# Keeping Britannia afloat: the challenges of maintaining a proportionate grand strategy

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**ABSTRACT**

Why do states fail to adjust to changes in the relative distribution of power? Some overreact against perceived threats and find themselves overstretched; they may have committed an excessive amount of limited resources to tackle the threat, become party to a burdensome number of entangling alliances, or simply taken on too many adversaries. In contrast, others underreach and pursue overly conservative goals that are not commensurate with their security interests. Their forces might be too few or ill-prepared for the threat they face, or they may lack a sufficient number of allies. This thesis therefore seeks to explain the poor quality of states' grand strategies and why they often end up doing too much or too little. Unfortunately, the literature on grand strategy is not up to the task. Using a neoclassical realist framework, I argue that we must look inside the "black box" of the state if we are to understand how policymakers perceive and respond to changes in the international environment. The thesis employs a range of qualitative methods, including archival research and process tracing, in order to highlight the importance of unit-level intervening variables, such as individual biases and domestic veto players, on the process of grand strategy. I look at three past cases of British grand strategy: the Second World War, the withdrawal from East of Suez, and the 2003 Iraq War. I argue that the imminence and proximity of external threats shapes who makes decisions and how effectively they do so. A proportionate grand strategy is more likely when the state faces an existential challenge. In contrast, decision-makers in benign security environments are more likely to become distracted and focus on parochial interests. The thesis concludes with policy recommendations and a call to action for greater engagement with strategic studies in the United Kingdom.

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## GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

**Grand strategy** is the *process* by which states prioritise their interests and direct finite resources in such a manner that brings about long-term external security. It should be seen as synonymous with *grand strategic thinking*.

A *proportionate* grand strategy involves the sustainable balancing of means (resources) and ends (objectives), based on a prudent calculation of the state's interests and the threats to those interests. Underreach or overstretch are the likely results of a *disproportionate* grand strategy, which involves the unsustainable balancing of means and ends, based on an imprudent calculation of the state's interests and the threats to those interests.

**Strategy** is grand strategy's junior, despite entering the lexicon centuries beforehand. It can be defined as the application of means to attain desired ends via ways (tactics).

**Statecraft** should be considered as the overall management of a state's affairs – both domestic and foreign. Grand strategy is just one aspect of that, and it only relates to external national security threats.

**Foreign policy,** like defence policy, is something that is factored in by the officials conceptualising grand strategy. Foreign policy describes a state's relations with the wider world. Grand strategy provides the explanation for a state's foreign policy.

# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

Why do states fail to adjust efficiently to changes in the relative distribution of power? In the wake of the Second World War, several European powers came under pressure to relinquish their imperial commitments. Yet, while some chose to retrench in response to relative decline, others fruitlessly resisted the winds of change. Why do some states allow themselves to become overstretched – where their ambitions exceed available resources – while others maintain an even balance between objectives and capabilities? Conversely, why do some states underreach and pursue overly conservative goals that are not commensurate with their interests? The answers to these questions, which are of interest not only to academics but also to policymakers, go to the heart of grand strategy.

## Defining grand strategy

Grand strategy is the highest form of statecraft. When done well, states are likely to avoid the perils of underreach and overstretch. Yet, charting a course between these two is a phenomenally difficult endeavour. It requires practitioners, who regularly work on short time horizons, to step out of policy minutiae. Academic scholarship on grand strategy has a role to play in reminding policymakers of the need to think about the big picture.

Unfortunately, these two communities often talk past each other. Many practitioners snub grand strategy as something divorced from the daily realities of politics. This is partly the fault of some academics for setting the bar too high with overly expansive definitions. Peter Layton, for example, argues that grand strategy is not just a "whole-of-government"

approach, but a "whole-of-nation" approach to statecraft.[1] This is a bridge too far. How can practitioners and wider society be expected to live up to these exacting standards? Paul Miller rightly observes that "when the concept wanders into domestic economic and social policy (like education policy, tax policy, or environmental regulation) under the guise of developing the resources of national power, it starts to become unrealistic and to lose its core meaning".[2] Although important, matters such as climate change should not fall within the scope of grand strategy if the concept is to retain parsimony.

Another source of controversy relates to whether grand strategy *has* to be written down. Peter Feaver, for example, contends that grand strategy "refers to the collection of plans and policies that comprise the state's deliberate effort to harness political, military, diplomatic, and economic tools together to advance that state's national interest".[3] The notion that grand strategy needs to be etched in ink is problematic, as, to paraphrase Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, "no plan ever survives first contact with the enemy".

Those who have oversold grand strategy with plan-centric definitions have given policymakers just cause to steer clear of the concept. When asked by a reporter if he required a new grand strategy, President Obama replied that he did not "need George Kennan now".[4] Similarly, President Clinton rejected the idea that Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman had grand strategies for dealing with Hitler and Stalin. Both of his

[1] Peter Layton, 'The Idea of Grand Strategy', *RUSI Journal* (157:4, 2012, pp. 56-61), p. 58.
[2] Paul D. Miller, 'On Strategy, Grand and Mundane', *Orbis* (60:2, 2016, pp. 237-247), p. 244.
[3] Peter Feaver, 'What is Grand Strategy and Why Do We Need It?', *Foreign Policy*, 8 April 2009.
[4] David Remnick, 'Going the Distance: On and off the road with Barack Obama', *The New Yorker*, 27 January 2014.

predecessors, he judged, had "powerful instincts about what had to be done and they just made it up as they went along".[5]

If grand strategy requires a fixed plan, then we may as well discard the concept to the dustbin of intellectual history. Domestic and international events can quickly nullify five or 10 year grand strategies. Colin Dueck agrees that, "if we define grand strategy – wrongly – as simply a prefabricated plan, carried out to the letter against all resistance, then clearly no president and probably no world leader has ever had such a strategy, nor ever will".[6]

There is clearly a need to reset expectations of this much-maligned term. One of the aims of this thesis is to move grand strategy onto more conceptually stable ground so as to protect it from the choppy waters of academic critique. I propose a new framework, based on the idea of proportionality, that goes some way to resolving extant issues and provides a basis for rigorous academic and policy analyses. I define grand strategy as the *process* by which states prioritise their interests and direct finite resources in such a manner that brings about long-term external security. The concept's scope should be limited to a state's alliances, force posture and commitments. Given that this is an ongoing process, grand strategy should be seen as synonymous with *grand strategic thinking*.

Obama and Clinton both engaged in grand strategic thinking, even if neither would acknowledge it. Channelling Trotsky, Hal Brands wryly observes that, "you may not be

[5] Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 133-134.
[6] Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 5.

interested in grand strategy but grand strategy is interested in you". All decision-makers are inevitably faced with trade-offs over their state's competing interests and priorities and they make judgements – consciously or unconsciously, based on reasoned analysis, intuition, ideology or something in between – about which goals and threats are the most important and how resources should be deployed to meet them.[7]

The ship of state will undoubtedly sail into political and economic headwinds, which means that tacking is inevitable. A state's short-to-medium term objectives, as well as its resource base, will almost certainly require adjustments over time, although its long-term interests are likely to remain more fixed. As Lawrence Freedman observed: "with each move from one state of affairs to another, the combination of ends and means will be reappraised. Some means will be discarded and new ones found, while some ends will turn out to be beyond reach even as unexpected opportunities come into view".[8]

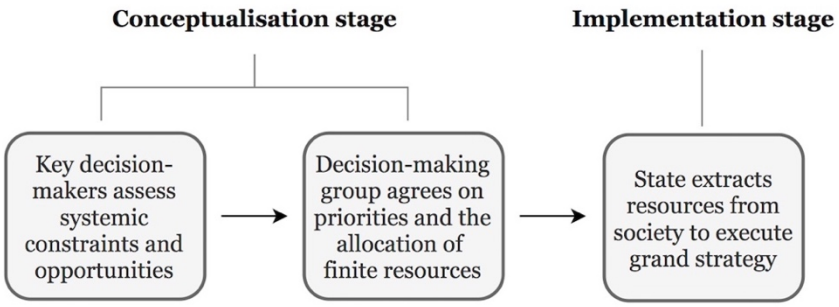
Policymakers astute at grand strategy will avoid the urge just to 'do something' in a crisis. Grand strategy explains *why* a specific state or area is prioritised. Why is a particular region of vital importance to state A? Why is state B regarded as a threat and yet state C considered a close ally? Grand strategy provides the overarching justification for a state's foreign and defence policies. Barry Posen notes that "a grand strategy contains explanations for why threats enjoy a certain priority, and why and how the remedies proposed could work".[9] 'Remedies' in this sense refer to the state's military, economic and technological resource

[7] Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 6.
[8] Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 611.
[9] Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 1.

base, as well as its web of alliances. This last point underscores the fact that this process of prioritisation does not take place in a vacuum. Grand strategies can also be hammered out between allies bilaterally or multilaterally through institutions and alliance summits.

