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Deriglazova, Larisa

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CHAPTER 3

The Dissolution of the British Empire and Asymmetric Conflicts in Dependencies

THE DISSOLUTION OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

The British Empire was one of the largest and most powerful empires in modern history. It managed to create a whole “British world,” the so-called Pax Britannica. The dissolution of the empire occurred relatively recently, and an imperial legacy can be traced in the lives of many nations that were part of or associated with it. The end of the British Empire is often claimed to have been relatively peaceful; however, decolonization was accompanied by protracted wars involving the British armed forces and those of some of its dominions. These wars were costly and strenuous for the metropolis. Moreover, it had to justify them morally before the court of domestic and international public opinion.

After the end of World War II, the United Kingdom was militarily the third most powerful country in the world, after the United States and the Soviet Union. It retained the military and material capabilities to exercise control over its colonial possessions. A readiness to transform the British Empire was evident even before the beginning of World War II, but that did not mean complete surrender to national liberation movements in the colonies. Moreover, British society supported the idea of empire and its

presumed civilizing influence on the people of its colonies. Right up to the final dissolution of the empire, there were debates in the United Kingdom about what “empire” meant, and about the need to transform the empire into a commonwealth of states.

Using the asymmetric conflict model to explore the reasons for the dissolution of the British Empire affords a new perspective on this issue. It questions some established opinions, and weighs the influence of the various factors that affected the process. To carry out this analysis, it will be helpful to identify the circumstances that set events on track for a fast if not always peaceful outcome. Such circumstances align with three groups of factors: military and power factors, domestic and economic factors, and international factors.

Military and power factors. These factors refer primarily to the material capability of the colonial power to maintain order in its dependent territories and subdue the resistance of local forces striving for independence. Specifically, these factors are the military power of the United Kingdom and its military strategies, and the distinctive ways in which it waged war in its colonies and dependent territories. This category should also include the military capabilities of the belligerent parties that managed to inflict political if not military defeat on the United Kingdom.

Domestic and economic factors. These factors are related to the desire to preserve the empire and to pursue certain foreign, military, and economic policies to achieve this goal. Domestic factors include the position of the major political parties and the population with regard to preserving the empire, and the associated costs of doing so. Parliament, the ruling parties, political forces, and the general public all had conflicting opinions on whether to shore up or dissolve the empire. Economic factors include the state of the economy, which conditioned the nation’s ability to sustain its foreign policy course.

International factors. These factors have to do with the policies of other powers and international organizations that affected the capability of the United Kingdom to preserve the empire. Here it is important to emphasize the position of the United States as the new leader of the Western world, as well as the position of the Soviet Union as the other new postwar superpower, and the position of the newly independent countries. Because the asymmetric conflict model implies political rather than military defeat of

the stronger party in an armed struggle, the ideological contest between West and East for influence in newly independent countries should be listed among the international factors, as both sides often saw a new country's choice of ideological patron as a political victory or defeat.

From Empire to Commonwealth

British imperial dominance peaked in the early twentieth century, when the British Empire comprised vast territories in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, North America, and Australia. In 1913, 427,467,000 people were imperial subjects.¹ After the end of World War I, the United Kingdom was given a mandate to govern the former colonies of the Ottoman Empire and Germany, and the British population reached its maximum. In 1939, the population of the empire was 500 million, or roughly one-fourth the world's population, while the population of the metropolis (the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) was just under 47 million.²

The transformation of the empire started with the formal definition of Dominion status, as declared at the 1926 Imperial Conference, held in London. The nature of British relations with its Dominions was laid out in the Balfour Declaration: "There are autonomous Communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations."³ A formal transformation of the British Empire into the British Commonwealth was stipulated by the 1931 Statute of Westminster, though its ratification lingered on into the post-World War II years. The Dominions of Canada, the Commonwealth of Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and the Union of South Africa were in fact individual states. Their troops took part in World War I, representatives of these states participated in the Paris Peace Conference and signed the Treaty of Versailles, and the states joined the League of Nations.

In 1939, the Royal Institute of International Affairs published *The British Empire: A Report on Its Structure and Problems*, which dealt separately with the Dominions, as well as with Newfoundland, Southern Rhodesia, India, Burma, and the "colonial empire." The report stated that "the Empire can better be described than defined," and clarified that the notion of a "colonial empire" applied to crown colonies, mandated territories, and

protectorates. Regardless of the way they had joined the empire, however, whether through conquest, cession, occupation, treaty, or League of Nations mandate, dependent territories were united by a common system of administration and common legislation. According to the report, the colonial empire was inhabited by some 58,350,000 people. This section of the report closely examined the system of governance in different territories. The degree of self-government depended, according to the document, on the degree of development of the local population.⁴ However, as noted by the Russian scholar Galina Ostapenko, “there was no significant difference in degree of dependence.”⁵

The Royal Institute’s report listed the problems of the empire in order of importance:

1. *The problem of preserving the unity of the Commonwealth and empire on foreign policy issues.* The difficulties of preserving such a unity stemmed from the special position of some Commonwealth countries (e.g., Ireland), differences in country status, differences between the security of certain territories and the security of the Commonwealth and the empire in general, and economic and political disagreements between Commonwealth countries. The report paid special attention to relations with the United States in the context of a common foreign policy. It noted that “the Empire as a whole endorses the Monroe Doctrine” and that “the preservation of status quo is one of the fundamental purposes of the United States, and is also one of the major interests of the British Empire. If the empire were to collapse and sovereignty of any of its important components were to pass into the hand of any other Power, the United States would obviously be exposed to new dangers, in spite of the oceans that separate America from Europe and Asia.” Finally, it perspicaciously noted that “in the event of war there would be a serious danger of disintegration of the Empire if its members differed on the fundamental question whether or not they should take part.”⁶

2. *The defense problem.* The defense problem was defined by the way this task was fulfilled within the empire. The report underlined that “the geographical, strategic, and political facts that are of the greatest importance for Imperial defense tend to confirm the functional dissimilarity

that derives from historical causes.” On the one hand, vast areas did not require any special protection, for they bordered on friendly countries (the US-Canadian border) or natural frontiers (Australia) or faced no serious threats (African possessions and India); on the other, the defense of strategic regions required significant resources. The report emphasized that a system of imperial defense was “to a considerable extent centralized rather than co-operative,” and that “in proportion to wealth or population an exceptionally high fraction of the cost and responsibility is borne by the United Kingdom, while most of the Dominions, according to their several strategic and geographical positions, more or less openly rely on it for help in defence.” The report considered whether imperial defense could be federalized, noting that “the nations of the Commonwealth independently reserve the right to decide, not only what defensive arrangements they shall make, but also when and how those defensive arrangements shall be put into operation by active participation in war.” The United Kingdom provided technical assistance, supplied standardized equipment, trained officers, and developed aviation and navy capabilities. Its armed forces were a “small but highly trained expeditionary force” that could be used in crisis situations. In other respects, the armed forces of the empire were represented by the local forces of the dominions or other territories. India possessed a large army, with “Indian troops trained and officered in the higher ranks by British officers (subject to progressive Indianization)”; the report discussed whether the Indian army could be “potentially available for Imperial purpose outside India.”⁷

3. *The colonial question.* The colonial question was considered in two aspects: (1) as “the methods of administration and the relations between native and immigrant peoples,” and (2) as “the relations between the Empire and foreign countries.” Relations with other countries were considered exclusively from the standpoint of claims laid by “dissatisfied powers”—that is, Germany, Italy, and Japan—to certain territories or access to supplies of raw materials and overseas markets. The report noted that the British Empire considered its colonies and dependent territories a crucial source of economic prosperity and intended to defend its interests in the world of power politics, rejecting the simplified Wilsonian approach to

the colonial problem. It specifically stated that “the colonial problem is extraordinary difficult, not only because of its own complexity, but also because it is being considered in the atmosphere of the conflict between democracy and totalitarianism, between the League of Nations and power politics. The principal Imperial Powers are democratic states and members of the League of Nations. The principal dissatisfied Powers, on the other hand, are totalitarian states whose ideology elevates the sovereignty of the State at the expense of the ideal of international community and interdependence embodied in the League, and regards expansion in the colonial and in other spheres as essential to national prestige and to the fulfillment of the ‘national destiny.’”⁸

In 1946, after the end of World War II, the Royal Institute of International Affairs published another report. This report, titled *British Security*, reviewed the traditional foreign policy of the United Kingdom before the war and analyzed the changes that had taken place during the war. It articulated what it called the three great British interests of modern times: “protection of these islands from attack by invading forces; the maintenance of the all-important British trade; and the development and security of oversea[s] possessions.” In its foreign policy the United Kingdom traditionally had relied on “the policy of the free hand” and had refrained from entering into binding obligations to any of the great powers. However, the experience of two world wars, according to the report, “has made it clear that the policy of restricting commitments with the object either of maintaining neutrality or of preserving freedom of decision no longer offers the best hope of security. The affairs of all parts of the world have become so interdependent and events in any one have such wide repercussions elsewhere that the achievement of world peace and stability calls for the co-operative efforts of all, and particularly of the major, peacefully disposed States.”⁹

The British position was defined by the fact that “Britain stands in the world at the head of an Empire and the centre of a Commonwealth with interests stretching right across the surface of the globe.” The report named three sources of British strength—its economic, strategic, and political positions—but noted the war’s negative impact on the United Kingdom: “As compared with the Powers with the greatest natural resources, such as the United States and Russia, she is probably weaker than before the

war.... She has become, on balance, a debtor instead of a creditor country, since a large part of the foreign investments upon which she drew heavily for financing her own effort and that of her allies in the last war, as well as in the early part of this war, have gone.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, the recovery of industrial and agricultural production and world trade would strengthen the position of the empire and the Commonwealth countries. The United Kingdom still enjoyed a strategic position globally, grounded in the triple foundation of land, sea, and air forces; however, in the future the burdens of ocean security would likely have to be shared with other countries, through international alliances.

The Royal Institute report identified new factors that had an impact on security policy. The first was “[an] ideological cleavage in public opinion in most countries arising from the impact of fascist and communist theories upon the established order of society throughout the world. The precise effect of this disturbance is not easy to measure; but its main result, in Britain as elsewhere, has been to introduce into the discussion of foreign affairs a factor of partisan conflict, of which any British Government must take account in estimating how far they can rely on united support at home for action abroad.” Moreover, the need for collective security measures had become much more important because of the relative weakening of the developed countries through war. Nuclear weapons were seen as a new factor in international relations and one whose impact was difficult to predict. Evaluating the sources of British political strength, the authors of the report believed that two of the most important conditions for stability in foreign relations were a shared outlook on foreign affairs by the different political parties and continuity in foreign policy, which should be maintained by successive governments. The report held that British society should be kept well informed in a timely manner about foreign policy issues and that secrecy was inadvisable, for transparency in the matters of government policy and foreign affairs would be expected to contribute to national unity: “Foreign affairs are not an obscure, mystical subject, beyond the comprehension of the ordinary man,” the authors wrote. “They are as much a matter for common sense, for free and open discussion, and for public judgment as other affairs of state.”¹¹

The report marked a sea change in British thinking about national security, which was no longer parsed as relations between its overseas possessions

and the imperial head but as embedded in international relationships with other powerful nations. The countries and regions identified as having an impact on British security were the Commonwealth, the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe, the Middle East, and the Pacific. Further, the conditions and mechanisms for creating international security would have to be pursued, and here the role of the United Nations was noted. The report also unambiguously stated that the United States had an absolute military resource superiority in the world and therefore had a major role to play in ensuring international security, as the United Kingdom once had.¹² As for the Soviet Union, the report's authors emphasized the need for close cooperation to ensure security in Europe and stability in the Middle East, and to formulate common approaches to India and China. At the same time, they noted that mistrust and ignorance about each other's history created serious psychological obstacles to Anglo-Soviet cooperation. The three main regions in which the interests of the two countries were closely intertwined were Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East. The report's assessment of the Soviet Union was reserved, merely pointing to the need to find common interests on which they could cooperate (the possibility of cooperation was confirmed by specific examples drawn from recent history).¹³ As for the Pacific Region, the United Kingdom needed a "permanent accord with the United States and the USSR" to pursue the following interests and goals: "1) the maintenance of the political association with the Dominions; 2) a general responsibility towards all the Pacific territories which are associated with her; 3) good relations with China; 4) commercial interests, including her investments in Pacific countries, trade and exchange of products; 5) communications, in which oceanic shipping and air routes are of prime importance; 6) the defence of individual territories; and 7) on a different plane, general support in the Pacific as elsewhere for 'liberal' tendencies and regimes."¹⁴

Thus, it appears that after the end of World War II, the United Kingdom intended to restore colonial control while taking into account changes in the international situation and the new alignment of forces. Bernard Porter has noted that the rapid Japanese occupation of the British colonies in the Far East became possible as a result of the negative attitude of the empire's subjects: "In the early 1940s her colonies in the east toppled one by one before the Japanese wind: Hong Kong in December 1941; then

Malaya—with her people apparently not lifting a finger to stop it, which put a damper on Britain’s euphoria; then, in February 1942, that great new ‘invulnerable’ imperial bastion in the east, Singapore (because its guns were all pointing out to sea and the Japanese came in from the land); and then Burma.”¹⁵ According to Keith Jeffery, “the failure by Britain to protect Imperial subjects had a long-term effect.... The Empire was gravely, if not fatally, injured.”¹⁶ British historian Michael Howard wrote that after the fall of Singapore, “the charisma on which British rule in the East had rested for a hundred of years and which British defence planners had been so anxious to preserve was destroyed forever.” American journalist Walter Lippmann, in his column in the *Washington Post*, argued that “the loss of Britain’s Far Eastern Empire transformed overnight an imperialist’s war into a war of liberation.” This editorial caused a debate in British political circles over the lessons of this defeat. One lesson was that colonial nations did not resist the Japanese troops owing to the unpopularity of the British rule. Another lesson was that many dependent territories represented “plural societies,” multinational and multiconfessional, a circumstance that had to be taken into account in the postwar reorganization of the system of governance.¹⁷

The United Kingdom’s main military purpose in the remaining colonies was to prevent them from falling under communist influence, rather than to preserve the status quo. Even before the United States did, the United Kingdom began viewing the struggle in Asia and Africa as part of a global struggle against communism. The official documents of the British government provide clear evidence of this fact.¹⁸ The Russian scholar I. I. Zhigalov quotes the words of Winston Churchill, who said that by spring 1945, the Soviet threat had in his eyes “replaced the Nazi enemy.”¹⁹ Classified British government documents confirm that in early 1946, considerable attention was devoted to the problem of Soviet influence in Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, India, and China.²⁰

In late October 1948, the Labour government agreed to drop “British” from the name of the Commonwealth as a result of India’s decision to introduce a republican form of political system in the country. Prime Minister Clement Attlee’s memorandum of December 30, 1948, stated that the term “British” should be avoided so as not to evoke associations with the British Empire, “[which] tendency has increased in recent times.” At the same time he noted that the “Commonwealth includes the Colonies

and other dependent territories, some of which are under the administration of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.” However, “the phrase ‘Commonwealth and Empire’, which conveniently implies a distinction between the self-governing and dependent parts of the whole, has no constitutional authority and is permissible only in colloquial use.”²¹ This decision generated a wave of indignation on the part of Conservatives, headed by Winston Churchill, in the British Parliament.²² In 1949, the name “British Commonwealth” was officially changed to “Commonwealth of Nations,” and India joined it. According to the British historian W. Roger Louis, “India’s decision strengthened the Whiggish view of the Empire’s progress and purpose including the belief that British rule had been designed originally to allow dependent peoples to advance towards self-government and to reach fulfillment in the Commonwealth.”²³ Taking a slightly different approach, David French argued that despite the clear inability of the United Kingdom to maintain the status of great power alongside the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II, “British defence policy, like her foreign policy, was designed to preserve as much as possible of Britain’s world power in increasingly adverse circumstances.”²⁴

