have been much safer during their journey to the South Atlantic.

The American nuclear security guarantee through NATO proved more effective than intended. Instead of promoting common military resistance to the USSR, it allowed the United Kingdom to remove security concerns from the list of its top priorities. Buffeted by economic problems, the British no longer sought to build the military they needed. Rather, they set funding limits and were content with the military they could easily afford. Defense spending became a political tool to show commitment to the NATO alliance as well as a treasure trove for funds for other governmental programs. The British military, weakened by budget cuts, surrendered its global reach, focused on Europe, and began planning for limited warfare. Consequently, the United Kingdom's ability to project military power suffered as the savings measures reduced both combat and support units. A sudden war in the remote Falkland Islands severely tested the British military. Due to the inadequate equipment of the British, certain losses had inordinately large negative effects on the conduct of the campaign. Because of a reliance on the American deterrent and too many defense cuts, the United Kingdom suffered through a prolonged campaign in the Falklands with heavier casualties and very narrowly avoided defeat. As Admiral Woodward wrote in his diary on the day before the liberation of the Falklands, "We are now on the cliff edge of our capability. Frankly, if the Argies could only breathe on us, we would fall over!"³⁵

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

³⁵ Bellos and Vasagar, "Falklands Victory."