When it comes to analysing grand strategy, I contend that the process can be split into two stages. The first phase, conceptualisation, involves officials ascertaining threats and opportunities, as well as prioritising their state's goals and interests, before deciding upon which of the state's finite assets are needed to protect or further the objectives. The second stage, implementation, involves the practical execution of these deliberations. This can be seen in model 1.1 below:

**Figure 1.1: The conceptualisation and implementation of grand strategy**




Implicit in this understanding of grand strategy is the idea that grand strategy can be done well or badly. Other scholars have explicitly demarked the positive and negative ends of this conceptual pole.[10] Hal Brands, for example, writes of coherent and flawed grand strategies.[11] I take issue with the existing typologies in the next chapter and develop my own terminology, based on the notion of proportionality.

[10] Gary Goertz, S*ocial Science Concepts: A User's Guide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 30-35.
[11] Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?*, p. 189.

A *proportionate* grand strategy involves the sustainable balancing of means and ends, based on a prudent calculation of the state's interests and the threats to those interests. Underreach or overstretch are the likely results of a *disproportionate* grand strategy, which involves the unsustainable balancing of means and ends, based on an imprudent calculation of the state's interests and the threats to those interests. In an ideal scenario, a state's interests and commitments are commensurate with its aggregate size (economic strength, population, and capabilities) and geographic location, as well as the nature of the threats it faces.

**The theoretical puzzle**

Now that the terms have been defined, I return to the original question: why have some states failed to adjust efficiently to shifts in the relative distribution of power? While some have managed to sustain proportionate grand strategies for long periods of time, others have veered into overstretch or underreach. Surely states would be wise to follow systemic incentives. The most important rationalist theory in this context is neorealism, which starts from the premise that the international system is anarchic. Scholars are divided over how much power states seek under such conditions but they agree that the system frames the choices available to states.[12] To be sure, countries are not obliged to prioritise commitments or allocate resources in line with structural conditions, but the system will punish those that do not. Kenneth Waltz believes those that fail to heed structural constraints and incentives

[12] The division between offensive and defensive realism is discussed at greater length in the theoretical framework chapter.

will "fall by the wayside".[13] Imperial Japan was incentivised to prey on European colonies in Asia during the early 1940s, but not to attack the United States – a country whose latent productive capacity far exceeded that of Tokyo's. Pearl Harbour was an operational success but it was strategically misguided. Japan pursued a disproportionate grand strategy from 1941 onwards as it engaged an opponent which it could not hope to defeat. Japan ultimately paid a high price for its error.

The "dominant reading of neorealism is that it employs a rationality assumption".[14] Yet, we know that states do not always behave rationally, largely because states are comprised of people. To be more precise, grand strategies are conceptualised by presidents, prime ministers, as well as ministers and officials from the foreign, defence and finance ministries. The biases, beliefs and personalities of these policymakers are liable to influence their perceptions of threats. Judgements over priorities and resources are likely to vary according to the demands of the problem and the abilities of the decision-maker. Some leaders are more deliberative than others, while others may be more impulsive or prone to motivated biases like revenge, status or honour. Yet, even the most objective policymakers, when placed under time pressure, are likely to employ cognitive shortcuts, like historical analogies, to simplify complex problems.[15]

[13] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 118.
[14] Colin Elman, 'Horses for courses: Why not neorealist theories of foreign policy?', *Security Studies* (6:1, 1996, pp. 7-53), p. 43. It is worth noting that Waltz specifically avoids this claim. I discuss the rationality assumption underpinning Waltzian neorealism in chapter three.
[15] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, second edition, 2017).

Moreover, neorealism assumes that states are *able* to respond efficiently to changes in the distribution of power. If the state needs to balance against a threat, it will be able to extract resources from society in a timely manner.[16] In practice, however, decision-makers often have to contend with domestic "veto players".[17] These vary from interest groups and the bureaucracy to opposition political parties and the wider public.

Neoclassical realism tries to incorporate these unit-level intervening variables within a theory that still places structure at the pinnacle of explanatory variables. Scholars in this tradition agree with neorealists that states are incentivised to behave according to systemic pressures. Yet, they note that "there is no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behaviour".[18] Accordingly, they strive to demonstrate how perceptions, biases, societal ideas, interest groups, political institutions, and civil-military relations determine how pressures from the international system are interpreted and translated into grand strategic outcomes.

Neoclassical realism is therefore an attempt to refine neorealism. The latter sets out how grand strategies should *ideally* be conceptualised, whereas neoclassical realism helps to explain how this process often transpires in practice. Brian Rathbun argues that neoclassical realism "begins with the premise that ideal state behaviour is that which conforms with the

[16] On balancing against threats, as opposed to power imbalances, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 263-265. Balance of threat theory refines, rather than refutes, Waltz's traditional balance of power theory.
[17] George Tsebelis, *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
[18] Gideon Rose, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy', *World Politics* (51:1, 1998, pp. 144-172), pp. 146-147.

unitary actor and objectivity premises of neorealism but shows when these conditions are not met empirically, domestic politics and ideas are the culprits".[19]

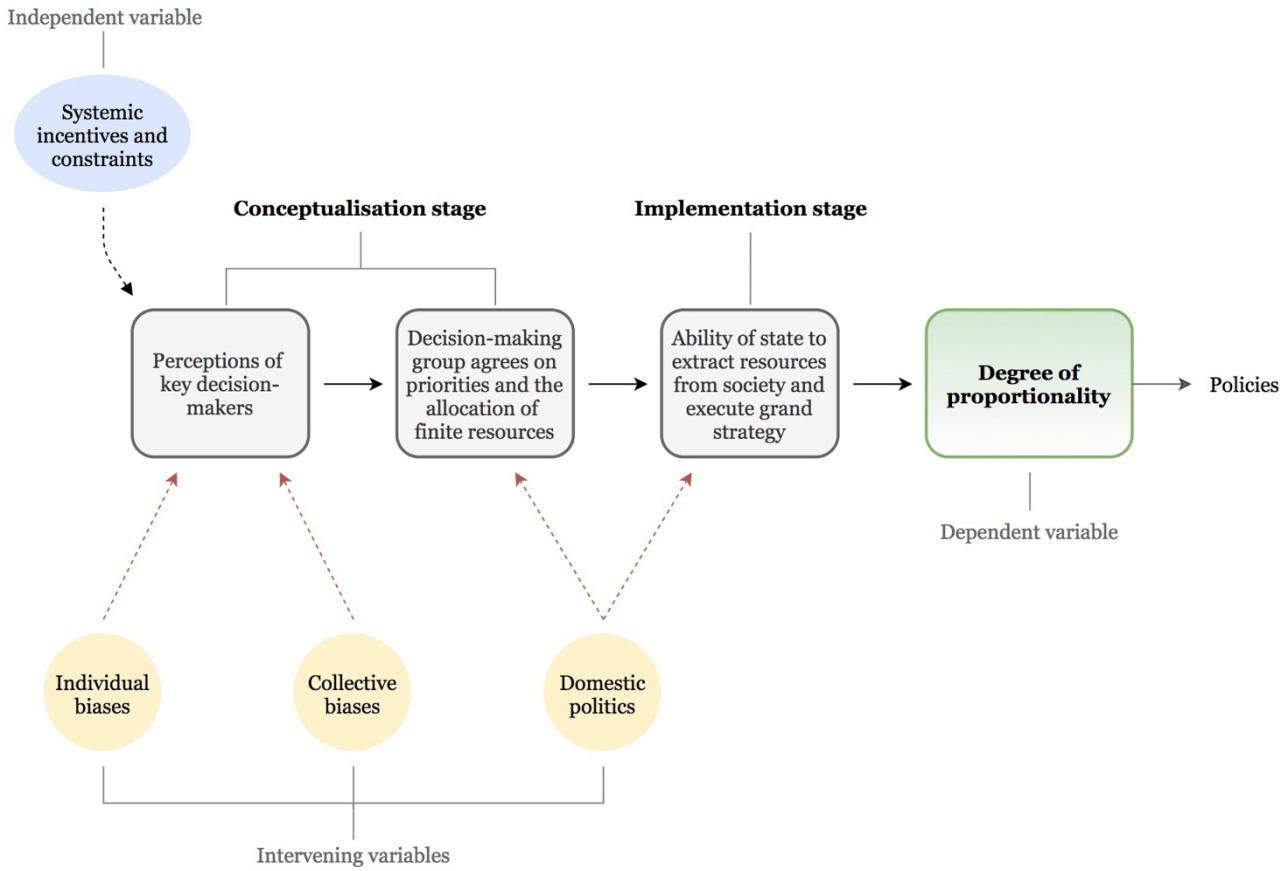
Neoclassical realism is not without its critics; the theory has come under sustained fire for being indeterminate. Stephen Walt, for example, contends that neoclassical realists incorporate domestic variables in an "ad hoc manner" without identifying "when these variables will exert greater or lesser effects".[20] There is some truth in this critique. Many neoclassical realists are in danger of identifying a laundry list of intervening variables without specifying how and when they matter.