W. Roger Louis, who edited *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, noted that the 125 historians who contributed to the five-volume project often had as much difficulty agreeing on when the empire began as on when it ended. According to him, the independence of Malaysia, Singapore, Aden, and Rhodesia was referred to as “the death rattle of British imperialism.” The project participants “reaffirmed that historical judgment changes dramatically from one generation to the next” under the impact of ideological “engagement in relation to the times” and because of the complexity of the phenomenon itself.²⁵

In 1964, the Commonwealth consisted of 18 independent states and the United Kingdom, as well as nine colonies in Africa, two in Asia, six in the Americas, thirteen in Oceania, and two in Europe. The population of the empire, including that of the United Kingdom, was around 68 million people, having shrunk to almost one-seventh of its earlier size. The population of the colonial power was around 70 percent of the overall number of imperial subjects.²⁶ In 1966, the position of colonial secretary was dissolved and responsibility for relations with dependent territories was transferred to the secretary of state for Commonwealth affairs. In 1971,

the Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles was adopted; it stated that the Commonwealth was “a voluntary association of independent sovereign states.” Along with a commitment to international peace, mutual understanding between nations, human rights protection, democracy, and elimination of the gap between poor and rich countries, the Singapore Declaration held that “we oppose all forms of colonial domination and racial oppression” and “will therefore use all our efforts to foster human equality and dignity everywhere, and to further the principles of self-determination and non-racialism.”²⁷

Charles Edmund Carrington, who held the Abe Bailey Chair of Commonwealth Relations at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, from 1954 to 1962, claimed that the British Empire ceased to be the world’s leading power after the fall of Singapore in 1942,²⁸ and that from that moment on, “the whole world moved into a phase of social development to which the French have recently given a name, the useful word ‘decolonization.’”²⁹ Carrington identified three phases of the British Empire’s collapse and referred to decolonization as the “transfer of power” to those nations that were mature enough to administer their own affairs. In the first stage some “old” colonies received the status of Dominion; in the second stage South Asia was liberated, between 1947 and 1957; and in the third phase Africa was decolonized, under the catchphrase “Independence now,” between 1958 and 1961. The fourth phase, according to Carrington, entailed completing the transfer of power to small states. He argued that the United Kingdom should retain military bases in strategic locations (Malta, Gibraltar, Cyprus, Aden [now part of Yemen], Kenya, Singapore, Hong Kong) by internationalizing the bases through the system of the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).³⁰

By the mid-1990s, all four of Carrington’s phases had been completed, though often independence was granted after a period of direct confrontation and even war:

1. In the first phase, which occurred mainly before World War I, Dominion status was granted to Canada (1867), the Commonwealth of Australia (1901), New Zealand (1907), the Union of South Africa (1910), and Ireland (1921).

2. In the second phase, which lasted from the end of World War II to the Suez Crisis of 1956, independence was given to Transjordan in 1946; Bhutan, India, and Pakistan in 1947; Brunei, Burma, Palestine, and Sri Lanka in 1948; and Sudan in 1956.
3. In the third phase, which ran from 1957 to the end of the 1960s, when long-lasting military campaigns on the periphery of the empire came to an end, independence was granted to the larger states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: Ghana and Malaya in 1957; Singapore in 1959; Somalia, Nigeria, and Cyprus in 1960; Sierra Leone, Kuwait, and Tanganyika in 1961; Western Samoa, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda in 1962; Kenya, Singapore, Sarawak, North Borneo, and Zanzibar (including Pemba Island) in 1963; Malta, Malawi (Nyasaland), and Zambia in 1964; Gambia and the Maldives in 1965; Barbados, Botswana, Guyana, and Lesotho in 1966; South Yemen in 1967; and Nauru and Swaziland in 1968.
4. In the fourth phase, which lasted from the 1970s until 1997, independence was gained mainly by small, often island states in the final dissolution of the empire. During this time the following territories also acquired sovereignty: Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates in 1971; the Bahamas in 1973; Grenada and Tuvalu in 1974; Seychelles in 1976; Dominica and the Solomon Islands in 1978; Kiribati, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent, and the Grenadines in 1979; Vanuatu and Zimbabwe in 1980; Antigua and Barbuda and Belize in 1981; and Saint Kitts and Nevis in 1983. Sovereignty over Hong Kong was transferred to China in 1997, and the ceremony is regarded as symbolizing the end of this period.³¹

As relayed by the editors in the introductory note to one of the volumes of *British Documents on the End of Empire*, “in 1945 Britain had over fifty formal dependencies; by the end of 1965 the total had been almost halved and by 1985 only a handful remained.”³² Trevor Owen Lloyd in *The British Empire, 1558–1995* lists the following stages of empire dissolution: (1) 1899–1922: fighting and reorganizing; (2) 1922–1945: the defeat of the idea of an imperium; (3) 1945–1960: independence by degrees; (4) 1960–1983: independence at once.³³

Thus, in the first two postwar decades the British Empire underwent a radical change and practically ceased to exist. To what extent this process was voluntary is an open question. Official British government documents of the time refer to the process of the empire's dissolution as a "transformation," "power transfer," or "evolution," which suggests that it was perceived as inevitable and even desirable. Evidence in favor of the voluntary nature of empire dissolution is at hand in British efforts to create political, economic, administrative, and legal institutions in the colonies according to the British model, as well as in the constant discussions by officials, politicians, and members of Parliament on reorganizing the empire into a commonwealth. That most former colonies joined the Commonwealth can be considered confirmation of the voluntary transformation of the empire. At present, 53 countries are members of the Commonwealth of Nations, and almost all are former British colonies or dependent territories. Burma, Ireland, Sudan, Somalia, and some other countries did not join the Commonwealth. Pakistan left the Commonwealth in 1972, then rejoined in 1989. South Africa left the Commonwealth in 1961 and rejoined in 1994.

The authors of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* note that some of the contributors to that work challenge the assumption of a voluntary and peaceful "self-dissolution" of the empire and consider the Commonwealth to be a continuation of empire by other means.³⁴ Ronald Hyam, editor of the 17-volume project *British Documents on the End of Empire*, indicates that this selection of documents shows that the main British objective was to contribute to the development of dependent territories and prepare them for independence, rather than to fulfill British imperial ambitions.³⁵ Moreover, Niall Ferguson writes, "What is very striking about the history of the Empire is that whenever the British were behaving despotically, there was almost always a liberal critique of that behavior from within British society. Indeed, so powerful and consistent was this tendency to judge Britain's imperial conduct by the yardstick of liberty that it gave the British Empire something of a self-liquidating character."³⁶

Indeed, multiple lines of evidence support a critical attitude of British politicians and British public figures toward imperial order. *British Rule in India Condemned by the British Themselves*, published in London in 1915 by the Indian National Party, is one of this kind. The book is a collection of quotations from British public figures speaking about extreme poverty in India, which was a

direct consequence of the British rule. It is noteworthy that the preface was written by William Jennings Bryan, the US secretary of state during President Wilson's administration. Bryan talks about justice and law, about the British refusal to give Indians an opportunity to control their treasures, and about British rule being worse than "Russian despotism": "How long will it be before the quickened conscience of England's Christian people will heed the petition that swells up from fettered India and apply to Britain's greatest colony the doctrines of human brotherhood that have given to the Anglo-Saxon race the prestige that it enjoys?"³⁷ However, the domestic critique of the British Empire, which appears in abundance in this publication, usually had in mind improving the system of governance rather than destroying it.

Even Soviet historiography, despite its fierce condemnation of the cruelties associated with British imperialism, expressed the view that "dissolution of the British Empire is distinguished by the relatively peaceful course of this process and the fact that most colonies making up the Empire did not completely sever their relations with the metropolis but became formally equal participants of the Commonwealth."³⁸ Soviet historians interpreted the Commonwealth as a transformation of imperial control into neocolonialism³⁹ rather than as a mechanism for the free association of independent states. The term "neocolonialism" reflected the Marxist-Leninist understanding of the imperial order as a system of exploitation and oppression of indigenous peoples. Even today this assessment is to a large extent present in the Russian research literature, though interest in empires, including the history and legacy of the Russian Empire, has prompted Russian researchers to develop a new perspective on this phenomenon.⁴⁰ Today both Russian and Western authors often consider empires, including the British Empire, as predecessors to globalization, economic and political integration, and efforts to create a single global space.

Despite the changed form of interaction with its dependent territories, the United Kingdom nevertheless aspired to retain its interests and levers in its former colonies. It formulated several key political, economic, and security interests during the transformation of its colonial empire:

- preserving the system of economic preferences and access to the most crucial sources of raw materials and natural resources, which ensured favorable conditions for the British economy;

- preserving close political ties with dependent countries and acting against competitors from the Western and communist countries; and
- preserving its military presence in strategic regions of the world to protect its interests and those of its allies and dependent territories.

Empire had enabled the United Kingdom to retain its great power status. The Russian historian Galina Ostapenko interpreted the formula of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill as follows: “The empire provides the United Kingdom with an independent position among the strong powers of the world.” Moreover, according to Ostapenko, Churchill did not see any contradiction between the notions of “empire” and “freedom.”⁴¹ Indeed, in his letter to US President Franklin D. Roosevelt in December 1943, Churchill wrote that “the principles of imperialism already have succumbed to the principles of democracy,” but also observed that “if imperialism is dead, it seems very reluctant to die down.” According to Churchill, “the imperialism of Germany, Japan, Italy, France, Belgium, Portugal and the Netherlands will, we hope, end or be radically revised by this war. British imperialism seems to have acquired a new life [as a result] of the infusion, into its emaciated form, of the blood of productivity and liberty from a free nation through lend lease. British imperialism is also being defended today by the blood of the soldiers of the most democratic nation on earth.”⁴² As David Kaiser notes, this is not what the American president wanted to hear about the future of the British Empire.⁴³

A discussion of the system of international trusteeship at a conference in San Francisco between April and June 1945 resulted in a heated debate over the inclusion of such concepts as independence or self-government in the UN Charter. Lord Cranborne, British representative and leader of the Conservatives in the British Parliament, argued that many parts of the British Empire had greater freedom than some independent states in Europe, and that an international system of trusteeship was not a way to preserve imperial control but rather would prepare colonial nations for independence. China, the Soviet Union, and several smaller countries sought to write “independence” into the document, while the representatives of France and the Netherlands were against this wording. The Soviet delegates insisted on including provisions pertaining to the “complete

national independence and self-determination of all colonial territories.” There were serious disagreements on that issue within the US delegation, though later the American delegation spoke against including the word “independence.” The discussion of the colonial issue turned mainly on the problem of international security. W. Roger Louis would later note that “the history of the colonial question at San Francisco can be viewed as an attempt to resolve the two issues of security and colonial accountability, on the one hand, and the larger question of the future of dependent peoples on the other.”⁴⁴

Those who study the dissolution of the British Empire often argue that the empire was primarily an economic phenomenon and emerged as a result of trade and consumerism, accompanied by some insignificant state intervention. Until the mid-1950s, half the global trade was provided by the British pound sterling, which only gradually was driven out by the US dollar. Military force was used to conquer territories, fight against other European empires, and suppress riots in colonized territories. However, according to Niall Ferguson, military and financial power alone would have been insufficient to create a world empire. The colonization process—which included the mass resettlement of Britons in conquered territories and the creation of the “British order,” with special rules for public space organization—played a significant role in developing and maintaining the British Empire. Ferguson writes:

When the British governed a country—even if they only influenced its government by flexing their military and financial muscles—there were certain distinctive features of their own society that they tended to disseminate. A list of the more important of these would run as follows: 1) The English language; 2) English forms of land tenure; 3) Scottish and English banking; 4) The Common Law; 5) Protestantism; 6) Team sports; 7) The limited or “night watchman” state; 8) Representative assemblies; 9) The idea of liberty.⁴⁵

Alan Burns also echoed Ferguson’s words in his 1957 book *In Defence of Colonies*.⁴⁶

Transforming the empire under new circumstances, the British authorities strived to implement their idea of appropriate organization of the local

community in economy, politics, culture, education, health care, and many other spheres. The concept of nation-building, popular now and frequently used in the process of conflict resolution and postcolonial recovery, is present in official British documents on the colonial question. In analytical material prepared by the British Colonial Office in May 1950, prior to the Anglo-American talks on the American position in the United Nations with regard to the colonial issue, officials stated that dependent territories had to meet five conditions before they could be considered ready for self-determination: “1) the people must be healthy and vigorous; 2) they must have education, and technical knowledge and skills; 3) they must be able to produce all they possibly can for their own needs; 4) they must have something to sell to the outside world in exchange for the things they need but cannot produce themselves; 5) they must be able to govern and administer their affairs with reasonable honesty and efficiency.”⁴⁷ The policy of the British Empire, according to the Colonial Office, was aimed at preparing and creating these conditions.

The publication of the British *Documents on the End of Empire* was a unique attempt to provide researchers with primary sources on the logic, drivers, and problems of the empire’s dissolution. The preface stated that “the central themes” of the publication were “the political constraints, both domestic and international, to which British governments were subject, the economic requirements of the sterling area, the geopolitical and strategic questions associated with priorities in foreign policy and in defence planning, and the interaction between these various constraints and concerns and the imperatives imposed by developments in colonial territories.” According to the editors, two central topics of colonial policy dominated between 1945 and 1951: economic recovery and the Russian expansion.⁴⁸

In the early 1960s, the swift collapse of the empire spread to Africa. In his famous speech in February 1960 in Cape Town, South Africa, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan emphasized the role played by nationalism in Britain’s granting independence to the countries of Africa: “The growth of national consciousness in Africa is a political fact, and we must accept it as such.... I sincerely believe that if we cannot do so we may imperil the precarious balance between the East and West on which the peace of the world depends.”⁴⁹ As the British historian Alistair Horne has noted, this speech elicited indignation from British Conservative politicians, who

claimed that Macmillan had gone too far, that his speech was premature and provoked radical political activity in Africa.⁵⁰ However, other British politicians saw nationalism as the main antidote to communist influence in the colonies, along with good relations with the former colonial power, and this was the idea voiced by Macmillan. Commissioner General for South East Asia and the British representative to SEATO Lord Selkirk (George Douglas-Hamilton) expressed the same idea, writing to the prime minister in August 1961, “Whether we like it or not we have to recognize that China, both militarily and ideologically, is becoming increasingly the dominant force throughout South East Asia. The only long-term effective answer to Communist China is nationalism, coupled with recognition by each State that it has an obligation to defend its own territory. I was glad to note recently that this idea seems to be more readily recognized in Washington than it was. We must clearly do everything we can to promote nationalism as a counter to communism and avoid policies (especially with an imperialistic flavor) which may lead nationalists and communists to join forces against us.”⁵¹

Thus, both military and nonmilitary factors played crucial roles in the dissolution of the British Empire. Any persistent countermeasures undertaken by the British authorities and the forceful suppression of national liberation movements in dependencies could have resulted in a breach of economic and political ties and, more dangerous, pushed the former colonies into a search for third-party support.