**The argument**

Neoclassical realism must explain how systemic signals are digested by the state if it is to stand up to scrutiny. I apply my two-stage model of grand strategy to explain how variables such as biases and interest groups intervene with the process. This can be seen in figure 1.2:

[19] Brian Rathbun, 'A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism', *Security Studies* (17:2, 2008, pp. 294-321), p. 312.
[20] Stephen M. Walt, 'The Enduring Relevance of Realist Tradition' in *Political Science: State of the Discipline*, edited by Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), p. 211.

**Figure 1.2: A neoclassical realist model of grand strategy**




The perceptions of key decision-makers are not only affected by the system, but also by individual and collective biases. During the conceptualisation stage, the key decision-makers at the helm of the state each have their own dispositions towards certain issues and countries, based on their unique life experiences and values. They have also been conditioned by ingrained ideas in wider society about their state's role in the world and the use of power. Leaders may remain dogmatically wedded to judgements over commitments, even as evidence mounts against their efficacy.

Consider, for example, the case of Austria-Hungary in the run-up to the First World War. The Empire's relative strength was ebbing away long before 1914, but the Habsburgs continued to assert themselves on the European stage as one of the great powers, partly

because such thinking had become ingrained. This outdated mind-set ultimately had fatal consequences for the dynasty.

The second stage of grand strategy is concerned with the implementation of the decision-making group's deliberations. Policymaking elites may have conceptualised a reasonably proportionate grand strategy (or otherwise) but domestic veto players can still block its implementation. The state's grand strategy, whether it is diluted by these blocking agents or not, ultimately filters out into specific foreign and defence policies.

I argue that the relative importance of the intervening variables depends on the intensity and imminence of systemic stimuli. In short, the effect of unit-level factors on grand strategy depends on the severity of security threats. Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell make a useful distinction between restrictive and permissive security environments.[21] The security environment is restrictive if the state faces imminent and pressing threats. Conversely, the security environment is permissive if threats are more remote or less intense.

*Intervening variables under restrictive conditions*

When the state is at war or faces a security crisis, decisions are likely to be taken over short time horizons. Domestic veto players are likely to be excluded either forcefully or voluntarily from the process. In the first instance, the need for secrecy and quick decisions will separate the key decision-makers from the wider bureaucracy, opposition political

[21] Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 52.

parties, interest groups and the public.[22] The willingness of veto players to block grand strategies is also likely to dissipate during a crisis, as the public, as well as opposition political parties and interest groups "rally round the flag".[23] Douglas Gibler finds that "opposition forces are likely to be either supportive of administration policies or stymied by broad popular support for the state" when there is an existential threat.[24]

With regard to individual and collective biases, we can presume a degree of rationality in that leaders want what is best for their country. A challenge to the state's survival is likely to hone the minds of the decision-making group. We should therefore expect states to conceptualise and implement proportionate grand strategies when faced with an existential threat. That said, it is incredibly difficult for leaders to deliberate and not rely on heuristics when faced with short time horizons. It is important to recognise that procedural rationality – where leaders analyse information objectively – is rare.[25] Thus, states do tend to balance against perceived threats, although individual and collective biases will shape "the types and the intensity of balancing strategies pursued".[26] The extent to which states balance (i.e. the proportionality or quality of grand strategic thinking) will vary according to the skills of those at the helm of the state at a particular time. We must therefore be comfortable with the fact that strategic geniuses are the exception, rather than the rule.

[22] Ibid, p. 61.
[23] John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley, 1973), pp. 208-212.
[24] Douglas M. Gibler, 'Outside-In: The Effects of External Threat on State Centralization', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (54:4, 2010, pp. 519-542), p. 520.
[25] Brian Rathbun, 'The Rarity of Realpolitik: What Bismarck's Rationality Reveals about International Politics', *International Security* (43:1, 2018, pp. 7–55), p. 23.
[26] Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p. 13.

*Intervening variables under permissive conditions*

Neorealism holds that states are incentivised to prioritise survival and security under conditions of anarchy. It is often the case, however, that the system does not provide clear signals over threats. States may be presented with a more benign environment, which affords greater scope for action. Neoclassical realism stipulates that the foreign policy executive (i.e. presidents, prime ministers, as well as senior officials from the foreign, defence and finance ministries) has three sets of goals: (1) to preserve the state's physical survival and political autonomy; (2) to maintain its relative power position; and (3) to safeguard all other ideological, religious, political, social, and economic goals they may possess. The foreign policy executive will tend to prioritise the first objective, but they may have the luxury of focussing on the second and third sets under permissive conditions.[27]

A more benign security environment is, however, likely to result in implementation issues. The core decision-making group is no longer the decisive stakeholder, as latent veto players *should* have greater access to information, particularly in democratic states.[28] Without a unifying existential threat, these groups no longer feel obligated to rally round the flag. As such, they can afford to push their own parochial interests. In short, more actors are given opportunities under clearly permissive conditions to "shape, constrain, or defeat policies at odds with their preferences".[29] In conditions of relative peace, we should expect to see leaders spending more time bargaining with domestic veto players. Compromises may be necessary if they are to implement their grand strategic priorities.

[27] Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, 'Correspondence: Neoclassical Realism and Its Critics', *International Security* (43:2, 2018, pp. 197-199), p. 198.
[28] Access to information is likely to vary by regime type. This is an area marked for future research.
[29] Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, pp. 91-94.

In summary, individual and collective biases chiefly affect the conceptualisation stage, while domestic political factors primarily influence implementation. These factors increase the likelihood of a disproportionate grand strategy. The extent to which these variables matter depends on the intensity and imminence of systemic stimuli.

**Research design**

In this section, I explain my approach for measuring: (a) the quality of a grand strategy and (b) the relative importance of the intervening variables. I also outline my case selection criteria and discuss some of the potential drawbacks of my research design.

*Measuring proportionality*

A proportionate grand strategy involves the sustainable balancing of means and ends, based on a prudent calculation of the state's interests and the threats to those interests. Hans Morgenthau considers "prudence – the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions – to be the supreme virtue in politics".[30]

I focus on the first stage of grand strategy: the threat assessment and discussion over objectives and resource allocation. Nina Silove suggests looking for "evidence of the key ideas held by the relevant individuals about the state's highest priorities and the means that should be mobilised in pursuit of those ends over the long term".[31] Thus, I examine whether

[30] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), p. 10.
[31] Nina Silove, 'Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of "Grand Strategy"', *Security Studies* (27:1, 2017, pp. 27-57), p. 50.

officials tried to achieve a sustainable balance between aspirations and finite means based on an assessment of systemic conditions.

This requires a value judgement, the subjectivity of which can be assuaged by developing a deep understanding of the context in which decisions were taken. This is common practice for historians.[32] Consider, for example, A.J.P. Taylor's work on the causes of the Second World War. He challenged the post-1945 view that Hitler was solely to blame for the Second World War and highlighted the mistakes made by other European statesmen in failing to balance efficiently against a resurgent Germany.[33]

When evaluating the judgements made by officials over threats, interests and resource allocation, it is important to try and place oneself in the shoes of the decision-makers and assess them only on what they knew at the time. It would be unfair to use the benefit of hindsight to evaluate the quality of decision-making based on what we know now about whether the grand strategy in question was successful. Doing so would also raise the issue of equifinality as this would wrongly suggest that proportionality equates to success when there could in fact be other explanations for the final outcome.[34]

Eliot Cohen writes that one must evaluate with a "historical mind". He defines this as "way of thinking shaped by one's reading of history and by using history as a mode of inquiry

[32] Randall L. Schweller makes a similar argument in *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006), pp. 17-18.
[33] A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York, Atheneum, 1962).
[34] Equifinality is the principle that there are multiple paths which can lead to the same outcome. See Goertz, S*ocial Science Concepts*, p. 63.

and a framework for thinking about problems".[35] Frank Gavin has written eloquently on the need to evaluate evidence with "historical sensibility". It is important, Gavin writes, to show "a toleration and even appreciation of uncertainty, surprise, and unintended consequences in human affairs, and a comfort with indeterminacy and multi-causal explanations".[36] Thus, when it comes to evaluating the quality of a particular grand strategy, a historically sensitive approach will prevent retrospective bias.

*Measuring intervening variables*

After having assessed the degree of proportionality in each case, I move to examine the variables that improved or hindered the grand strategy. Process tracing will be employed to examine the importance of causal variables that contribute towards more proportionate grand strategic thinking.[37] This method is more than simply describing events as they unfolded. It provides a "common middle ground for historians interested in historical explanation and political scientists…who are sensitive to the complexities of historical events but are more interested in theorising about categories of cases as well as explaining individual cases".[38] It provides a means of highlighting when and how domestic and individual-level (relating to biases) factors may have influenced the process of grand strategic thinking. Furthermore, this method encourages researchers to be sensitive to the

[35] Eliot Cohen, 'The Historical Mind and Military Strategy', *Orbis* (2005, pp. 575-588), p. 575.
[36] Francis J. Gavin, 'Thinking Historically: A Guide for Strategy and Statecraft', *War on the Rocks*, 17 November 2016.
[37] James Mahoney, 'The Logic of Process Tracing Tests in the Social Sciences', *Sociological Methods & Research* (41:4, 2012, pp. 570-597).
[38] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), p. 223.

possibility of equifinality.[39] Indeed, Balzacq, Dombrowski & Reich believe that grand strategy research is "tailor made for…process tracing".[40]

In summary, I employ two tests to observe my claims. In the first instance – measuring proportionality – I examine whether officials prudently assessed threats, before striking a sustainable balance between resources (means) and commitments (ends). In the second – explaining proportionality – I employ a process tracing method to ascertain the relative importance of the intervening variables identified in the neoclassical realist framework.

*Case selection*

I test my arguments on the United Kingdom, using a case-within-case approach. The logic for concentrating on past cases of British grand strategy from the last one hundred years is threefold. First, it ensures there is sufficient variation on the independent variable: systemic constraints, as measured by the distribution of relative power and the salience of external threats. The UK's security environment has changed dramatically since the early 1900s, largely due to its relative economic weakness and geographic exposure. The UK is an island but its close proximity to Europe means that it has never had the luxury of ignoring dramatic shifts in the continental balance of power. Over the past century, it has been forced to confront three aspiring continental hegemons. By way of contrast, the Americans are blessed by geography and an abundance of natural resources. Intervening abroad for security interests has generally been a choice for Washington, as opposed to a necessity.

[39] Ibid, p. 215.
[40] Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich, 'Is Grand Strategy a Research Program? A Review Essay', *Security Studies* (October 2018, pp. 1-29), p. 20.

The second reason relates to this study's contribution to the field. Much of the contemporary literature on grand strategy is overwhelmingly concerned with the pre-eminence of the United States and whether it should try to reduce, maintain, or expand its global footprint. There is great value in this research programme, but it has led to a "conflation of grand strategy as American grand strategy", which "leaves it open to criticism as arrogant, parochial…and (ironically) irrelevant beyond the Washington beltway".[41] The grand strategy literature would therefore be improved by expanding the diversity of cases.

The third reason relates to the state of the grand strategy debate in the UK. While there may be issues with the prescriptive approach taken by many scholars of American grand strategy, at least there is a lively discussion in the United States. The same cannot be said for the UK. The concept rarely appears in the country's foreign and security lexicon – either in academic or policymaking circles – which makes it particularly interesting for study.[42] The reluctance to engage with the terminology partly stems from a misunderstanding. In 2010, MPs on the Public Administration Select Committee opted to use 'national strategy' instead of grand strategy on the grounds that the latter "is seen as hubristic".[43] This was unfortunate, as the "grand" element of the term refers to the level of government at which it is conducted, as well as the fact that it includes non-military means, such as diplomacy.

[41] Ibid, p. 23.
[42] The relatively new Centre for Grand Strategy at King's College London is a welcome exception.
[43] House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 'Who Does UK National Strategy?' (London: HM Stationery Office, 2010), p. 9.

Almost a decade ago, a trio of senior military officers observed that Britain had "let slip both the mechanisms and more importantly the grammar with which to conduct the relevant strategic discourse".[44] Academic scholarship has an important role to play in reminding senior policymakers of the need to engage in big picture thinking. Given that two pillars of British grand strategy – the partnerships with Europe and the United States – have been undermined in recent years, now would be a good time for British politicians and civil servants to engage with this terminology.[45]

The relationship with Washington has come under strain as a result of the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, as well the election of President Trump, who believes that international politics is a zero-sum game and that alliances are transactional.[46] Over the next decade, the United States is likely to increase the relative importance it places on Asia, as opposed to other parts of the world. This is somewhat inevitable, as "the lion's share of the history of the twenty-first century is going to be written in the Asian-Pacific region".[47] There is, consequently, a danger for policymakers in London that their limited influence in Washington will decline as American officials adjust to these new geopolitical realities and their priorities inexorably change. Should the UK now take steps to remain relevant to decision-makers in Washington or should it accept a diminution in its ties with the United States? How should Britain engage with the Indo-Pacific region and, more specifically, with

[44] Paul Newton, Paul Colley, and Andrew Sharpe, 'Reclaiming the Art of British Strategic Thinking', *RUSI Journal* (155:1, 2010, pp. 44-50), p. 45.
[45] Winston Churchill identified Britain's grand strategic interests on the basis of three interlocking circles of influence: The Empire and Commonwealth, "the English-speaking world" (predominantly the US), and Europe. See Winston Churchill, 'Speech at a Conservative Mass Meeting, Llandudno, 9 October 1948', in Randolph S. Churchill, *Europe Unite – Speeches: 1947 and 1948 by Winston S. Churchill* (London: Cassell, 1950), pp. 417–18.
[46] Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), p. 182.
[47] Kurt Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016), p. 1.

countries like China and India? The fallout arising from the Cameron government's decision to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in March 2015 demonstrates the delicacy of these decisions.[48]

Closer to home, the British public's decision in June 2016 to withdraw from the European Union is likely to have profound repercussions for the country's relationships on the continent and how it interacts with the wider world. This thesis does not intend to engage in futurology, but it is clear that Britain faces some tough decisions ahead over how it will deploy its finite diplomatic resources to secure trade with Europe and open new links with other parts of the world. Compromises will inevitably have to be made, which will require proportionate grand strategic thinking.

Implicit in the critique made above – that Britain no longer thinks well at the grand strategic level – is the assumption that it once did. This begs the question: when was this golden era of British grand strategy? When has the UK conceptualised proportionate grand strategies in the past? Were they successfully implemented? Were there reasons why proportionate grand strategies were implemented on some occasions and not others?

I adopt a case-within-case approach to answer these questions. Cases were selected on the independent variable: systemic constraints, as measured by the distribution of relative power and the salience of external threats.

[48] Geoff Dyer and George Parker, 'US attacks UK's "constant accommodation" with China', *Financial Times*, 12 March 2015, https://www.ft.com/content/31c4880a-c8d2-11e4-bc64-00144feab7de.

- British grand strategy during the Second World War, specifically the decisions to: fight on in May 1940; prioritise Egypt over Singapore in 1940/41; and delay the opening of the "Second Front" until 1944
- The decision(s) to withdraw from "East of Suez" during the Cold War
- The decision(s) to partake in America's war in Iraq

The three cases provide sufficient variation on the independent variable. The three episodes from the Second World War are similar in that the UK faced a clear and existential threat. Thus, we should expect to see a limited role for domestic veto players. We should expect decisions to be taken by the foreign policy executive with few obstacles to implementation. While decision-makers are likely to follow systemic incentives under conditions of total war, it is important to remember that biases are still likely to creep into the discussions.

Moreover, all three episodes from the Second World War follow "strategic shocks". The decisions to fight on in May 1940 and to prioritise limited resources in the Middle East, as opposed to Asia in 1941/42, were taken in the wake of the French Army's collapse. The debate with the Americans over when to launch "the Second Front" took place after the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941.