ASYMMETRIC ARMED CONFLICTS ACCOMPANYING THE COLONIES’ STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

The loss of colonial possessions was of economic, military, and strategic importance for the British Empire and was accompanied by forms of warfare often called small wars or emergencies in British historiography, though the level of casualties and the durations of the conflicts are consistent with the criteria for war accepted in the research literature.⁵² According to my calculations based on the COSIMO database, over the period of 1945–1999 the United Kingdom was engaged in 27 asymmetric armed conflicts with dependencies; in 15 cases participation was direct and in 12 cases it

was indirect. Seven of the 12 cases of indirect participation were conflicts with the empire's former dependencies, and 5 cases were conflicts with the dependencies of other countries. Twenty-one armed conflicts involving the United Kingdom occurred in the first two decades after World War II. In all these conflicts, regular British Army troops fought against various irregular troops and national liberation movements that used guerrilla strategies. The most bloody and protracted were the armed conflicts that preceded the independence of India, Malaya, Kenya, Yemen, and Nigeria. The independence of Sudan, Cyprus, Malawi, and Israel was also achieved by local forces fighting against British rule.

Around one-third of the asymmetric armed conflicts in which the United Kingdom was involved in the first two decades after World War II took place in countries that were not British possessions: in Greece, Indochina, Indonesia, Lebanon, and Angola. In Greece, it aimed to prevent the victory of communist forces during the Greek Civil War. In Indochina, it participated in disarmament of the Japanese troops south of the 16th degree north latitude, following the decision of the Potsdam Conference. After the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was established in September 1945, its troops occupied the southern part of the peninsula but were driven out by British troops by the spring of 1946.

British policy in Indochina aimed at helping restore French control, as well as fighting against local pro-communist and nationalist forces, which were seen as a threat to the British possessions in South and Southeast Asia. However, as contemporary British scholars note, an attempt to restore the empire through military action by the British Army, which had a significant share of Indian and African soldiers, took place under conditions that greatly differed from those of the prewar period. According to British historians Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, British troops poured into Burma, "reversing the humiliating defeat which they had suffered at Japanese hands three years earlier. The British went on to occupy Thailand, much of former French Indo-China and Dutch Indonesia," but this "revivified British Empire" faced "a variety of powerful, armed and embittered nationalist leaderships determined to claim immediate independence."⁵³ In the Dutch colony of Indonesia, British and Australian troops were present to accept the surrender of Japanese troops, and they did not fight against establishment of the independent government of

Sukarno. In April 1946, British troops left Indonesia and transferred power to the Dutch colonial administration.

Sir Julian Paget, lieutenant colonel in the British Army, provides data on 34 small wars in which the United Kingdom participated in 1945–1966. He labeled three of these as “limited wars”: Korea in 1950, the Suez Crisis of 1956, and Kuwait in 1961. He defined 11 military operations as counterinsurgency campaigns: Greece, 1945; Palestine, 1946–1948; Aden, 1947; Malaya, 1948–1960; Kenya, 1953–1955; Cyprus, 1954–1958; Togo from 1957; Masqat and Oman from 1957; Brunei, 1962–1963; Malaysia, 1963–1966; and Aden from 1963. And finally, he defined 20 conflicts as “policing operations”: British Honduras, 1948, Singapore, 1950; Aqaba, 1951; British Guiana, 1953; Buraimi (Oman), 1955; Hong Kong, 1956; British Honduras, 1957; Aden, Jordan, and Nassau, 1958; Cameroon, 1960–1962; Jamaica 1960; Zanzibar, 1961; British Guiana, 1962; British Honduras from 1962; Cyprus from 1964; Swaziland from 1964, Zanzibar, 1964; East Africa, 1965; and Mauritius, 1966.⁵⁴

Although there may be objections to classifying certain cases as wars, from 1945 to 1966 there was no single year in which the United Kingdom was not involved in hostilities, though formally it was not in a state of war. Paget argued that the British troops would continue to be involved in such wars for the next 20 years, and his expectation came to pass. Information on 28 hostilities in the British dependencies is presented in table 3.1.

Paget attempted to identify the outcomes of 20 insurgencies worldwide that occurred between 1945 and 1966. According to his calculations, only five ended in unambiguous victory for the insurgents: the conflicts in China, Palestine, French Indochina, Algeria, and Cuba. The results of five unfinished campaigns were ambiguous or incomplete: those in Vietnam and Laos (though these events are now seen without question as victories for the insurgents), Angola, Yemen (from 1960), and South Arabia. The United Kingdom and other major powers, in Paget’s opinion, defeated insurgencies in Greece, the Philippines, Laos (1945–1954), Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, Oman, Brunei, and Malaysia.⁵⁵ Ivan Arreguín-Toft makes a similar attempt to identify victors in asymmetric conflicts of great powers; however, he believes that insurgents achieved victory in Malaya and Cyprus.⁵⁶

One of the main problems of the Asian colonial empire after the war was the issue of Indian and Burmese independence. Political factors played

Table 3.1. British Army Operations in Dependencies, 1945–1982

Location	Years of military operation	Year of independence
India-Pakistan	1945–1948	1947
Palestine	1945–1948	1948
Malaya	1948–1960	1957
Gold Coast (Ghana)	1948	1957
Nigeria	1949	1960
Kenya	1952–1960	1963
Sudan	1953–1955	1956
Cyprus	1955–1959	1960
Oman	1957–1959	1971
Togo	1957–	1960
Jamaica	1960	1962
Cameroon	1960–1962	1961
Kuwait	1961	1961
Zanzibar	1961	1963
Aden	1947, 1958, 1962–1967	1967
British Honduras (Belize)	1948, 1957	1964 (self-government)
British Guiana (Guyana)	1954, 1962–1966	1966
Swaziland	1963	1968
Jamaica	1960	1962
Mozambique Channel	1965–1975	1975 (Mozambique)
Uganda	1964	1962
Bermuda	1968–1969, 1973–1977	1968 (self-government)
Northern Ireland	1969–	
Belize	1970–	1981
Cayman Islands	1970	British overseas territory

Table 3.1. (continued)

Rhodesia (Zimbabwe)	1979–1980	1980
New Hebrides (Vanuatu)	1980	1980
Falkland Islands	1982	British overseas territory

Note: Conflicts listed in chronological order from starting date of conflict.

Sources: Data compiled from Mileikovsky, *Raspad Britanskoi imperii* [The dissolution of the British Empire]; Paget, *Counter-insurgency Campaigning; The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4: *The Twentieth Century*; and Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*.

a decisive role in the United Kingdom’s acknowledgment of their independence, though Soviet researchers also noted that the creation of a large Indian army contributed to the collapse of British rule, especially in light of the growing anti-British sentiments among the Indian military.⁵⁷ To the annoyance of its British partners, during the war the United States actively lobbied for India’s independence. W. Roger Louis in *Imperialism at Bay*, which examines the role of the United States in the decolonization of the British Empire, mentions Roosevelt’s attempt to discuss the possibility of Indian independence with Churchill during the latter’s visit to Washington, D.C., in the winter of 1942. Churchill’s response is recorded in his memoirs: “I reacted so strongly and at such length that he never raised it verbally again.” Louis writes that Roosevelt advised Josef Stalin not to mention the word “India” in conversation with Churchill.⁵⁸ The British position with regard to its colonial possessions was then formulated as “We hold what we have.”⁵⁹ Many British scholars have noted the serious disagreements between the United States and the United Kingdom over colonial issues during the war and after its end, in particular the independence of India and Burma.⁶⁰

In light of the powerful national liberation movement in India and India’s active participation in World War II, the issue of independence seemed decided. Nevertheless, the British cabinet continued discussing the transfer of power over the course of several months in 1946. The actual wording “transfer of power” came up during a discussion about granting

independence to India, Burma, and Ceylon. In a secret letter of July 13, 1946, addressed by the governor-general of India Lord Wavell to Secretary of State, India Office, Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Lord Wavell wrote, "The transfer of political power in India to Indians will affect Great Britain and the British Commonwealth in the principal issues: Strategy, Economics and Prestige." He noted that "the principal advantage that Britain and the Commonwealth derive from control of India is Strategic.... The war of 1939-1945 could hardly have been won without India's contribution of two million soldiers, which strengthened the British Empire at its weakest point." Moreover, the strategic location of India and Ceylon was useful for naval bases, air transport, and securing oil supplies in the area of Iran (Persia) and the Persian Gulf. The importance of having trained military personnel in India was emphasized, as it protected British interests in this vast region. On the economic side, India was a valuable trading partner, an important market for British capital and for the employment of numerous professional personnel from the colonial power. Lord Wavell also noted that "in international Prestige, Great Britain should on the whole gain by her transfer of power, provided that this results in an orderly and friendly India." His general conclusion was that "on the whole Great Britain should not lose, but, on the contrary, may gain in prestige and even in power, by handing over to Indians, provided that the following main conditions are fulfilled: A. Power can be transferred in an orderly manner to a friendly and united India. B. A satisfactory defensive alliance can be secured." The greatest danger, according to the secret letter, was that an independent India might "come under the domination of Russia" or under communist influence as a result of revolutionary movements supported by Russia.⁶¹

The transfer of power to Pakistan took place on August 14 and to India on August 15, 1947. Burma became independent on January 4, 1948, and immediately left the Commonwealth. Ceylon became a Dominion on February 4, 1948. Having granted independence to Burma, the United Kingdom retained a military presence there, as well as the right to use naval ports and airspace, according to the British-Burma agreement of October 17, 1947.⁶² The largest "pearls in the crown of the British Empire" were lost in the first postwar years. Prime Minister Clement Attlee stated in 1948, "No doubt, we could retain India and Burma for two or three more years. But we could do that at the cost of colossal spending of money

and manpower, and if we did that, then they, having won the independence, would break away from England completely. We turned the nations, that could become our enemies, into friends. This was worth the risk.”⁶³ During the meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Commonwealth Relations on January 7, 1949, it was noted that India’s departure from the Commonwealth “would be a disastrous blow to the prestige and influence of the Commonwealth and would gravely affect the economic position of the United Kingdom and the sterling area generally.”⁶⁴

Immediately after the end of the war in Europe, the United Kingdom was drawn into hostilities in Palestine, its mandate territory since 1920 following the League of Nations’ decision. The struggle of Israeli and Arab armed groups was well under way in Palestine even before the start of World War II, and British officials were among the casualties. After putting down the Arab uprising in 1939, it was important for the United Kingdom to preserve the loyalty of Arab leaders in the region so as to secure its interests in the Middle East on the threshold of war. One step in this direction was the introduction of quotas on Jewish migration into Palestine, along with tightened control over migrant flows. According to the Soviet historians Stanislav Desiatskov and Alexander Sudeikin, as a result of these measures, “Arab states ceased support to the guerrilla movement of Palestinian Arabs, and soon it started to decline for a while.”⁶⁵ However, during the war in Europe, owing to the increased number of refugees, the British authorities were forced to modify their position with regard to immigrants from Europe, though the results were somewhat ambiguous and inconsistent. British attempts to maintain the balance between the Jewish and Arab populations by cooperating with the political elites in Palestine had to face the growing contradictions between these communities.⁶⁶

The rise of Jewish extremism and the armed response of Arab groups led to full-scale civil war in 1946–1948, which showed that the British plan to create a joint state in Palestine was not viable. At a cabinet meeting in January 1947, Prime Minister Clement Attlee asked Chief of the Imperial General Staff General Montgomery “whether law and order could be preserved in Palestine in such circumstances.” The answer was recorded as follows: “If there were active opposition from either Jews or Arabs alone, the situation could be handled with the military forces now available in Palestine. If there were active opposition from both communities, the

situation could not be handled without military reinforcements”—which would have to be provided at the expense of the British occupation forces in Germany—or “this could in the last resort be done without retarding the demobilisation scheme.” Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin indicated that the Palestinian problem was aggravated “when President Truman intervened with his demand for the immediate admission of 100,000 Jews to Palestine.”⁶⁷ The analytical survey that was prepared by the British Foreign Office on British policy toward Palestine stated that “Palestine was traditionally an area in which United States irresponsibility and vicarious idealism combined with Zionist pressure to produce clear-cut and categorical imperatives.”⁶⁸ As a contemporary researcher has noted, “massive propaganda, particularly in the United States, whose pressure on the British government to permit Jewish immigration into Palestine greatly added to Britain’s difficulties.”⁶⁹

The contemporary American expert on terrorism Bruce Hoffman, director of the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., believes that the reason for the failed British military operation in Palestine in 1939–1947 was a wrong strategy chosen by the British authorities based on the experience with suppressing the Arab disturbances of 1936–1939. According to Hoffman, despite a twentyfold numerical superiority of British troops and police over the Jewish terrorist groups Etzel and Lechi, they failed to oppress the extremist groups because the British authorities did not take into account the important differences between the Arabs and Israelis. Hoffman refers to a document summarizing these differences, prepared by the British representative in Palestine for the secretary of state for colonies. According to the document, “Jewish terrorism” was a city phenomenon with a lower level of intensity, organization, and Jewish community support than the Arab riots.⁷⁰ British attempts to use the methods of collective penalty employed by the British Army during the Arab Revolt failed when they were applied to the Jewish community, and even had an opposite effect. Hoffman describes a British police reprisal in July 1947 during a period of martial law in Tel Aviv. Policemen retaliated after the mined bodies of two sergeants were found hanging in an orange grove. The sergeants, who had been kidnapped and murdered, were British military men whom Etzel had offered to exchange for its arrested fighters. Before order was restored, 5 Jews had been killed and 16 injured, and 25 Jewish-owned shops were destroyed.⁷¹

From the perspective of our analysis, Hoffman's argument narrows the problem down to a military-strategic one and does not take into account several important factors contributing to the British failure that he himself mentions. Without denying the obvious British failure to establish peace and order in Palestine, the British authorities acted under political, international, and psychological pressure rather than merely for strategic reasons. British troops and police could use arms only for self-defense, and high-level permission was needed for the use of arms in other circumstances; this permission was granted by the British high commissioner for Palestine after coordination with the colonial secretary and military secretary. Official British documents also reveal the delicacy of the issue of using force or coercion on the Jewish population of Palestine, in light of international and especially American public opinion. The behavior of Jewish extremist groups was also psychologically difficult for the British soldiers and politicians to understand. Both the military and the civilian population became victims of terrorist attacks. It seemed that British politicians and military troops and the Jewish population of Palestine were united by a common enemy: fascism. Moreover, the British troops, accustomed to direct confrontation with the enemy, were not ready to exhibit restraint after attacks against barracks and military camps and the murder of British soldiers. The struggle intensified after the end of major warfare in Europe, which created a psychologically difficult situation for an exhausted army that had suffered heavy losses. The need to accept the surrender of the Japanese troops in the Far East and restore British order in the occupied territories created an additional burden for the armed forces, politicians, and British society itself. Even if one accepts Hoffman's argument that the British administration in Palestine could not find the right strategy for isolating and eliminating terrorist groups, the hostile attitude of the Jewish population toward the policy of limited migration to Palestine, restrictions on the acquisition of land, and the loss of trust of the Arab population made the situation practically hopeless for the British administration.⁷²

According to the notes from the September 20 cabinet meeting, the prime minister said that in his view, "there was a close parallel between the position in Palestine and the recent situation in India."⁷³ He did not think it reasonable to ask the British administration in Palestine to continue in

present conditions,” and hoped to terminate the British mandate and withdraw the British administration and British forces from Palestine. It was also stated that the British government should not commit itself “unconditionally to cooperate with other members of the United Nations in implementing any policy requiring the use of force.”⁷⁴ The December 3, 1947, joint memorandum of Secretary of State Ernest Bevin and Colonial Secretary Creech Jones on the British position before the United Nations concerning Palestine confirmed that “the United Kingdom representatives at the United Nations, while assisting the respective Committees with factual information, have consistently taken the line that we would not comment on the substance of the partition proposal, [and] would not be responsible for enforcing a settlement which was not agreed by both Jews and Arabs or to support a United Nations commission in enforcing it.”⁷⁵ The inability of the British authorities to ensure security in Palestine, together with a severe domestic economic crisis and the high sensitivity of the world community to the issue of Jewish rights, forced the United Kingdom to announce its withdrawal from Palestine in September 1947. In February 1948 the British mandate in Palestine was terminated, and in May of that same year British troops were completely withdrawn.

One of the most important factors motivating the United Kingdom to cease its attempts at coercion in Palestine was the need to preserve friendly relations with Arab leaders. The United Kingdom considered the Middle East an important strategic region and sought to establish friendly relations with the regional governments in the new context of strengthened nationalist feelings and a striving for complete independence, as in Sudan and Egypt. At the same time, it was unsuccessful in gaining the support of its stronger ally, the United States. A confidential memorandum, “Present State of Jewish Affairs in the United States,” prepared by the Earl of Halifax, British ambassador to Washington, and sent on February 25, 1946, stressed that the British policy in Palestine had been met with complete ignorance and misunderstanding in United States, and that “average Americans” and even congressmen knew no more about Arab states and the Arab world “than they do of the moon.”⁷⁶

One of the most protracted armed conflicts involving the British armed forces was an emergency in Malaya between 1948 and 1960. Unlike the engagement in Palestine, this campaign of the British forces is usually seen

as successful from military and strategic standpoints and as a victory over the communist movement. In *The Malayan Emergency*, a monograph analyzing these events, Donald Mackay calls Malaya “the domino that stood,” a reference to the domino theory of successive communist influence in neighboring countries.⁷⁷ The British authorities considered Malaya “the only territory in South-East Asia which has been developed as a base for the British forces on which we rely to defend our interest in the area,” and Singapore was named “a focal point in sea and air communication in South-East Asia.”⁷⁸ The United Kingdom went to considerable effort to recover and strengthen its position in Malaya. After the end of the war, reforms were carried out, and existing semiautonomous princedoms were transformed into the Federation of Malaya. When reforms were discussed, it was taken into consideration that greater British control was necessary for security reasons, to preserve control after disarmament of the Japanese troops and because of the region’s strategic significance.⁷⁹ The reforms included an attempt to normalize relations between the largest ethnic groups, the Chinese (around 45% of the population) and Malays (44%). However, an anti-British movement, headed by the Communist Party of Malaya and mostly comprising ethnic Chinese, was on the rise in the country. A State of Emergency Regulation was introduced in Malaya in the summer of 1948 and not officially lifted until July 31, 1960.

Anthony Clayton has written that at the peak of armed clashes, up to 35,000 military men and 73,000 policemen were involved.⁸⁰ A secret CIA memorandum prepared in November 1949, “Current Situation in Malaya,” provided the following data on British strength and capabilities in the region: “39,000 British Far East Land Forces, tactical units consisted of seven battalions of British infantry, seven battalions of Gurkha infantry, three battalions of Malaya infantry, one British artillery regiment, one Malay artillery regiment, and one British armored car battalion. Some units were composed mainly by Malays and some Ceylonese, Chinese, and Indians. The Royal Air Force strength in Malaya was 68 aircraft, of which approximately 50 percent were directly involved in the suppression of the terrorists. In addition to the British military forces there were 60,000 to 70,000 police and auxiliaries, mostly Malays of varying levels of training and usefulness.” The memorandum stressed that the State of Emergency Regulation that had been introduced in the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of

Singapore had granted “wide power to the two governments: banishment of individuals, a mandatory death sentence for illegal possessions of arms, powers of search persons and premises without warrant, long-term detention of suspected without trial, close control over movements of persons and vehicles, and power to impose curfews and occupy properties. Legislation, making compulsory the registration of Chinese over twelve years of age and carrying of identity cards, was later enacted.” During one year of the emergency, “3,000 aliens and 56 British subjects (most, if not all, Chinese and Indians)” were deported under the emergency regulations, and some 7,500 persons were detained, “among them many Chinese squatters, suspected or convicted of aiding the terrorists.” The memorandum mentioned the British strategy of complete evacuation and resettlement of some Malayan squatters from “particularly bad areas of a federation.”⁸¹ The success of such a campaign was associated with the tactic of General Gerald Templer, who implemented the program of resettlement of squatters. However, the same tactic when implemented by Americans during the Vietnam War did not bring success. According to data provided by Mackay, during the 12 years of the Emergency, 2,473 civilians were killed, 1,385 were wounded, and 810 disappeared. The security forces lost 1,865 killed and 2,560 wounded, a total of 4,425 casualties, and in turn killed just under 6,700 and captured 1,200. In addition, 2,681 terrorists surrendered.⁸²

The Malayan Emergency was one of the most protracted and cruel military campaigns of the British in Asia. It required deployment of the largest part of the British troops in Asia, was associated with significant expenses, and ended with the granting of independence to Malaya in 1957. British authorities managed to implement the program of modernization and construct the foundations of a modern economy and political life for the sake of the local population and the British residents. The United Kingdom spent around £86 million on the economic development of Malaya in 1945–1949.⁸³ After Malaya’s independence, the United Kingdom maintained a large military contingent in the region and a military base in Singapore to preserve its strategic position and access to important raw materials, as well as to counter the communist influence. At the same time, it intended to prevent conflicts between the newly independent states in the region—Malaysia, Indonesia, and Borneo—that could draw it into armed clashes.⁸⁴

The military operation in Malaya is usually evaluated as successful, insofar as “the military victory and ... the effective mobilization of local political and popular support” were achieved.⁸⁵ Mackay also notes that the nature of success was that the campaign “destroyed the presumption that a Communist guerrilla insurgency must always succeed.”⁸⁶ However, he also writes,

in terms of the very basic British objective set in 1948, the restoration of effective colonial rule, the campaign can be seen as a tactical success but a strategic failure: the MPC [Malaya Communist Party] was defeated but British rule had to be abandoned. By 1951, however, the overwhelming imperative of British policy had become decolonization, and in that context the campaign was a British triumph. The handover of power in 1957 was not to a victorious guerrilla force, but to a democratically-elected government broadly representative of popular will, and one that could be relied on, at least for some time, to favour British interests. Beyond that, what appears from the history of the Emergency is a confusing picture of overlapping elements, all of which led to success, but none of which can properly be said to have been the single defining factor.⁸⁷

The dissolution of the British colonial empire in Africa was similarly accompanied by military campaigns in Gold Coast, Kenya, and Malawi (Nyasaland). The state of emergency in Kenya was maintained for eight years, from 1952 to 1960. To suppress the Mau Mau uprising, British authorities used both political methods and cruel punitive measures.⁸⁸ According to various sources, during the uprising tens of thousands of insurgents were killed. When the state of emergency was lifted in 1960, it was decided to prepare for the transfer of power to the African majority. The independent Kenyan government was headed by Jomo Kenyatta, who had been imprisoned for almost eight years for participating in the uprising.

Fighting against British rule, local forces often applied strategies that today are recognized as asymmetric. David French has argued that “the indigenous populations of India, Egypt, Palestine, Aden, Cyprus, Malaya, Borneo and Kenya refused to meet the British on their own terms and adopted a mixture of guerrilla warfare, urban terrorism and forms of nonviolent opposition.

Although the British did not suffer a series of conventional military defeats, for the insurgent nationalists were never in a position to invade Britain, their resistance was bitter and prolonged. That fact alone, implying as it did rising financial and human costs, was enough eventually to persuade policy-makers in London to negotiate a settlement which usually entailed the withdrawal of British forces and the granting of independence.”⁸⁹ Insofar as all armed conflicts involving the United Kingdom resulted in the political independence of the former dependencies, this can be considered a political, if not military, defeat for the great power.

In this respect, it is important to present some principles of British counterinsurgency as they emerged over the course of several campaigns. The British military paid special attention to the issue of small wars and antiguerrilla campaigns. A relatively small army and the global possessions of the British Empire defined the principles of governance and maintaining order in dependent territories. The British approach consisted in giving broad authority to officers and relying on local personnel to maintain order. Military operations in the territory of the empire were referred to as “imperial policing,” as reflected in the title of a book by Major-General Sir Charles William Gwynn, published in 1939. Gwynn wrote that such operations were not military in the proper sense of the term, even if they were carried out by the army. Unlike in a conventional war, when the army should use maximum force to achieve victory, police operations require the use of minimum force but maximum self-restriction, restraint, and patience. Police operations are aimed not at fighting and destroying the enemy but at maintaining or restoring order among the crown’s subjects. Gwynn stressed that the army functions as a reserve force to support the civil administration. He specifically wrote that the suppression of various revolutionary movements, “unless nipped in the bud, is a slow business,” and “becomes a battle of wits in which the development of a well-organised intelligence service, great mobility, rapid means of inter-communication and close co-operation between all sections of the Government forces are essential.”⁹⁰

During the period of empire dissolution the term “imperial policing” was replaced by “counterinsurgency operation.” Today the acronym of this term, COIN (counterinsurgency), is widely used. Julian Paget defined insurgency as “armed rebellion against the Government, in which the rebels have the support or acquiescence of a substantial part of populace.” The

methods they use “to achieve their aim of overthrowing the Government may include guerrilla warfare, but insurgents may equally well resort to civil disobedience, sabotage or terrorist tactics.” Thus, guerrilla warfare is used among other tactics and is “in the sense of the special form of warfare, based on mobile tactics by small, lightly armed groups, who aim to harass their opponents rather than to defeat them in open battle.”⁹¹

Paget, like many other authors of the Cold War period, believed that postwar insurgencies arose for a variety of reasons, chief among which was “Communist cold war campaigning.” Not all uprisings were the product of communist influence, but communist countries used insurgencies and anti-Western sentiments to spread their influence in the former colonies, even though they sometimes faced insurgencies themselves in “friendly countries.” In analyzing the influence of communist ideology on insurgencies, Paget introduced a term that has become widespread—“warfare by proxy,” or “a proxy war.” He wrote that the communist powers’ support of insurgencies was “the most economical technique of their cold war campaigning; it is traditionally the method of the few fighting the many, and it costs the counter-insurgents far more in terms of money, manpower and effort than it does their enemies.”⁹²

Paget wrote of the need for a completely new approach to the counter-insurgency campaign and illustrated this claim by rephrasing the famous expression of Mao Zedong about “insurgents living among the populace of a country ‘like fish in water.’” “The policy must be to destroy the fish,” Paget wrote, “either by removing the oxygen from the water or by draining the pond, rather than by chasing individual fish in the muddy and weedy water with a very small net.” To understand the British approach, it is important to identify the needs and tasks of insurgents and those who fight them. The essential requirements of this approach can be summed up as “winning the hearts and minds” of the local population, a phrase attributed to General Templer. According to Paget, “the support of the local population is an important factor for both sides in any counter-insurgency campaign, but particularly for insurgents, who will resort to ruthless intimidation, if necessary, in order to achieve it. Short-term local support is not the same, however, as the long-term objective of winning the hearts and minds of the people permanently. This is the ultimate aim of both sides, and is a predominant factor in all their thinking.”⁹³

To ensure the support of the local population, civil rather than military actions should be the principal means; however, the armed forces can and should play a decisive role in the implementation of civilian tasks. Paget named five rules for winning the hearts and minds of the population:

1. The first essential is that those in control must understand and respect the feelings and aspirations of the nation. They must also take positive steps to prove this sympathy, so that the people are convinced that victory over the insurgents will bring them a political settlement which will meet their wishes.
2. Secondly, there must be firm and fair Government, so that law and order are maintained and the interests of the populace are safeguarded, not exploited, by those in power. The Government may be either internal or external, but in either case, corruption and dissension must be eliminated, justice must be done (and be seen to be done!) and administration of the country must be as efficient as it can be made in the face of the inevitable insurgent efforts to disrupt it.
3. The third factor is the building up of public confidence by the establishment ultimately of a sound national Government, even if it is at first under auspices of a controlling Power.
4. The fourth and perhaps the best-known measures for winning hearts and minds is what the Americans call "civic action". This is organized aid to a country in variety of forms, and is now an accepted feature of most counter-insurgency campaigns. It covers direct financial aid, technical advice and the provision of amenities such as schools, hospitals, roads, new industries, food and welfare.... A most valuable form of "civic action" is the training of the populace to help themselves when they finally achieve their freedom from the insurgency.
5. Finally, the Public Relations and Information aspects are all-important. Not only must the propaganda, indoctrination and

falsehoods of the insurgents be countered quickly and firmly, but the Government must also put across their own case forcibly and frequently.... Propaganda is an unpopular word, but it is a powerful weapon for either side in any cold war campaign and any insurgency, and it is one that Britain could wield with more skill and conviction. It can be just as effective as armies in defeating insurgency—and very much cheaper!⁹⁴

These principles indicate that insurgency was considered a political problem. The armed forces involved in counterinsurgency operations performed the auxiliary function of maintaining order and eliminating the most dangerous manifestations of insurgencies. However, their activities were subject to the customary law and to civilian government, and military personnel were expected to behave in strict accordance with the law in the difficult context of provocations and tension. Paget mentions the need to strictly investigate and prosecute any cases of violation of laws and discipline by the military, and this was to be done by the courts and be open to the public.

Another important book, *Low-Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping*, an account of the British experience with counterinsurgency, was published by General Frank Kitson in 1971. Kitson listed three main factors as responsible for the increased incidence of subversion and insurgency in the post-World War II period: “(1) the changing attitude of people towards authority; (2) the development of techniques by which men can influence thoughts and actions of other men; (3) the limitation imposed on higher forms of conflict by the development of nuclear weapons.” Evaluating the spread of insurgency in modern conflicts, Kitson pointed out that “most countries now regard subversion and insurgency as an integral part of one total war and not as a separate subject.... Whether in Europe or overseas, the pattern of conflict is such that it is virtually impossible to imagine an orthodox war taking place without an accompanying campaign of subversion and insurgency, although the reverse is by no means true.”⁹⁵

Kitson hewed to the British national tradition of understanding the role and tasks of the military in counterinsurgency operations, especially against the background of the anti-British riots in Northern Ireland and

the growing number of international peacekeeping operations the United Kingdom was taking on. He argued that in a democratic country, rulers cannot afford the same brutality and disregard of law applied by dictators to restore order. Relations between the civilian population and the military receive special attention. Kitson also referenced Mao Zedong's analogy likening insurgents to fish in the sea; however, his approach is expressed in tougher terms than Paget's:

In attempting to counter subversion it is necessary to take account of three separate elements. The first two constitute the target proper, that is to say the Party or Front and its cells and committees on the one hand, and the armed groups who are supporting them and being supported by them on the other. They may be said to constitute the head and body of a fish. The third element is the population and this represents the water in which the fish swims.... If a fish has got to be destroyed it can be attacked directly by rod or net, providing it is in the sort of position which gives these methods a chance of success. But if rod and net cannot succeed by themselves it may be necessary to do something to the water which will force the fish into a position where it can be caught. Conceivably it might be necessary to kill the fish by polluting the water, but this is unlikely to be a desirable course of action.