The withdrawal from East of Suez was taken amidst the pressures of the Cold War. There was more room for manoeuvre than during the Second World War as the potential threat from the Soviet Union waxed and waned. British officials had more time to consider the pace of withdrawal, and weigh their own relative decline against the drawbacks of pulling out too quickly. There was, for example, concern of a power vacuum emerging in the

Middle East. In conditions of relative peace, we should expect to see more domestic veto players pulling the foreign policy executive in different directions. Furthermore, there is greater scope for the core group of decision-makers to concentrate on other interests not related to the state's security and survival.

With regard to the final case, the security environment was objectively permissive in the early 2000s. Terrorism was a significant concern to public safety but such attacks do not constitute an existential threat. The intelligence was clear that Saddam Hussein was not linked to the 9/11 hijackers, nor was he likely to provide terrorist groups such as Al Qaida with weapons of mass destruction. Yet, permissive conditions allow greater scope for biases as decision-makers can concentrate on second and third order objectives. Theoretically, they should also increase the number of veto players, but this depends on the level of clarity over the nature of the threat. 9/11 created an atmosphere of uncertainty, which dissuaded potential veto players from blocking or diluting the government's grand strategy.

There are further advantages to looking at these particular cases. Starting the investigation at the beginning of the Second World War is logical as this marked the most acute phase of Britain's relative decline in the hierarchy of nation states (as it was not on an equal footing with the two superpowers). It also marked the beginning of the US-led "international order", however that is defined. There is therefore rough equivalence to today, which would not be the case if the starting point was 1776, or 1815, for example. Examining post-9/11 grand strategy is important as it brings the story up to the present day.

*Data collection*

The UK National Archives are a fruitful source of primary evidence for examining how officials made grand strategic assessments for the first two cases in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Given that the conceptualisation of grand strategy takes places at the highest level of government, I am interested in documents from the Prime Minister's Office, the Cabinet Office (including the relevant sub-committees such as the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee), the Foreign Office, the Treasury, as well as the three armed services (amalgamated under the Ministry of Defence after its creation in 1964). The third case study does not align with the UK National Archive's timeframe but the recently-published, twelve-volume Chilcot Inquiry into Iraq War contains a treasure trove of primary data.

Memoirs will also be useful but they are to be treated with a healthy dose of scepticism; these recollections are often released years after the event and can be subject to revisionism as individuals seek to justify their positions in the deliberations that took place. Public documents such as Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) strategies, defence white papers, National Security Strategies and Strategic Defence and Security Reviews, as well as ministerial speeches, may also be useful in demonstrating how governments have presented their grand strategies publicly. Yet, it is vitally important when using such sources to be aware of the intended audience. Speeches, as well as documents that are made available to the public soon after publication, are unlikely to shed much light on difficult trade-offs over a state's competing interests. Grand strategy is a process that does not have to be explicitly set out publicly, which further underscores the importance of archival records.

*Opportunity costs*

There are limitations to the generalisability of my findings, given that the research is centred on the UK. The logic of relying so heavily on a small number of cases may therefore come under scrutiny. Important causal variables can be overlooked in case study research.[49] That said, the inductive nature of process tracing may identify potential omitted variables.[50] Moreover, a quantitative approach would be inappropriate for this type of study. Measuring the quality of a grand strategy requires one to be mindful of the context in which decisions were taken. It would be difficult to remain historically sensitive with a large-N study. Case studies are widely regarded as the best method for capturing complex processes like grand strategy.[51]

One might wonder why this is not a comparative study. An interesting comparison could be made with France, which shares a similar security environment. Both countries ruled over vast empires, although their experiences of decolonisation were strikingly different. Moreover, their approaches to transatlantic relations and European integration are often at odds. With such contrasting systems of government, we should expect variation in the conceptualisation and implementation processes. These differences would make for an interesting comparative study and should be considered for further research.

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[49] Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 208-211.
[50] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, p. 221.
[51] Balzacq, Dombrowski & Reich, 'Is Grand Strategy a Research Program?', p. 20. For a defence of the case study approach, see John Gerring, 'What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?', *American Political Science Review* (98:2, 2004, pp. 341-354); and John Gerring, 'Case Selection for Case Study Analysis: Qualitative and Quantitative Techniques' in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology* edited by Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady, and David Collier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Finally, one could also critique the study's timeframe. The decision to start in May 1940 excludes analysis on the work of the Committee for Imperial Defence, for example. There are several other episodes between 1940 and the present day that would have made for excellent cases. Ultimately, trade-offs are somewhat inevitable due to time and space constraints. The aim is not to assess whether Britain has conceptualised proportionate grand strategies at every historical juncture.

**The contribution**

Lukas Milevski laments that grand strategy has become a "standardless, incoherent concept", owing to the lack of rigour with which it is so often employed by scholars between and within the fields of international relations, strategic studies, and history.[52] Does it matter that grand strategy is falling into a state of conceptual malaise? I argue that the concept is worth saving as it is clearly not solely the preserve of those in a proverbial ivory tower. Practitioners are ultimately the ones who make calls over their state's competing interests and priorities. Scholars have an important role to play in reminding policymakers of the need to think about the big picture. Moreover, they can constructively challenge assumptions over interests, objectives and priorities. This first requires the salvaging of grand strategy to ensure that both communities do not continue to talk past each other.

The contribution of this thesis is threefold. First, the proportionate/disproportionate framework charts a route away from the overly ambitious and prescriptive literature on

[52] Lukas Milevski, *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 141.

grand strategy, which could serve as the basis for future scholarly and policy analyses. By placing grand strategy on more conceptually stable ground, there is hope that policymakers will re-engage with the terminology. The second contribution relates to the theoretical framework. The research explains how states can end up in a position of overstretch or underreach. It therefore augments the literature on the domestic sources of grand strategy. Moreover, by determining the relative importance of unit-level intervening variables, this thesis adds ballast to neoclassical realism.

Finally, the research makes an empirical contribution as it offers a new way of thinking about these important chapters in British history. The conclusion will draw out tentative policy recommendations for practitioners over how to mitigate the effects of harmful biases and ideas. The empirical contribution serves as the basis for greater engagement with grand strategic studies in the United Kingdom at this crucial juncture in the country's history.

**Plan**

The next chapter explains how my definition of grand strategy relates to the existing literature, as well as related concepts such as strategy, statecraft, and foreign policy. In chapter three, I lay out my neoclassical realist framework and theoretical argument. The case studies proceed in chronological order through chapters four to six. The conclusion brings together the salient points from these chapters and suggests avenues for future research, as well as a set of policy recommendations for practitioners.

## CHAPTER II

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Grand strategy, as set out above, should be seen as an *ongoing process* of prioritisation and resource allocation. This chapter will link my definition of grand strategy to some of the classic Anglo-American texts on the subject. The conceptual pillars are as follows:

**A concept for times of war and peace, employing both military and non-military assets**

It is often held that Basil Liddell Hart and Edward Mead Earle are the intellectual architects of grand strategy – with preference given to one or the other generally dependent on which side of the Atlantic one was schooled. The maritime theorist, Julian Stafford Corbett, should instead be seen as the first scholar to explicitly demarcate 'grand strategy' from 'strategy' and give the former a distinct meaning. In a lecture in 1904, he said that "grand strategy [involves] dealing with the whole theatre of war, with planning the war. It looks on war as a continuation of foreign policy. It regards the object of war and the means of attaining it. It handles all the national resources together, navy, army, diplomacy & finance".[53]

Corbett thereby opened the possibility of including non-military means for resource allocation, but Liddell Hart must be credited for moving the concept away from being an exclusively wartime phenomenon. "Grand strategy", he judged, "looks beyond the war to

[53] Julian Stafford Corbett, 'Lectures on Naval Strategy – Lecture One', Julian Stafford Corbett Papers, National Maritime Museum, CBT/31, p. 117.

the subsequent peace".[54] Across the Atlantic, Edward Mead Earle agreed that it is "not merely a concept of wartime, but it is an inherent element of statecraft".[55]

Moreover, Liddell Hart did not believe that grand strategy employed solely military means to achieve desired objectives. "Fighting power", he concluded, "is but one of the instruments of grand strategy – which should take account of and apply the power of financial pressure, of diplomatic pressure, and, not least of ethical pressure, to weaken the opponent's will".[56]

Decades later, Paul Kennedy reinforced both of these arguments. "It was not enough", he wrote, "for statesmen to consider how to win a war, but what the costs (in the largest sense of the word) would be; not enough to order the dispatch of fleets and armies in this or that direction, but to ensure that they were adequately provided for, and sustained by a flourishing economic base; and not enough, in peacetime, to order a range of weapons systems without careful examination of the impacts of defence spending".[57]

It follows that, as the treatment of grand strategy proliferated beyond war, so have the means it employs. It is no longer considered the exclusive realm of the military. Grand strategy employs non-military resources, as well as military assets, but these are all *externally* focussed and geared toward security. Barry Posen defines grand strategy as the "collection of military, economic and political means and ends with which a state attempts

[54] Basil Liddell Hart, *The Decisive Wars of History: A Study in Strategy* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1929), p. 151.
[55] Edward Mead Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), p. viii.
[56] Liddell Hart, *The Decisive Wars of History*, p. 151.
[57] Paul M. Kennedy, *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (London: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 4.

to achieve security".[58] We should therefore expect to see grand strategy conducted by political leaders and policymakers from a state's defence, foreign and financial ministries.