Recalling the British experience of operations in Aden, Kitson pointed to the dangers attendant on the early withdrawal of armed forces that have been maintaining order in the country and rendering assistance to the local government. Any announcement of the complete withdrawal of external armed forces from the country could lead to the complete loss of support from local forces fighting the insurgents.⁹⁶ These conclusions to a large extent correlate with the reasons proffered for the US failure in Vietnam, and now in Iraq.

On peacekeeping, Kitson wrote that although it is a "fundamentally different occupation to the countering of subversions, there is a surprising similarity in the outward forms of many of the techniques involved."⁹⁷ He wrote about the difference of peacekeeping operations because external "force acts on behalf, and at the invitation of, both sides to a dispute, and it

is supposed to prevent violence without having recourse to warlike actions against either of them.”⁹⁸ By the time his book was published, the British military had accumulated a vast experience participating in UN peace-keeping operations in Cyprus and Congo. Kitson indicated that “political considerations do govern the efforts of those involved in peace-keeping to a much greater extent than they govern the efforts of those involved in most forms of warfare and the lesson has to be taught and learned.”⁹⁹

Kitson devoted an entire chapter to the training of the military for participation in counterinsurgency and peacekeeping operations. According to him, such training should include the following: (1) explaining the fundamental nature of subversion and insurgency in the course of conflict; (2) training military personnel in how to cooperate with representatives of the local police force and civil government; (3) teaching officers how to direct the activities of their own soldiers, including any policemen or locally raised forces; (4) training military personnel in and teaching all ranks about the actual techniques of counterinsurgency; (5) how to collect and make the best possible use of overt information; and (6) providing troops with some understanding of the fundamental nature of the peace-keeping operation.¹⁰⁰

In conclusion, Kitson noted that in order to make the army ready to counter subversion and insurgency and to take part in peacekeeping operations, it is important to understand how these activities differ from conventional wars and to apply this knowledge in training and organizing the army units for these purposes. He specifically stressed that “the qualities, required for fighting conventional war are different from those required for dealing with subversion and insurgency; or for taking part in peace-keeping operations for that matter. Traditionally a soldier is trained and conditioned to be strong, courageous, direct and aggressive, but when men endowed with use of these qualities become involved in fighting subversion they often find that their good points are exploited by the enemy. For example, firm reaction in the face of provocation may be twisted by clever propaganda in such a way that soldiers find the civilian population regarding their strength as brutality, and their direct and honest efforts at helping to restore order as the ridiculous blunderings of a herd of elephants.”¹⁰¹ Kitson’s book demonstrates the change in the nature of the British military’s participation in small wars, which were already considered to be limited enterprises with a

temporary military presence, an understanding reflected in the characterization of relations with the local population and government.

Later works by British authors on the principles of counterinsurgency and peacekeeping operations largely repeated and developed the main provisions of the works cited above,¹⁰² even as the principles of counterinsurgency operations applicable in 1960–1970 found their way into the management of today’s peacekeeping missions. For instance, a 2005 book by British general Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, demonstrates a profound understanding of the nature and tasks of such operations when performed by regular fighting troops.¹⁰³ Smith’s book summarizes his 40 years of military service, during which he took part in peacekeeping operations in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.¹⁰⁴ His main idea is that peacekeeping operations are distinguished from conventional wars in being “wars amongst the people,” that is, among the civilian population. This nonmilitary participation in turn determines the tasks, means, and principles of the participation, behavior, and legitimacy of use of armed forces.

Thus, the military campaigns of the United Kingdom in its dependent territories were from the very beginning in service to political, economic, and strategic goals. The amount of force used to quell uprisings no doubt varied with the situation; however, it is evident that there was a conscious striving for minimum use of force, accompanied by a strict self-restraint on the part of political and civil institutions.

FACTORS IN THE BRITISH POLITICAL DEFEAT IN ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS IN ITS COLONIES

Military Power and the Postwar Economy

Military power and the limitations of the postwar economy were the most important reasons for the British political defeat in colonial conflicts. By the end of World War II, British armed forces had reached their maximum size in British history, at more than 5 million troops. The United Kingdom maintained large troop numbers on its military bases and in its dependent territories in Asia (Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaya), in the Middle East and Africa (Suez Canal, Aden, Oman, Bahrain, Kenya), and in Europe (Malta,

Cyprus). The military presence of the land-based British Army in Europe was significant and included occupation forces in Germany and Austria (1.1 million out of almost 2 million people in the armed forces in late 1946) and in Greece.¹⁰⁵ The armed forces were gradually demobilized in the first postwar years: in 1946 the size of the armed forces was 2.053 million troops; this figure fell to 1.302 million in 1947 and to 689,000 in 1950. By 1952, the British armed forces had increased to 872,000 troops as a result of the war in Korea.

Weakened by war, the United Kingdom was forced to ask the United States for financial assistance, specifying the conditions of its participation in military operations. In February 1947, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin warned the US leadership that if the United States did not provide assistance to the United Kingdom, the latter would have to cease providing military assistance to Greece and Turkey in the fight against leftist and communist forces. The start of the war in Korea in 1950 demanded a considerable increase in British defense spending and in the size of its armed forces; moreover, the country was drawn into the armed struggle in Malaya. The cabinet noted that the United Kingdom needed to increase its defense budget by £100 million in the current year, and even that would not be sufficient. Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir Richard Stafford Cripps prepared the memorandum titled “Defence Requirements and United States Assistance” in July 1950, which stated, “Clearly it would be impossible for us to meet a rise of expenditure of this magnitude without assistance,” and a specific expenditure plan was suggested. The defense expenditure was set at £820 million for 1950–1951 (an increase of £40 million over the 1949–1950 level) and at £900 million for 1951–1952. It was noted that “on general economic grounds we consider £950 millions as the maximum defence expenditure we can afford in 1951–1952 and in the following years.” It was stated that Britain “should ask for assistance to meet the difference between the total cost of defence in these three years of £3,400 millions and £2,859 millions, i.e. £550 millions.” Moreover, this aid “should be in free dollars which we either hold or use to make purchases in any part of the world, and not aid which can be used for purchases made in dollars. This is essential because this additional programme will inevitably restrict our engineering exports, and is, therefore, likely to increase our sterling liabilities. We

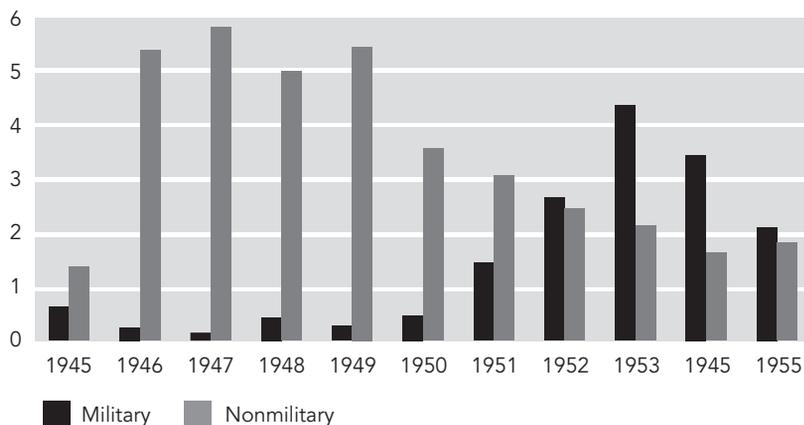
need to receive aid in a form which enables us to raise our dollar reserves in order to offset these liabilities.”¹⁰⁶

Cabinet documents also noted that the deployment of British troops to Korea could weaken the British position in those areas of Asia where it counteracted the communist threat (Malaya and Hong Kong). Moreover, an increase in defense expenditure “would force the Government to choose between a lower standard of living or longer dependence on United States aid.”¹⁰⁷ In discussing British military involvement in Korea, British politicians kept in mind the relations with continental China, officially recognized by Britain but not by the United States. It was feared that a British military presence could threaten the security of Hong Kong and result in a denial of oil shipments to Britain and strategic exports to China. The British policy toward China, the documents noted, had been founded on the principle that Britain “should at all cost avoid action which would force the Chinese Communists into the arms of Moscow.”¹⁰⁸

According to official statistics, the United States allocated US\$3.835 billion to the United Kingdom under the Mutual Security Program in 1949–1955, with most of these funds allocated in 1949 (\$1.62 billion) and 1950 (\$917 million).¹⁰⁹ In total, the United States allocated the following sums under the Mutual Security Program for military objectives in 1949–1955: \$14.603 billion to Western European countries and \$2.33 billion to countries in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, including Turkey (which received \$453.026 million), and Greece (\$843.894 million).¹¹⁰ The comments to the statistical data indicate that these sums aggregate payments under various government programs for emergency relief. These were funds allocated under aid programs to France, Italy, Austria, the United Kingdom (British loan), special programs for Turkey and Greece, the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan, 1948–1951), and aid programs to Korea and China (Taiwan).¹¹¹ Figure 3.1 shows the ratio of military to nonmilitary spending (in billions of dollars) by US assistance programs in the first postwar decade, according to the 1956 *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

In 1957, after the disastrous British operation during the Suez Crisis, a secret document was adopted, titled “Statement of Defence.” This white paper indicated a “fundamental revolution in defence policy of the country.”¹¹² It is symptomatic that the document starts with a statement of principles: a radical revision of defense policy was necessary

Figure 3.1. Military and Nonmilitary Spending by US International Assistance Programs, 1945–1955 (US\$ billions)



Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1956*, 77th annual ed. (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1956), 882, figure 46, “U.S. Government Foreign Grants and Credits, by Program: 1945 to 1955 (billions of dollars).”

for economic, international, and military reasons: “Britain’s position and influence in the world depend first and foremost upon the health of her internal economy and the success of her export trade. Without these, military power is of no avail and in any case cannot in the long run be supported.”¹¹³ According to the document, conscription was to be cancelled,¹¹⁴ and the size of the armed forces was to be maintained at the level of 375,000, compared to about 700,000 in 1957. The size of the Royal Navy was to be reduced by about 20 percent, the army by 45 percent, and the Royal Air Force by 35 percent.¹¹⁵ Professor Keith Hartley, director of the Centre for Defence Economics, University of York, in explaining the reasons for a transition to contract service, referred to the debate in Parliament and among cabinet members. The main argument was that conscription was “extremely wasteful in its use of manpower,” “an inefficient method of acquiring military personnel” with “increasing cost, complexity and skilled labour requirements of modern weapons,” and was simply not needed with the threat of nuclear deterrence. As

Hartley noted, "Overall, the defence economics problem has compelled the UK to make defence choices in world of uncertainty."¹¹⁶

According to the "Statement of Defence," in the then current situation "the overriding consideration in all military planning must be to prevent war rather than to prepare for it," and to develop a nuclear retaliation capability. The main focus in defense should be placed on strategic aviation, the development of a nuclear force, obtaining US assistance in nuclear deterrence, and participation in collective security systems (Western European Union, NATO, the Baghdad Pact, SEATO). It was noted that "Britain must provide her fair share of the armed forces needed"; however, "she cannot any longer continue to make a disproportionately large contribution" to the defense of "the free world, particularly in Europe." That is why it was planned to reduce the presence of the British Army in Germany (from 77,000 troops to 64,000) and to reduce the number of tactical bombers in Germany by half, but equip them with nuclear weapons to compensate for the reduction in force size. The Middle East, the colony in Aden, Singapore, and the Persian Gulf area were identified as strategic regions, which Britain confirmed it would defend with "land, air and sea forces," which therefore had to be maintained in that area and were intended to "preserve stability and resist extension of Communist power in that area." The document confirmed Britain's willingness to continue providing assistance to Malaya and to maintain a military presence in Singapore and a significant military garrison in Hong Kong. In the colonies, the document called for reducing the troop size to the minimum necessary level and using local forces where possible, to be assisted in case of emergency by the "Central Reserve," which could be quickly relocated from the British Isles. It also proposed developing a Commonwealth Strategic Reserve, especially comprising Australian and New Zealand forces.¹¹⁷ However, the Commonwealth partners, it seemed, were patently "look[ing] to the USA rather than to Britain for defence co-operation," and British attempts to share with them the responsibility for maintaining regional security and counteracting communism were not fully successful.¹¹⁸

The changes in the British defense strategy as detailed in a meeting of the cabinet on April 2, 1957, implied the active involvement of local forces in the colonies and former dependent territories to meet Britain's overseas defense commitments.¹¹⁹ In accordance with the established hierarchy of

objectives, the British military strategy in the colonies was aimed at maintaining order and keeping forces loyal to the crown in power. Military responsibility was to a large extent shifted to the local armed forces, which meant a continuation of traditional imperial policy under new conditions. The tradition of raising local armed forces in dependent territories contributed to the colonies' and dominions' gaining independence sooner than the colonial power wanted them to.¹²⁰

Anthony Clayton, analyzing the defense and security policy of the empire from 1900 to 1968, spoke to the issue of “deceptive might” and the growing mismatch between British needs and resources. The main problem was, no doubt, exhaustion of society and resources during World War II.¹²¹ The Soviet Union, its expanding presence in Europe and growing influence on national liberation movements in Asia and Africa, and its nuclear weapon capability were seen as the main security threats of the post–World War II period. Earlier than the United States did, the United Kingdom identified the Soviet threat and world communism as the major problem of the postwar world order. In this respect, it had to be pragmatic in identifying priorities for its military deployments and deciding the degree to which it would participate in military campaigns. According to David French, “in the late 1940s and 1950s many of the factors which had once facilitated British military superiority beyond Europe were fast disappearing.” These factors included NATO commitments that forced the United Kingdom to keep a significant military force in Europe, and “international opinion that was increasingly hostile to metropolitan governments who used armed force to support their colonial pretensions.”¹²²

New strategic documents were later adopted that further reduced defense programs and the armed forces, brought back British troops from overseas military bases, shifted the defense focus to Europe, and developed the rapid response forces. Both Soviet and Western scholars noted that in the postwar United Kingdom, Parliament and the cabinet agreed on the need to balance the United Kingdom's desire to retain its authority in the world with the economic and political limitations on its ability to maintain high defense spending.

In 1967, when “British trade deficits plunged to their worst level in history,” according to Roger Louis,¹²³ another white paper on defense was adopted.¹²⁴ According to the white paper, the economic situation in the

United Kingdom had forced the government to reduce military spending and reconsider its defense commitments to its allies and dependent territories. The main source of military threat was still the Soviet Union; hence the focus moved to military deterrence in Europe in alliance with NATO countries. The white paper noted that with the growing military power of the Commonwealth countries, the United Kingdom could decrease its military presence, close most military bases and withdraw personnel, transform its aid into military-technical and expert assistance, and provide troops only in case of urgent need. Moreover, the United Kingdom would participate in large military operations only with its allies, rather than alone. A specific plan for British troop withdrawal from Aden, South Arabia, by 1968 was outlined, as was a more general plan to reduce the British military presence in Singapore and Malaysia by about half by 1970–1971¹²⁵ and completely close its bases in both nations by the mid-1970s.¹²⁶ Richard Crossman, Lord President of the Council, wrote a memorandum on defense withdrawals that stated that Hong Kong would be the only remaining British base overseas, but he recommended cutting British military commitments as soon as possible in the Middle East, stressing that “in the Arab world a British military presence is an embarrassment to our friends and a provocation to our enemies.” As for a British presence in the Far East, he noted with obvious bitterness and resignation, “it is difficult to suppose that after nearly ten years of steadily declining military strength in the area a British military presence would be credible either to our allies or to our enemies. In fact it would be a residual delusion of grandeur with which we would delude only ourselves.”¹²⁷

David French believed that “it was an economic crisis, not public opinion or US pressure, which compelled the Wilson government to reshape British defence policy and forsake almost all of Britain’s remaining imperial commitments.” This decision to withdraw British military personnel from “East of Suez,” or about 100,000 troops, in the early 1960s “marked the end of Britain’s role as a great imperial military power.” If in 1965–1966 one member in four of the British armed forces had been deployed outside Europe, by 1973–1974 the figure was only one in ten, and by 1981 the forces raised outside the United Kingdom “had shrunk to only 3 per cent of total military power.”¹²⁸

The nuclear arms race in Europe and the intensification of the Northern Ireland problem greatly affected the increase in defense spending in the

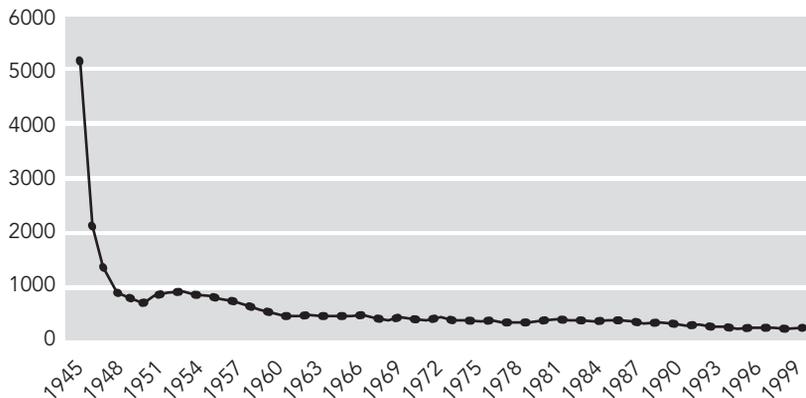
1970s. The Conservative cabinet of Edward Heath (1970–1974) made a commitment to modernize armaments, while Richard Nixon’s administration promised to maintain a US military presence in Europe. Budget priorities were considerably revised by the cabinet of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990), who demanded that welfare objectives had to be reconsidered in favor of a strengthened defense capacity of the country and the modernization of armaments based on new security threats. In 1974–1979 the British defense budget was equal to around 4.75 percent of GNP, or £8.558 billion per year; in 1979–1980 it was planned to increase defense spending by 3 percent. Annual expenses for the counterterrorist operation in Northern Ireland were estimated at £400 million, or more than 20 percent of defense spending.¹²⁹ Figures 3.2 and 3.3 show the changes in armed forces and defense spending in the postwar period. Today, the United Kingdom ranks 28th in the world in terms of army size and second in terms of defense spending.

Domestic Factors

Domestic economic and political factors played an important role in decision making on defense policy and strategy. In addition to maintaining a certain level of defense spending, postwar British governments had to ensure economic recovery and achieve a certain standard of living. Churchill wrote to Roosevelt in 1943 that if economic recovery took too much time, “we may again have people shouting that ‘We can’t eat the Constitution.’ They may even add to the non-edibles the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms. This might lead to panic, bankruptcy and revolution.”¹³⁰ Thus, the problem of economic recovery played a crucial role in defining the budget priorities, and the task of retaining imperial control by any means was not the primary one. In addition, limitations on the military budget were imposed by the postwar promises of Clement Attlee’s Labour government to create a welfare state in the United Kingdom, since this required redirecting state spending to social needs.

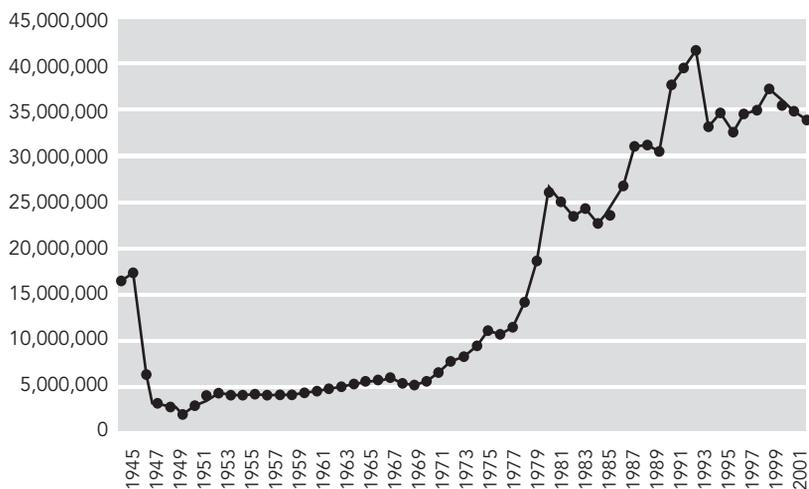
The United Kingdom was in a precarious economic state after the war and, like many other European countries, was forced to ask the United States for financial aid. Ritchie Ovendale has written that “at the end of the war Britain was in a devastated economic state, in effect bankrupt,” and that the victory in the war “was probably, at best, Pyrrhic.” Ovendale argues

Figure 3.2. Size of the British Armed Forces, 1945–2001 (thousands)



Source: Correlates of War project, National Material Capabilities, 1816–2001 (v3.02) database (<http://www.correlatesofwar.org/>).

Figure 3.3. Military Spending in Britain, 1945–2001 (US\$ thousands)



Source: Correlates of War project, National Material Capabilities, 1816–2001 (v3.02) database (<http://www.correlatesofwar.org/>).

that “British forces occupied parts of Europe and the Far East: Britain had to see that peoples in these areas did not die of starvation even if this meant greater austerity at home.” Under these conditions, in Ovendale’s opinion, a weakened United Kingdom had no other choice but to become an ally of a stronger power. He also says that “the British people might have wanted to turn inwards but the newly-elected Labour government fought to sustain Britain’s role as a world power, and despite the economic difficulties, to ensure that it was the *pax Americana* that replaced the *pax Britannica* and not a world dominated by Russian communism.”¹³¹

Between 1939 and 1945, British foreign debts had increased from £500 million to £3.25 billion,¹³² including £1.321 billion of Indian debt¹³³ and that of other dependent territories and indebted countries (e.g., Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, Argentina, Portugal). But the United Kingdom did not want the United States to take part in solving the problem. American historian and economist Charles P. Kindleberger, who participated in the development of the Marshall Plan, has said that the British position reflected its fear of a drop in the pound sterling exchange rate and the negative influence that such a drop would have on the domestic economic situation.¹³⁴ In August 1945 the United States suspended Lend-Lease supplies, and Anglo-American talks on a loan continued until December 1945. John Maynard Keynes, head of the British delegation at these talks and chairman of the World Bank Commission, noted that Britain turned to the United States for a loan “primarily to meet the political and military expenditure overseas.”¹³⁵ The British dependence on the United States that had formed during the war was retained and even strengthened during the first postwar decade. US aid was conditional: the preferential acquisition of American goods and products was to be offered in exchange. In addition to these prerequisites, the United States used financial levers to exert pressure on the United Kingdom concerning its colonies and security in Europe, Asia, and the Far East.

In December 1945, an agreement was signed for a loan of US\$3.75 billion, due in 50 years, at 2 percent interest.¹³⁶ According to the agreement, the United Kingdom undertook an obligation to abolish the sterling zone a year after the agreement entered into force, to restore the free exchange of the pound to the dollar, to unfreeze the funds in British banks belonging to Britain’s dominions, colonies, and other countries of the sterling zone,

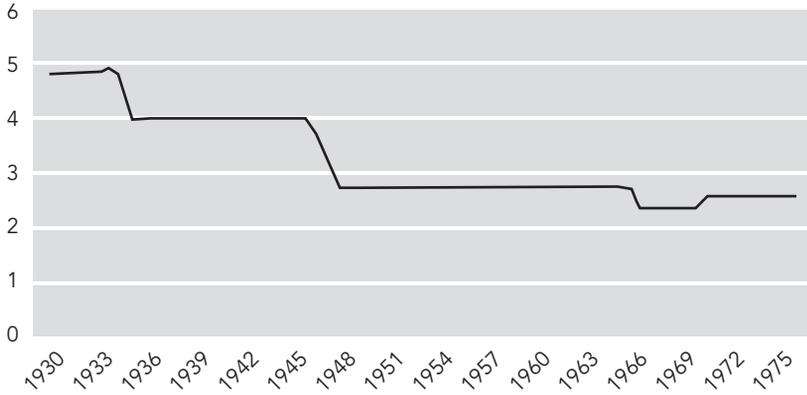
and to pay them in dollars if the owners wanted that. The United Kingdom undertook an obligation to reduce and then eliminate preferential customs duties protecting the market of the British Empire.¹³⁷ In July 1946 the US Congress ratified this agreement, and on July 16, 1947, the United Kingdom introduced the free conversion of the pound but failed to support it longer than seven weeks. In July 1946 the United States cancelled control over wholesale prices, which led to their drastic rise (from 111 to 141 units from May to December 1946). This rise is seen as the reason why all funds under the “British loan” were spent by late 1947. There was a severe crisis in the United Kingdom, and new loans were needed. On December 1, 1948, an agreement was concluded on humanitarian aid to the United Kingdom—the Economic Cooperation Agreement, which remained in force until June 1951. Under the Marshall Plan, the United Kingdom received US\$337 million in the form of loans and US\$2.351 billion worth of manufactured goods between 1948 and 1951.¹³⁸

The United Kingdom’s economic and financial dependence on US assistance enabled the latter to pursue an economic policy that in the long run contributed to the destruction of the sterling zone and the establishment of the US dollar as an alternative world currency by the end of the 1950s. Mint parity existed between the two countries until 1978, with the United Kingdom devaluing the pound three times after the start of World War II. In 1939 the United Kingdom set the pound-dollar exchange rate at $\pounds 1 = \$4.03$, reducing by 17 percent the rate that had existed for more than 100 years: $\pounds 1 = \$4.86$ (1837–1939). In September 1949 the pound was devalued by 30 percent (to $\pounds 1 = \$2.8$) under US pressure.¹³⁹ In November 1967 the pound was again devalued, by 14 percent (to $\pounds 1 = \$2.4$). Figure 3.4 shows the ratio between the pound and the dollar with mint parity.

The ratio of the market value of the pound sterling to the US dollar shows greater flexibility and a more radical pound devaluation (figure 3.5).

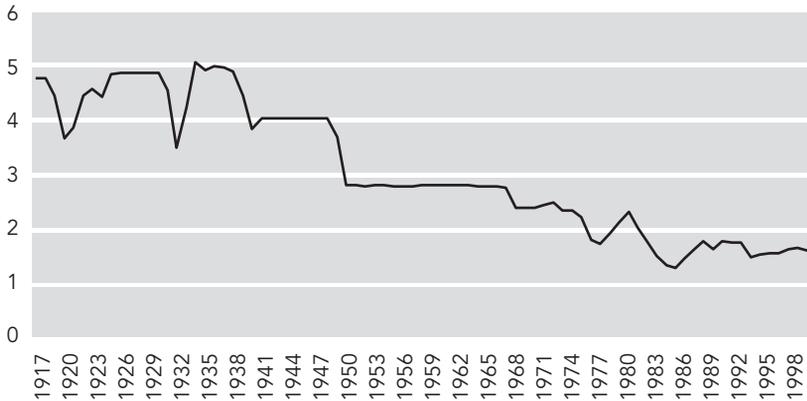
Statistics on export-import flows of manufactured goods between the United States and the United Kingdom for the period 1936–1970 reflect the change of balance in favor of the United States, primarily with Lend-Lease supplies and aid programs from 1941 to 1948 (figure 3.6). Despite the regular statements issued by US officials on the country’s commitment to free trade principles, protectionist measures over the import of manufactured goods helped to insulate the US domestic market from overseas competition.

Figure 3.4. Ratio of US Dollar to British Pound Sterling with Mint Parity, 1930–1978



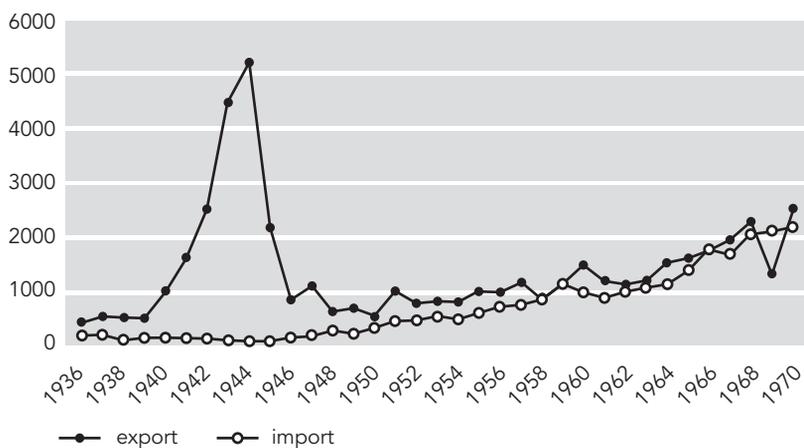
Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, vol. 5, pt. E: *Governance and International Relations*, edited by Susan B. Carter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5-561-5-562, table Ee612-614, “Dollar-Sterling Parity: 1789–1978.”

Figure 3.5. Ratio of US Dollar to British Pound Sterling in Free Circulation, 1917–1999



Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, vol. 5, pt. E: *Governance and International Relations*, edited by Susan B. Carter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5-569-5-570, table Ee621-636, “Bilateral Exchange Rates—Europe: 1913–1999.”

Figure 3.6. Volume of Export-Import Flows between the United States and the United Kingdom, 1936–1970 (US\$ millions)



Source: Series U 317–334: Value of Exports (Including Reexports) of U.S. Merchandise, by Country of Destination: 1790–1970 (in millions of dollars), Series U 335–352: Value of General Imports, by Country of Origin: 1790–1970 (in millions of dollars), in *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, pt. 2 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1975), 903, 905.