**A process of prioritisation and resource allocation**

There are three ways that scholars typically evaluate grand strategies.[59] The first centres on the plans, national security strategies and strategic defence and security reviews that many governments publish. The problem with focussing on these documents is that they contain few hard strategic trade-offs over competing interests. Indeed, they are primarily used by governments as a "vessel for communicating with audiences at home and abroad".[60] Threats and interests are often not prioritised. Take, for example, Britain's National Security Strategy of 2008 and 2009, which Patrick Porter argues was:

> "Thick with description and thin on the main question: the dialectic between a country's aims and its ability to meet them. It does little ranking or prioritising and it hardly acknowledges trade-offs and compromises. It offers a free lunch where the UK can simultaneously be pro-Europeanist and Atlanticist, pro-sovereignty and pro-human rights, an upholder of 'rules' and yet a spreader of values. It assigns Britain the daunting task of managing globalisation and influencing events all over the planet, but without seriously questioning whether the country still possesses the resources or the popular will for globe-girdling commitments".[61]

The same could be said of the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review.[62] There was almost no attempt to prioritise interests and match means to ends accordingly. In trying to

[58] Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 7.
[59] See Silove, 'Beyond the Buzzword'.
[60] Rebecca Friedman Lissner, 'What Is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield', *Texas National Security Review* (2:1, 2018).
[61] Patrick Porter, 'Why Britain Doesn't Do Grand Strategy', *RUSI Journal* (155:4, 2010, pp. 6-11), p. 6.
[62] HM Government, Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review (London: The Stationery Office, 2010).

include every foreseeable threat – from human security issues such as flooding and pandemics to conventional challenges such as interstate war – these documents actually accomplished very little.

Governments should not be overly criticised for this. Practitioners would be most unwise to publicly declare the totality of their objectives, interests, resources and capabilities. Scholars, however, should not concentrate on these documents as the primary means of analysing a state's grand strategy. Planning certainly forms part of the process of grand strategy but that does not mean states must stay true to a fixed plan. As President Eisenhower once remarked, "plans are worthless, but planning is everything".[63]

The second and most common approach to grand strategy today takes a prescriptive approach. Most scholars focus on the United States, with some advocating a more restrained US grand strategy, while others call for continued, deep American engagement around the globe.[64] A common criticism of this field is that grand strategic options, such as "offshore balancing" are unachievable, given how government practically functions. With so many competing interests and stakeholders, it would be impossible to deliver an unalloyed version of any of these grand strategies.[65] Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich agree that "scholars and analysts who expect, and advocate, the adoption of any single grand strategy to address contemporary US security needs are certain to be

[63] Dwight Eisenhower's speech to the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference, Washington, 14 November 1957.
[64] Examples include John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy', *Foreign Affairs* (95:4, 2016, pp. 70-83); and Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, 'Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement', *Foreign Affairs* (92:1, 2013, pp. 130-142).
[65] Michael Mazaar, 'The world has passed the old grand strategies by', *War on the Rocks*, 5 October 2016.

disappointed".[66] They are undoubtedly correct but this critique slightly mischaracterises the views of many grand strategy scholars, who are well aware of the barriers to implementation. Advocates of "offshore balancing", for example, do not expect Washington to fully embrace their proposal. Rather, their goal is to encourage others to step out of the weeds of policy debates and think about the big picture.

The real issue with this literature is that the debates have become quite cyclical, being generally timed with the advent of a new administration. Bridging the gap between these camps is an insurmountable challenge because the divisions over America's role in the world are so ideological. In the media and commentariat, grand strategy is all too often conflated with doctrine, which merely describes trends in a government's foreign policy and says nothing of the crucial means-ends relationship. Without a course correction, grand strategy is in danger of becoming a political football.

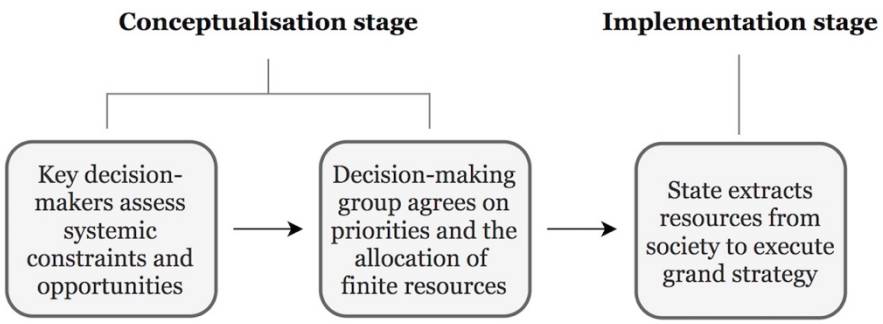
The third way of analysing grand strategy is by treating it as a process. This is seen by Milevski as a relatively new way of approaching the concept but it can, in fact, be traced back to Paul Kennedy, who wrote that a grand strategy's success is dependent on "the constant and intelligent reassessment of the polity's ends and means".[67] More recently, William Martel judged that the process of grand strategy can be split into two stages: "articulation" and "implementation".[68] This is a useful guide, but I argue it is better to think of the first stage as one of "conceptualisation" because "articulation" implies that grand

[66] Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich, 'Does Donald Trump have a grand strategy?', *International Affairs* (93:5, 2017, pp. 1013–1037), p. 1036.
[67] Kennedy, *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, p. 6.
[68] William Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 37-56.

strategy has to be made explicit. In his seminal work, *On Grand Strategy*, John Lewis Gaddis defines the concept as "the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities". This alignment is not fixed, but something that is done over time. "If you see ends beyond your means", he advises, "then sooner or later you'll have to scale back your ends to fit your means".[69]

Bridging the work of Posen and Gaddis, I define grand strategy as the *process* by which states prioritise their interests and direct finite resources in such a manner that brings about long-term external security. This involves officials at the highest level of government ranking their country's vital, major and peripheral goals and interests, as well as continuously evaluating how best they should interact with other states and deploy their assets to protect or further these goals and interests. Accordingly, grand strategy should be seen as synonymous with *grand strategic thinking*. Figure 2.1 portrays this process:

**Figure 2.1: The conceptualisation and implementation of grand strategy**




**Proportionate and disproportionate grand strategies**

Implicit in this understanding of grand strategy is the idea that it can be done well or badly. The former involves striking a sustainable balance between objectives and available

[69] John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin, 2018), p. 21.

resources. Writing after the First World War, Major General John Charles Fuller argued that the job of grand strategy was to keep conflict limited enough to allow it to remain a policy option for the future. An astute grand strategist would therefore shun the notion of a pyrrhic victory still being a victory. Resources should instead be husbanded for the subsequent peace. Thus, Fuller regarded the First World War as a grand strategic disaster for the UK because the carnage resulted in fewer British and German men of working age. The loss of nearly one million British and over two million German men (not to mention the millions of wounded on either side) reduced not only Britain's output but its trade with Europe as well. As he put it, "every man killed means a loss of capital".[70]

Basil Liddell Hart agreed that, "if you concentrate exclusively on victory, with no thought for the after-effect, you may be too exhausted to profit by the peace, while it is almost certain that the peace will be a bad one, containing the germs of another war".[71] He was of the opinion that limited war was the most strategic form of conflict as it would ensure that a state still had sufficient resources to achieve its ends in the post-war environment.

These intellectual architects of grand strategic thought were warning about what we consider today as overstretch. This term was first coined by Paul Kennedy in his seminal work, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. He observed that "imperial overstretch" brought about the decline of the Ottoman, Dutch, Habsburg, Spanish, French, and British empires.[72]

[70] J.F.C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1926), p. 76.
[71] Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 353.
[72] Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 515.

The core of his argument ran that each empire fell because it took on security commitments that the state's economic means could not sustain.