Contemporary scholars, relying on available memoirs, archives, and statistics for the wartime and early postwar period, note the presence of conflicting and sometimes opposing US and British positions. For instance, according to British historian Alan S. Milward, the United States was insufficiently generous with regard to the United Kingdom when dealing with Lend-Lease funds and the repayment of loans, unlike Canada, which cancelled the United Kingdom's debt under the mutual aid agreement.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, British researchers and politicians expected the United States to be interested in rendering unconditional economic and military assistance to the United Kingdom during the war and after its end. From the British perspective, the United Kingdom was the only European country that had successfully fought fascism and defended the interests of the free world. The restoration of British military strength after the war, primarily seen as the

recovery of imperial power, was supposed to create an efficient protection from the spread of communist ideology and Soviet influence. Churchill wrote to Roosevelt that “sustaining Britain as a first class power has for many years been the cornerstone of America’s foreign policy.”¹⁴¹ David Kaiser notes that the correspondence of Churchill and Roosevelt “illustrates the emerging new balance of power in the western world, entirely dominated by the United States despite Churchill’s unceasing efforts to reserve a distinct military, political, and economic role for the British Empire,” and also demonstrates Roosevelt’s resistance to the idea that the United States would “police the world, and therefore developed his concept of ‘four policemen’—the United States, the Soviet Union, the British Empire, and China—who would jointly keep the world under control,” which contradicted Churchill’s views.¹⁴² Some secret messages of the British Foreign Office indicate that the United States regarded Britain as “a second-rate Power, a ‘junior partner’ of the United States.” At the same time, there was “no real reason to fear that in fact Britain and the Commonwealth will be forced to play the role of a second-class Power, even though their physical strength is exceeded by the strength of other Powers. There are other things in leadership besides dollars and guns.... Moreover, there seems to be little doubt that Britain will continue to exercise enormous influence upon the ways in which Americans look at the world. In our view, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, they will for long continue to see many crucial things through the British window.”¹⁴³

According to a report on an April 1944 London visit from Under Secretary of State Edward Reilly Stettinius to Secretary of State Cordell Hull of May 22, 1944: “As the result of our conversations in London, we are more deeply convinced than ever that the United States must play an aggressive role in the creation of the international machinery necessary to ensure world security and economic stability. It is clear that the British attach great importance to the active participation of the United States in the world problems of the post-war era. We feel that in order to ensure our participation they will go far toward meeting our wishes on the form and character of the machinery for international cooperation.” The British position on the need for a wide network of military bases is described in the detailed report: “Mr. Churchill repeatedly emphasized the need for international funds to support international bases, even under a trusteeship arrangement. He believes that

in this way the United Nations will learn how expensive it is to maintain a security system such as the British have maintained in the past through national bases under Empire organization.”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, the United States started allocating funds after the war to support British military bases. In 1953 the United Kingdom received a loan of US\$5.6 million for Kenya and more than US\$1 million for Tanganyika under the Mutual Security Program, in order to expand and modernize ports and docks.¹⁴⁵

Charles P. Kindleberger has claimed that the allocation of huge funds under the provisions of the Lend-Lease Act was an issue of concern for the US Department of the Treasury, which was worried that “the American public would be upset by a generous provision of aid without some sort of means test,” also taking into account the British desire to preserve the market of the empire from external impact and restore it after the war. Furthermore, he believes that US humanitarian aid to Europe in the post-World War II years in the form of merchandise supplies also failed to accomplish its objective, insofar as the goods were sold and “the aided government received considerable sums of its own money, raising the question of how to handle them.” This “contributed measurably to the demoralization of both the US foreign service and Congress,” and, “[by] wasting some of the aid-receiving country’s resources” caused disputes between aid recipients and the United States and resulted in senseless spending.¹⁴⁶

An analysis of the funds allocated by the United States in the form of grants and loans in 1945–1955 demonstrates that the United Kingdom received the largest assistance, comparable only with the aid given to France. It is noteworthy that, as researchers have pointed out, US financial aid to France played a negative role in France’s relations with its former colonies. British historian Andrew Williams wrote that, ironically, American financial assistance enabled France to wage an unpopular, bloody, and politically disastrous military campaign in Indochina for almost 10 years.¹⁴⁷ Sami Abouzahr calculated that “by the time the French abandoned the effort after the catastrophic defeat at Dien Bien Phu (1954), the US was financing 80 per cent of the French war effort, and had committed itself financially, politically and emotionally to preventing a Communist victory there.” Abouzahr argued that “to French prime minister Bidault, Marshall Aid was nevertheless a blessing that would allow him to ‘avoid the abandonment of French positions’.” European Recovery Program (ERP) appropriations

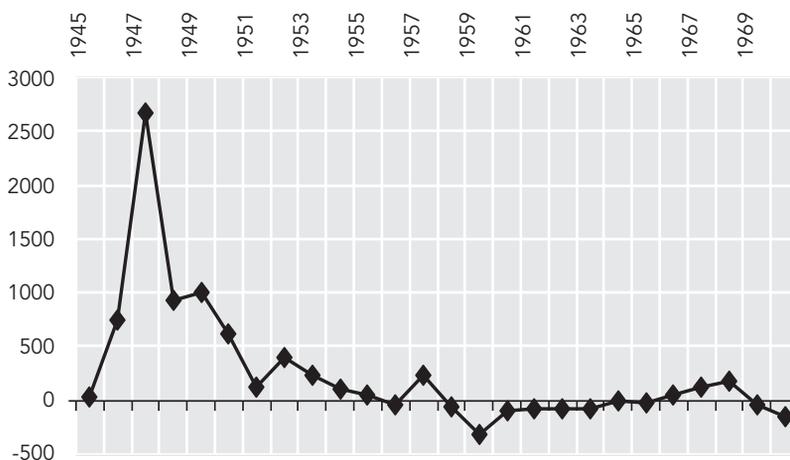
let France finance the war in Indochina at the expense of domestic reconstruction projects favoured by the European Cooperation Administration, the body in charge of administering Marshall Aid.”¹⁴⁸

Only a small part of US financial assistance was in the form of grants. Much more was in the form of loans, and some of the grants were transformed into loans.¹⁴⁹ The last repayments of the British loan were to be made in 2006. Data on the volume of funds paid by the United States in the form of foreign grants and loans, including the recipient country’s obligations under previous loans, show that the United Kingdom paid most of its debt in the late 1950s and 1960s. According to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, the United Kingdom received US\$1.034 billion between 1950 and 1963 under the programs of military assistance and \$500,000 between 1964 and 1969.¹⁵⁰ Ritchie Ovendale notes that in 1956, “the period of foreign aid was ending and Britain had to find means of increasing by £400 million the credit side of its balance payment.”¹⁵¹ Figure 3.7 illustrates the ratio of US loans to the United Kingdom to repayments by the latter of the loans received.

The need to tightly control the defense budget and keep it in line with the overall national economy is a distinctive feature of all postwar British governments. This was reflected in the so-called consensus between political parties with regard to the main foreign and defense policy directions. Soviet scholars who studied the British colonial policy stated with regret that even the Labour Party, which promoted socialist ideas and was supposed to defend the interests of the working class against the Conservative Party, was infected with opportunism and anticommunist prejudice.¹⁵² V. A. Ryzhikov wrote that the foundation of the foreign policy course of the British Labour government in 1945–1951 “was defined by attempts to strengthen the position of British imperialism in England and beyond its borders, serving the interests of British and US monopolies, hatred toward the USSR and socialist countries, the desire to strangle the national liberation movement that had emerged after the end of World War II in the countries of the British Empire and all over the world, fear of communist ideas, democratic forces and social progress all over the world.”¹⁵³

This claim is only partly justified. In Ritchie Ovendale’s words, though the Labour Party pursued the ideals of socialism at home, it did not extend these to foreign policy. Attlee shared Churchill’s perspective on foreign

Figure 3.7. Volume of Funds Received by the United Kingdom from the United States under Grants and Loans, Taking into Account Repaid Loans, 1945–1970 (US\$ millions).



Source: Series U 75-186: U.S. Government Foreign Grants and Credits, by Country: 1945 to 1970, in *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, pt. 2 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1975), 873–874.

policy issues, and everyone expected him to continue the course typical of the previous Conservative cabinet.¹⁵⁴ However, Attlee's Labour government laid the foundations for the transformation of empire under new conditions and in this way contributed to the defeat of the idea of empire. The Attlee government formulated the main directions of empire transformation: nation-building, a transfer of power, and constitutional reforms in the colonies. As David Fieldhouse wrote, "between 1945 and 1951 Attlee's governments dismantled Britain's imperial system in south Asia, accepted a fundamental change in the nature of the Commonwealth, and defined a process of political evolution which led directly to the dismemberment of empire in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific during the two decades after 1951." Fieldhouse also tried to answer the question of "how far such far-reaching changes were planned or whether they grew, unintended, from the pressure of circumstances." In general, he concluded that

“Labour’s position on imperial issues was almost identical with that of most Conservatives and that their policies in office were shaped by circumstances rather than by principle.” He also noted that “the Churchill government that came into office in 1951 could not put the clock back,” even though “it attempted to slow up the extension of self-government” for Ghana.¹⁵⁵

W. Roger Louis noted that Attlee regarded the system of international trusteeship created within the UN framework as a continuation of “the old story of British Imperialism,” and quoted from a memorandum of British Prime Minister Clement Attlee in September 1945: “After the last war, under the system of mandates, we acquired large territories. The world outside not unnaturally regarded this as a mere expansion of the British Empire. Trusteeship will appear to most people as only old mandates writ large.” At the same time, Louis believes that Attlee, “with the objections of a Labour politician who opposed Imperialism on ideological ground, sensed that the basis of power of the British Empire was being transformed,” and realized the need to protect the Empire and the peoples inhabiting it.¹⁵⁶

The need to maintain or transform the empire and preserve order in the dependencies posed a significant problem for the postwar governments, both Labour and Conservative. As Gillian Peele has noted, analyzing concurrences and differences in defense and foreign policy of the leading British parties, the Conservatives were characterized by a closed decision-making procedure, realism in defining priorities based on national interests, and the appointment of professional diplomats and officials to key positions in those areas. The Labour Party traditionally demonstrated a higher commitment to ethical and moral principles in politics, corresponding to the idealist paradigm in international relations; a significant degree of openness of decision-making procedure; and the appointment of popular politicians to key security and defense positions.¹⁵⁷ Labour governments were characterized by an active pursuit of policy to involve the colonial population in governance, protect its rights to land, develop democratic procedures, allocate funds for the development of colonial nations, develop the education system, and fight against racial discrimination and forced labor.

One of the most serious crises in relations between African countries and the United Kingdom broke out during the Labour government headed by Prime Minister Harold Wilson (1964–1970). Bitter differences were caused by the political system of Rhodesia and the apartheid practices

supported by the local white minority. Meanwhile, researchers also note that the Labour Party seemed more concerned about the economic aspect of the problem, that is, sanctions. Conservatives were more pragmatic in evaluating the need to allocate money to support local forces loyal to the British and thoroughly weighed all the pros and cons of maintaining the British presence and choosing the forms of influence. Conservatives did not want the Commonwealth to become, like the United Nations, “a forum for expression of Third World grievances.”¹⁵⁸

Both Labour and Conservative parties regarded the Soviet threat in Europe and Asia in the 1940s to early 1950s as a primary one, and starting in the late 1950s, concern about the spread of communism in Africa was expressed more and more often. The Chinese threat was viewed primarily in the context of the security and defense of British interests in Southeast Asia and the Far East. The earliest official documents of the postwar period already emphasized the impossibility of maintaining full control in the colonies by military means only. Identifying the strategy with regard to dependent territories, British politicians paid significant attention to the issue of colonial development, going so far as to lay the foundations for a contemporary “development policy” that included political, economic, cultural, educational, and technical aspects. However, the humanitarian and educational projects also required significant spending to implement.

Ovendale, evaluating “what lay behind the British decision to abdicate in Africa” in 1960, wrote that many earlier theories about the reasons for the rapid dissolution of the empire were finally confirmed or refuted by government documents that were released in the 1990s after the 30-year rule had expired. Ovendale indicated that the “quit in Africa” position was caused by a number of international and national factors: (1) “the growing evidence that there would be disturbances in Africa similar to those in Asia at the end of the Second World War”; (2) the inability of Britain to prevent such a development and the concomitant possibility that the British presence would be associated with failure to preserve the order, which could push the political forces toward the communist bloc; (3) the failures of France and Belgium in conducting a colonial policy in Asia and Africa and the moral condemnation of their policy by world public opinion; (4) pragmatic profit-and-loss calculations in relation to keeping colonies; (5) “the need for the West to maintain a common front in Africa to prevent Soviet

penetration”; and (6) “strategic calculations in relation to the protection of Middle Eastern oil.” Like many other researchers, Ovendale pointed to the influence of the Suez Crisis, the launch of Sputnik, and the development of the Soviet nuclear program on the British defense strategy, as well as the fact that “the threat to Britain’s position and influence in the world was political and economic rather than military.”¹⁵⁹

International Factors

The growing US influence in the world and tensions between the transatlantic partners were the most important international factors influencing the dissolution of the British Empire. According to Niall Ferguson, “the key to victory—and the key to the future of the Empire itself—lay, ironically, with the country that had been the first colony to throw off British rule,” or “as one old Colonial Office hand already sensed... ‘the prize of victory [would] not be the perpetuation, but the honourable interment of the old system.’”¹⁶⁰ The anticolonial and anti-imperialist position of the United States was declared in the Atlantic Charter, signed on August 14, 1941, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, despite differences between these two countries with respect to colonies and dependent territories.¹⁶¹ The Soviet Union became a signatory to the Charter on September 24, 1941, together with European countries,¹⁶² though Stalin had a skeptical attitude toward this document: “I actually thought that the Atlantic Charter was directed against countries striving for world domination, but now I see that it is directed against the Soviet Union,” according to David Kaiser. Kaiser noted that “Anglophobia still dominated important elements of the American press, and the President was sensitive to any accusations of ‘pulling British chestnuts out of the fire.’”¹⁶³ Louis wrote that many prominent Americans, including Roosevelt, believed that “national independence was the natural and desirable course in world affairs, though, in the case of the British, some were more willing than others to grant that self-government within the British Empire might be a satisfactory alternative.”¹⁶⁴ President Truman in his speech “Restatement of Foreign Policy of the United States” of October 27, 1945, outlined the fundamental principles of foreign policy in an imperfect world after the end of the war. Seven of the twelve principles in one way or another stated the

right of nations to free self-determination, the democratic principles of governance, and a ban on limited sovereignty and coercion.¹⁶⁵

W. Roger Louis tried to identify the role of the United States in British decolonization during World War II. His assessment reflects the dual character and evolution of the US position. On the one hand, many American politicians and officials hoped that the empire would be destroyed during the war; however, by the end of the war British politicians had managed to prove that preservation of the empire would contribute to security and check the proliferating Soviet and Chinese influence. On the other hand, the negative attitude of the American public and many officials, as well as the growing dependence of the United Kingdom on the United States, prompted Britain to strive for reform of the empire and the development of colonies toward full independence.¹⁶⁶ The Suez Crisis became a serious test for the Anglo-American partnership. The unexpected concurrence of US and Soviet positions in the United Nations created an anti-imperialist front that France and the United Kingdom could not counter. British attempts to influence the United States in its anti-imperialist rhetoric and practice were not successful owing to US economic interests and the nation's colonial past.

Alan Burns's book *In Defence of Colonies: British Colonial Territories in International Affairs*, published in 1957, is a unique account of the emergence of an anti-imperialist alliance that crossed the space dividing political blocs. Burns spent 42 years working in the British Colonial Office; he was governor of the Gold Coast (Ghana) from 1941 to 1947 and permanent representative of the United Kingdom on the UN Trusteeship Council from 1947 to 1956. In the preface to his book, he noted that the Britons, under the influence of ever-growing international criticism with regard to the British rule in colonies, "are beginning to be a little ashamed of our position as a colonial Power and inclined to pay undue attention to the self-righteous attitude of other nations." The reason for writing the book, according to the author, was the lack of objectivity of the representatives of "anticolonial" nations, who, though they may be "personally friendly and reasonable in their approach to colonial questions, ... are generally bound by anti-colonial convention (or by their instructions) to an extent which does not allow them to deal with such questions publicly in an objective manner."¹⁶⁷ Burns cited the United States, the Soviet Union, India, Latin

American countries, and the United Nations as a whole as the most striking representatives of the anticolonial alliance. Characterizing the US position with regard to the colonial issue, he sarcastically noted that the difference between the United Kingdom and the United States was that the United States preferred to regard its colonies “as nothing more than ‘possessions.’” Most Americans, he felt, did not understand the British contribution to the economic and political development of the peoples of the empire and the United Kingdom’s help in preparing them for self-government.¹⁶⁸ Burns wrote that anticolonial feeling in America was “due almost entirely to an historical emotion, and is based to a large extent on a lack of knowledge and a convenient blindness to comparative facts. The anti-colonial attitude of the United States has been a great help to Communist policy in the past but there is fortunately a growing realisation of this fact in responsible American circles.... It is often said that the Communist leaders are trying to drive a wedge between the United Kingdom and the United States. There would be less chance of this wedge being effective if the British could feel that their American allies ... were not intent on weakening the British position by making colonial administration more difficult.”¹⁶⁹

Burns also believed that the Soviet Union was an empire, as it continued the policy of conquering new territories and exploiting those it had inherited from the tsarist regime. He also noted that in the Soviet Union, unlike in dependent British territories, all manifestations of nationalism and critique of existing order were suppressed.¹⁷⁰ He criticized the anticolonial position of India, stating flatly that the country had “assumed the leadership of the (non-communist) anti-colonial bloc.”¹⁷¹ Burns calculated the distribution of positions of 76 countries in the United Nations with regard to colonial issue: 8 Arab states, 13 Asian states, the Soviet bloc (9 countries), 20 Latin American states, and 26 “miscellaneous” states, a category that included the developed countries of Europe and North America. In his view, all regional groups were ready to support any resolution hostile to colonialism. Of the group of developed countries (the “miscellaneous” states), at least three countries, he thought, also had an anticolonial position.¹⁷²

Prime Minister Harold Macmillan personally addressed President Eisenhower, asking the United States not to vote for the UN General Assembly resolution on immediate independence to colonies in December 1960. However, having abstained from voting at the direction of the White

House, US delegate Zelma Watson George stood up and applauded to welcome the resolution's passage.¹⁷³ The contradictions between partners were sometimes so pronounced that Macmillan in his diary ironically referred to Anglo-American affairs as "a very special relationship."¹⁷⁴

In the Soviet literature, the US anti-imperialist rhetoric was often regarded as insincere, which led to an underestimation of US influence in the dissolution of the European empires after the war. However, an analysis of American and British official documents of the postwar period prompts agreement with the opinion expressed by the contemporary British historian Andrew Williams, who wrote that the liberal ideas of the American elite and its negative attitude toward British imperialism were not "just liberal hypocrisy" that "camouflaged for naked pursuit of national interest." On the contrary, US national interests stemmed from an understanding of the need for ethics in foreign policy.¹⁷⁵

In the postwar period, the problems of constructing a new international security system inevitably forced US leaders to search for a balance among ideas of national liberation, the struggle against leftist and communist ideology, providing for US economic interests, and managing security on a global scale. Thus, the issue of a colonial legacy could not be disentangled from military-strategic issues. At the same time, the United States did not want its position on decolonization to be associated with the policies of the European empires. Acting in support of colonial independence, the United States did not want to accept responsibility for the transition period and had a pragmatic attitude toward military intervention, especially intervention in British dependent territories and the colonies of other European powers. The US position with respect to former European colonies in Africa and Asia was clearly outlined in declassified documents of the National Security Council of 1948–1949. A 1949 NSC document dealing with the possible capture of Hong Kong and Macao by Communist China noted that, taking into account the low strategic, economic, and military value of these areas for the United States, it would be "unwise for the United States to contribute forces for the defense of Hong Kong and Macao unless we are willing to risk major military involvement in China and possibly global war. Similarly, no United States military materiel should be provided or committed in advance of a re-examination of the situation at the time the British and/or Portuguese position is made known to us."¹⁷⁶

The NSC reports of 1948–1949 dealing with the former Italian colonies in Africa (Eritrea, Libya, and Somaliland) express the US urge to emplace “unilateral British control,” but Britain refused to accept the burden.¹⁷⁷ The NSC report of July 26, 1949, considered various options of voting at the UN General Assembly concerning the independence of Eritrea, Libya, and Italian Somaliland. It noted that US policy should be directed toward “the preservation of United States and United Kingdom strategic interests and positions.” However, practical work aimed at a power transfer in Libya was to be undertaken, according to the document, by French and British administrations, while the United Kingdom was accorded responsibility for preparing Eritrea to unite with Ethiopia and Somaliland, a decision that was to be codified by the UN General Assembly. The US position was expressed as follows: “Our strategic interests will be protected until that time by the continuance of the British administration.”¹⁷⁸ Following the UN decision in 1948, Libya (Tripolitania and Cyrenaica) officially gained independence on December 24, 1951. In November 1949, the United Nations made a decision to establish Italian trusteeship over Somaliland for 10 years, while Eritrea was attached to Ethiopia as a result of a referendum.

The United States maintained a similar position with regard to unrest in Malaya, where it had economic interests, as Malaya provided more than half of the natural rubber supplies used by the United States and more than one-third of its tin, and was also the biggest dollar-earner in the sterling bloc. A CIA memorandum noted that at that moment, there was no serious threat from communist forces in the region, the United Kingdom managed to maintain order, and US economic and strategic interests were protected.¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, in some regions the British presence relied on US support—in Cyprus, Aden, Malaya, and Kenya, for example—or, in Niall Ferguson’s words, where “British rule was essentially ‘underwritten’ by the US.”¹⁸⁰

The United States was forced to become more and more active in ensuring international security because of the Soviet and communist threat. Responsibility for maintaining the global order thus migrated from the United Kingdom to the United States. Niall Ferguson referred to this process as a “transfer of power,” drawing a parallel with empire transformation as a transfer of power to the local forces, as the term is accepted in the British literature. However, the meaning of this phrase has a global

context.¹⁸¹ By the end of World War II, the United Kingdom was the only Western country that had a mass-trained army, fleet, and aviation capacity, as well as a worldwide network of military bases. This fact made the Anglo-American partnership in international security inevitable. The United States and the United Kingdom discussed the degree of responsibility and intervention in case of civil war in Greece and the situation in Yugoslavia, Turkey, China, the Middle East, and South Asia. All these situations were in a way related to confrontation with a leftist ideology promulgated by national liberation movements. Nevertheless, the United States did not plan to accept the role of world policeman alone, and insisted on sharing the responsibilities of demilitarization and de-Nazification of the Axis countries with both Western and Eastern bloc countries. In Ovendale's view, the Korean War demonstrated that the United States had chosen in favor of active participation in ensuring international security on a global scale.¹⁸²

In considering the international factors that contributed to the rapid dissolution of the British Empire, we should also note the agreement of US and Soviet positions with regard to Southeast Asia in the first postwar decade. Alexey Bogaturov, a leading Russian international relations expert, has pointed out that both countries preferred to distance themselves from postcolonial conflicts. The positions of the two countries also concurred with regard to Chiang Kai-shek, who was rendering assistance to the growing national liberation movement in French Indochina. In both countries, the leadership was satisfied with the desire of nationalist forces to destroy the remains of European colonial power in the region. Later, the United States and the Soviet Union demonstrated restraint toward the government of the DRV under Ho Chi Minh. They had a similar policy with regard to Indonesia, and there was no confrontation with regard to the riots in British Malaya. In the first postwar decade, both countries practiced restraint in their approach to local revolutionary movements. Moreover, the Soviet influence and the military and economic assistance it supplied to revolutionary movements in the region were much less than deemed by Western analysts of that period.¹⁸³ Paul Kennedy noted that the growing popularity of communist ideas in the world was not a manifestation of the Soviet influence, though the Soviet Union could claim it as part of its victory.¹⁸⁴

The final defeat of France in Indochina in 1954 and the subsequent active involvement of the United States in regional policy marked a new

stage in the alignment of forces and interests in Southeast Asia between Western bloc partners and opponents of a bipolar world. British documents on the situation in Laos in 1961 reflect an increasingly restrained position of the United Kingdom as well as growing British distrust and anxiety about the overly aggressive behavior of the United States, which could draw SEATO countries into a full-scale military conflict.¹⁸⁵ US Secretary of State Dean Rusk, in response to the British decision to withdraw all troops from Southeast Asia and the Middle East in 1967, noted that this decision left him “profoundly dismayed,” and that it represented “a major withdrawal of the United Kingdom from world affairs, and this was a catastrophic loss to human society.” The British position with regard to the war in Vietnam was negative. The Labour Party rank and file evaluated it as “as the most immoral act since the Holocaust,” though the official position of the Labour government was moderate. When asked why the United Kingdom did not adopt a tougher stance with regard to US policy in Vietnam, Prime Minister Wilson answered, “Because we can’t kick our creditors in the balls.”¹⁸⁶

Soviet researchers traditionally consider the collapse of colonial empires to be conditioned by the overarching crisis of capitalism and inevitable revolutionary transformations. They wrote about the “liquidation of the colonial system as an integral part of world revolutionary process”; however, they also emphasized that “socialist revolutions . . . as such would not have caused a crisis and dissolution of the British Empire, if these processes had not been prepared by the development of characteristic contradictions. The criminal and shameful system of colonialism is collapsing under the weight of the crimes it has committed.”¹⁸⁷ This suggests that Soviet and Western researchers identified some common reasons for the dissolution of the British Empire, though their conclusions and predictions differed. As a result, the studies of the 1950s to 1970s contained some conclusions important for understanding the nature of empire dissolution as an example of a clash between asymmetric antagonists. The main objectives of the military campaign were to prevent the victory of communist and pro-communist forces, because their coming to power would make it impossible to maintain traditional political and economic ties with a given country. The conclusions of Soviet historians generally were in accord with the fears of Western politicians, though this did not mean that the Soviet Union had a decisive influence on empire dissolution.

In fact, official documents from the 1940s and 1950s show that both the Soviet influence in the third world countries and the fears of Western countries concerning this influence were exaggerated, if substantiated. There are no data to confirm that the Soviet Union rendered significant military or material assistance to the national liberation movements in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East *in the first postwar decade*. The Soviet Union had to rebuild its economy under conditions much worse than those the United Kingdom faced. Control in Europe was associated with significant costs. The Soviet nuclear program consumed a lot of resources. Leaders of the newly independent states in Asia and Africa were inconsistent, and this did not contribute to strengthening the Soviet influence there. Hence the Soviet influence was expressed to a larger extent through the formation of an alternative ideology of liberation and anti-imperialism, especially using the UN platform. China, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia became prominent players in Southeast Asia, but they occupied a special position.

The presence of a multimillion-troop Soviet army in Eastern Europe and the Soviet nuclear weapon capability prompted the United Kingdom to abandon its customary isolationist thinking and contribute to the balance of power in Europe. By the mid-1960s, the United Kingdom had deployed in Europe three times as many troops as it had in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. The constant bargaining that went on between the United States and the United Kingdom over transatlantic obligations to counteract the Soviet threat in Europe illustrates this claim well.

Andrew Rothstein, a member of the British Communist Party and the author of *British Foreign Policy and Its Critics, 1830–1950*, published in Russian in the Soviet Union in 1973, wrote that British foreign policy was gradually made subordinate to US foreign policy, which was a consequence of “the policy of maximum hostility towards the Soviet Union.” He listed the following events to confirm this claim: the Quebec agreement between the United States and United Kingdom in 1943 on a secret nuclear bomb development; a series of agreements with the United States on financial and economic issues in 1945–1947; the devaluation of the pound, carried out under US pressure in 1949; an agreement to place American bases with nuclear weapons on British territory; “restrictions in trade with Socialist countries introduced at American bidding in 1951 and being in place for many years; consent to rearmament of Western Germany

in 1954, despite the fact that a minority in the House of Commons voted in favor; subsequent opportunity given to troops and tanks of Western Germany to hold exercises in the British territory; shameful support of American aggression in Vietnam.”¹⁸⁸

More clearly seen now is the contradiction between the United States and the United Kingdom with regard to the British colonies and the principles of international trade and financial system. The United States intended to replace the British pound with the US dollar as the major world currency, creating additional difficulties for British economic stability within the sterling zone and imperial preferences. US economic assistance to the United Kingdom was brought up earlier. This aid was made contingent on certain conditions being met, often as a price paid for the destruction of the imperial world order. In A. M. Rodriguez’s opinion, the establishment of the Bretton Woods system contributed to the destruction of “the closed nature of imperial monetary systems of Britain and France” and prepared for the transition from colonial policy to neocolonialism.¹⁸⁹ The implementation of the Marshall Plan further strengthened the US influence through loans made to European countries. A similar view was expressed in the Soviet literature, framed as “the contradictions of imperialist powers in the struggle for sales markets and markets of resources.” Niall Ferguson cited Hitler’s words that it was “rival empires more than indigenous nationalists who propelled the process of decolonization forward.” And the United States, in his view, is without doubt an empire. He believes that “the imperial renaissance might have led further if the United States and Britain had made common cause, for American backing was the *sine qua non* of imperial recovery.”¹⁹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

The main reason for the dissolution of the British Empire was the impossibility of preserving colonial rule and prewar forms of political and economic relations under the new historical conditions. The United Kingdom found it difficult to retain efficient control of its colonies and mandates; it had to change how it interacted with local elites and political forces that were not satisfied with a subordinate position. Thus, a major role in the

dissolution of the British Empire was played by the rise of national liberation movements under the influence of the events of World War II and the anti-imperialist agenda of the two postwar world leaders, the United States and the Soviet Union. Liberal ideas—liberation and the absence of coercion—found proponents and opponents at both poles of the post-World War II world order. Many authors have noted the competing and often conflicting interests of the United States and the United Kingdom, especially with regard to European colonial possessions. The United States believed that independence should be granted as soon as possible, while European countries, especially the United Kingdom, preferred to execute a planned process over several decades. The United States openly expressed its anticolonial position and exerted pressure on European countries in order to destroy the remains of imperial possessions and create a new economic order based on the principles of liberalism and free trade.

It would be a mistake to consider the dissolution of the British Empire as a sign of military weakness without taking into account the political and economic aspects of the empire as a system. The British Empire was to a large extent an economic project, though its profitability is debatable. Nevertheless, it was impossible to protect economic interests without relying on military force. The imperial state in the colonies was founded on a combination of factors: (1) military power, to maintain order and subordination both within the empire and beyond; (2) political and economic factors, which brought certain benefits to local elites and the population; and (3) an ideological system emphasizing values, to justify the imperial order to elites and the population. World War II undermined the foundations of colonial dominion, and the colonial powers had to restore control. The postwar conditions were unfavorable for the preservation of imperial possessions, even by states with strong military and power resources. The United States, the new leader of the Western world, openly made known its anti-imperialist position and contributed, in rhetoric and in practice, to the demolition of the European empires. As a result, the United Kingdom was more concerned with safeguarding its economic and political interests in the new world order than with keeping an empire together.

The asymmetric conflicts sparked by national liberation movements in the British colonies hastened the transition from imperial to local control. Small wars in colonies were initially considered political rather

than military enterprises. Their political feasibility was an important issue, and the United Kingdom wanted to reduce its efforts to keep the peace in regions going out of control. In the interwar period, the so-called inter-imperialist contradictions with regard to control, access to resources, and the use of colonial possessions represented the greatest challenge to security. After World War II, however, the Western powers had to coordinate their efforts as a growing communist influence in Asia and Africa became the overriding concern. Responsibility for control over the periphery and semiperiphery of the former British Empire was transferred from the United Kingdom to the United States.

Having lost its global leadership, the United Kingdom hoped for a Pax Americana to replace the Pax Britannica, and was concerned to prevent the rise of Russian communism. The United States reluctantly agreed to expand its sphere of authority and maintain order on a global scale, fearing that it would be accused of imperial behavior both at home and abroad. However, the persistent position of the United Kingdom with regard to its economic capabilities, defense spending, and army size helped push the United States into more active participation in ensuring international security, along with a conscious need to counteract the Soviet threat on a global scale. Yet even after the dissolution of the Soviet threat in the early 1990s, the effects of the transition from British power to American power would be felt in the continuation of asymmetric conflicts that echoed those of the Cold War years.