More recently, scholars have identified new terms for "good" and "bad" grand strategies. Lawrence Freedman reasons that Hitler embarked on a "flawed" grand strategy during the Second World War because he fought a war on two fronts without having the capabilities to match.[73] Hal Brands writes of "coherent" and "flawed" grand strategies. He does not offer an explicit definition of coherence but argues that the George W. Bush administration pursued a "flawed" grand strategy because it was "too optimistic in its goals, too demanding in its requirements of American power, and too insensitive to essential issues like risk and cost".[74]

Brands's distinction between coherent and flawed grand strategies is useful but problematic. First, the words are not antonymic of each other; the logical inverse of a coherent grand strategy is an incoherent grand strategy. More concerning still is that other scholars of grand strategy employ coherence to mean something else entirely. Martel, for example, defines grand strategy as "a coherent statement of the state's highest political ends to be pursued globally over the long term".[75] This suggests that he regards coherence as the clear enunciation of a state's interests. Similarly, Daniel Drezner writes of "clear, coherent, and well-defined" grand strategies.[76]

[73] Freedman, *Strategy*, pp. 142-143.
[74] Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?*, p. 189.
[75] Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice*, p. 32.
[76] Daniel Drezner, 'Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy? Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times', *Foreign Affairs* (90:4, 2011, pp. 57-68), p. 58.

Grand strategy does not have to be explicitly articulated or set down on paper for it to exist. All states engage in grand strategic thinking, even if it goes by another name. It is therefore better to avoid this coherent/flawed distinction in order to prevent further confusion. Another option is that of sound and unsound grand strategies. Walter McDougall defines a "sound" grand strategy as one where "the equation of ends and means [is] so sturdy that it triumphs despite the setbacks at the level of strategy, operations, and campaigns".[77] This definition also echoes the notion of balance, but the idea of "soundness" is rather vague. It is not clear how one can measure conceptual "soundness".

The notion of solvency offers another route to identifying the positive and negative poles of grand strategy. In 1943, Walter Lippman wrote that "a foreign policy consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and the nation's power. The constant preoccupation of the true statesman is to achieve and maintain this balance". Those that fail to do, he warned, invite disaster. Lippman's understanding of foreign policy would today be considered grand strategy. When a statesman got the balance right, they were pursuing solvent foreign policies. When a state's commitments exceeded its resource base, its foreign policy was insolvent.[78]

Solvency is preferable to coherence as a way of thinking about this notion of balance because it comes without the baggage of articulation that is associated with the latter. The problem, however, is that it only deals with overstretch and not underreach. States can fail

[77] Walter A. McDougall, 'Can the United States do Grand Strategy', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 13 April 2010.
[78] Walter Lippman, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), pp. 9-10, 83-84.

to protect their vital or major interests even when it is in their power to do something. A country could pursue a solvent grand strategy but have overly conservative goals, which may cause damage to its long-term interests.

These typologies make it possible to evaluate whether the state achieved a sustainable balance between means and ends, but there is no attempt to evaluate whether the ends chosen were actually worthwhile. Moreover, we are no closer to understanding whether a government struck the right balance between spending on social services as opposed to external security. A critic might dismiss this discussion of semantics as unimportant, but that would be misguided. The eminent military historian, Hew Strachan, wisely observes that "words convey concepts: if they are not clearly defined, the thinking about them cannot be clear".[79]

The most appropriate way of identifying the positive and negative poles of grand strategy is through proportionality. In an *ideal*, positive case, a state's ends are proportionate to its means and vice versa. This involves identifying interests and commitments that are commensurate with the state's aggregate power (economic strength, population, and capabilities) and geographic location, as well as the nature of the threats it faces.[80] Thus, a proportionate grand strategy involves the sustainable balancing of means and ends, based on a prudent calculation of the state's interests and the threats to those interests. These

[79] Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy In Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 151.
[80] Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, pp. 22-26.

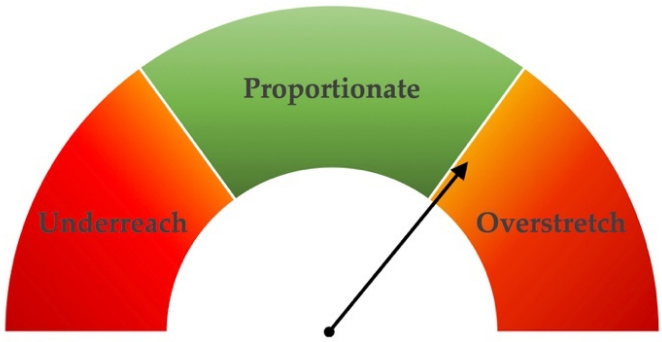
assessments require calibration on a semi-regular basis to ensure that judgements are still supported by the latest information.

In contrast, a disproportionate grand strategy involves the unsustainable balancing of means and ends, based on an imprudent calculation of the state's interests and the threats to those interests. This is likely to result in:

- Overstretch: Pursuing overly ambitious goals given available means. Example: The Austro-Hungarian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century.
- Underreach: Identifying overly conservative goals that are not commensurate with the state's interests. Example: The US during the interwar period.

Figure 2.2 illustrates the proportionate/disproportionate distinction in the form of a gauge or dial. The state should strive for the arrow to be as close to the centre as possible. In this particular case, the state has veered into overstretch because its objectives exceed its resource base. Depending on the threat environment, policymakers can either reduce commitments or increase the amount of funding allocated to defence and foreign affairs.

**Figure 2.2: The dial of proportionality**

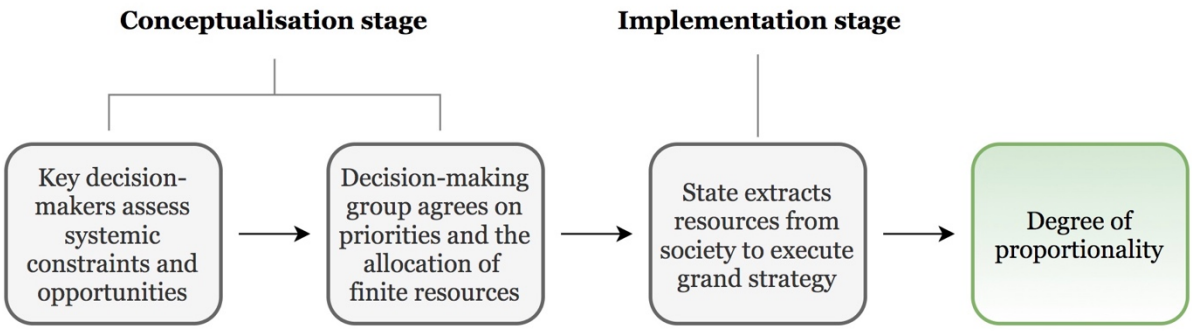


A disproportionate grand strategy may be the result of:

- Overbalancing: Inflating the threats to the state's interests. Example: The "War on Terror" and more specifically the invasion of Iraq in 2003.
- Underbalancing: Underestimating or downplaying the threats to the state's interests. Example: The UK during the mid-1930s.

This proportionate/disproportionate distinction resolves several issues with the aforementioned ways of thinking about grand strategy. First, the 'guns versus butter' problem with the other typologies is negated by the inclusion of a threat assessment. A state facing an existential challenge would be pursuing a disproportionate grand strategy if it allocated too few resources to defence and foreign affairs. Similarly, a state would pursue a disproportionate grand strategy if it spent 6% of its GDP on defence in relative peacetime with scarce threats to its vital or major interests. Figure 2.3 builds on figure 2.1 by including the principle of proportionality in the process:

**Figure 2.3: The conceptualisation and implementation of grand strategy**




John Lewis Gaddis would presumably be in favour of this distinction. He counsels statesmen to "proportion aspirations to capabilities".[81] Objectives can be endless, whereas

[81] Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, p. 175.

resources are finite, which means they must connect. This balance or the line between proportionate and disproportionate grand strategies is not exact. Even the most rational of decision-makers cannot perfectly judge subtle changes in the distribution of power. Furthermore, it is difficult to overhaul grand strategic priorities over short time horizons. Decisions over commitments, as well as military capabilities and force posture are rarely taken at rapid speed. Moreover, it takes time to cement alliances, as well as amass, reduce or reallocate resources. Accordingly, this framework allows margins for error. Striking the right balance between means and ends is phenomenally difficult and the perfect grand strategy is unattainable. A proportionate grand strategy is therefore the *ideal* that practitioners should strive for and which analysts can subsequently contrast a government's record with, whilst being sensitive to the context in which decisions were taken.

The proportionate/disproportionate distinction also helps to explain why some states are prepared to countenance higher costs than others. Weak states with finite means need to be particularly careful not to become overstretched. In contrast, powerful countries with abundant resources have a greater buffer zone to absorb higher costs. Superpowers regularly verge on or enter into the realm of overstretch without punishment. Consider the failed military interventions that Washington has staged since the mid-1990s. Stephen Walt rightly notes that because the United States was so rich, powerful and geographically secure after the Cold War, "it could afford to follow a misguided grand strategy for a long time without bankrupting itself completely or leaving itself vulnerable to foreign

invasion".[82] In short, those with greater power (or potential power) can afford to make errors more often than those with limited or diminishing means.

**Relation to other concepts**

Where can we place grand strategy in the matrix of inter-related concepts such as strategy, statecraft, and foreign policy?

*Strategy* is grand strategy's junior, despite entering the lexicon centuries beforehand. It derives from the Greek word *strategos*, meaning general, but it was used to convey what we think of today as tactics. Hew Strachan contends that the European idea of strategy – the general's plans and his executions of manoeuvres in the lead-up to a battle – only became common parlance in the eighteenth century when standing, professional armies became the norm.[83] By the end of the Napoleonic Wars, it was clear that there should be a distinction between this and the tactics that were subsequently employed on the battlefield; this void was filled by the writings of veterans Carl von Clausewitz and Baron Antoine-Henri Jomini. Thus, strategy emerged to distinguish "the higher military art from the more mechanical requirements of tactics".[84]

Strategy is no longer solely the domain of generals. It would now be considered negligent for any serious organisation, whether it is a government department, the military, or a multinational corporation, to take on a major problem without first outlining a strategy for

[82] Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), p. 89.
[83] Strachan, *The Direction of War,* p. 28.
[84] Lawrence Freedman, 'The Meaning of Strategy, Part II: The Objectives', *Texas National Security Review* (1:2, January 2018).

doing so.[85] Businesses now have strategies for their marketing and HR departments, while individuals can find online strategies on anything from getting a job to gambling on sports competitions. Lawrence Freedman traces the proliferation from military to commercial worlds to the 1950s.[86]

For purists such as Strachan, one cannot distinguish between business strategy and military strategy as it should solely be the preserve of the latter. He laments that strategy has now "acquired a universality which has robbed it of meaning and left it only with banalities".[87] Colin Gray and Lawrence Freedman are more relaxed about its proliferation.[88] The former succinctly defines it as the "direction and use made of means by chosen ways in order to achieve desired ends".[89] Thus, strategy can be taken as the application of means (resources) to attain desired ends (objectives) via ways (tactics).

*Statecraft* should be considered as the overall management of a state's affairs – both domestic and foreign. Grand strategy is just one aspect of that, and it only relates to external security.

*Foreign policy*, like defence policy, is something that is factored in by the officials conceptualising grand strategy. Foreign policy describes a state's relations with the wider

[85] Freedman, *Strategy*, p. x.
[86] Ibid, pp. 495-496.
[87] Strachan, *The Direction of War,* p. 27.
[88] Freedman, 'The Meaning of Strategy, Part II'.
[89] Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 18.

world. As Brands explains, grand strategy provides an overarching framework for a state without which its foreign policies would seem ad hoc and reactionary.[90]

Grand strategy provides the explanation for a state's foreign policy. Take, for example, British and American attempts to bring eastern European under their collective security and economic umbrella. John Lewis Gaddis cites this as an example of what General George Marshall once called "theatreitis" – "the tendency of military commanders to look only at the needs of their own theatre of operation, and not at the requirements of fighting the war as a whole".[91] NATO's eastern expansion in the 1990s, which was encouraged by policymakers in the United States, was done with very little thought for how the Russians might react. Western allies pursued amenable foreign policies towards the Baltic states and Ukraine, but there was little thought as to whether any of this was sensible in strategic terms. Unlike London or Washington, Moscow regards Kiev as a vital interest – something which was not factored into western calculations. This underscores the point that grand strategy explains rather than describes a state's behaviour with the outside world.

**Caveats**

My definition of grand strategy places parsimony over the pursuit of maximum explanatory leverage. Grand strategy is not about dealing with a state's schooling or healthcare challenges. Moreover, it does not concern itself with every foreseeable threat. For example, I do not include potential financial crises under the purview of grand strategy.

[90] Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?*, pp. 1, 4-5.
[91] John Lewis Gaddis, 'What is Grand Strategy?' keynote address at the 'International Security in a New Era of Crisis' symposium, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, 30 April 2009.

Such hazards are obviously important but they must be addressed with other tools, like education, tax or health policy. The concept should be reserved for national security threats, as opposed to human security threats like climate change. Grand strategy primarily deals with individual countries and how they prioritise interests and allocate resources to achieve security in an anarchic world populated by other states. Policymakers debate over a country's alliances, force posture and commitments. Grand strategy therefore only tackles a certain set of threats. Limiting the concept's scope is necessary if it is to be salvaged from its current state of definitional malaise.

## CHAPTER III

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Why have some states failed to adjust efficiently to changes in their security environment? I first discuss structural realism, or neorealism, which holds that states are incentivised to develop grand strategies that correspond to changes in the international system. I review the theory's well-known deficiencies not to flog a dead horse, but to situate neoclassical realism. The latter is a logical extension of structural realism and the work of scholars like Kenneth Waltz. I propose a nuanced version of neoclassical realism, building off the conceptual framework for grand strategy outlined in the previous chapter.

### The structural expectation

Neorealist scholars start from the premise that the international system is anarchic. With no higher authority, or "night watchman" as John Mearsheimer puts it, to govern international affairs, countries must fend for themselves.[92] They must accumulate power to ensure their survival. The theory's intellectual architect, Kenneth Waltz, notes that "structures shove and shape; they do not determine the actions of states".[93] While countries are strongly incentivised to select grand strategies that correspond with changes in the distribution of power, they are not obliged to. Those countries which fail to heed structural constraints and incentives will "fall by the wayside".[94] States will be defensively minded as their "first concern…is not to maximize power, but to maintain their positions in the

[92] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 43.
[93] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Structural Realism after the Cold War', *International Security* (25:1, 2000, pp. 5-41), p. 24.
[94] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 118.

system".[95] States balance against others, first by increasing defence spending (internal balancing) and then by forming alliances (external balancing). The system punishes the overly ambitious because the "excessive accumulation of power by one state or coalition of states elicits the opposition of others".[96] Consider, for example, the coalitions that formed against Napoleon to prevent French continental hegemony during the early nineteenth century. Those that cannot balance, or those that choose not to, accede to their rival's ascent. Bandwagoning and appeasement strategies are not advisable strategies, however, as they will only serve to embolden competitors. To quote Winston Churchill, "an appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last".

There is an implicit assumption of rationality in this theory. Yet, Waltz rejects the importance of rationality to his arguments, citing the "vagaries of men and the unpredictability of the individual's reactions to events".[97] He is undoubtedly right on that point, but his theory runs counter to that caveat. Another neorealist, Colin Elman, observes that Waltz's arguments "depend on assumptions of rational choice, asserting that statesmen are "sensitive to costs" and are likely to respond efficiently to changing international conditions and incentives".[98] Similarly, John Mearsheimer believes that Waltz's focus on "the cost of pursuing misguided policies creates powerful incentives for states to act rationally".[99]

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[95] Ibid, p. 126.
[96] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (18:4, 1988, pp. 615-628), p. 625.
[97] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Stability of a Bipolar World', *Daedalus* (93:3, 1964, pp. 881-909), p. 906.
[98] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p. 43.
[99] John J. Mearsheimer, 'Reckless States and Realism', *International Relations* (23:2, 2009, pp. 241–256), p. 245.

Waltz explained that his theory only related to systemic outcomes and could not be expected to predict the policies of national governments. He maintains that he created "a theory of international politics and not a theory of foreign policy" (i.e. state behaviour).[100] By discounting rationality, however, he arguably fails to accomplish even that. Why should we expect balancing to work if, time and again, states do not act rationally? In Waltz's world, why should we expect states to take the necessary measures to discourage a potential aggressor if deterrence fails?[101]

Other neorealists have fewer qualms in basing their predictions on a rationality assumption. Most neorealists wager that states are run by "rational calculators who make reasonable judgements on available evidence and are sound evaluators of relative power". Those at the helm "tend to sensibly assess their environment, their resources available to them and arrayed against them, and the policy tools at their disposal".[102] Moreover, most structural realists see "no problem with using neorealist theories to make foreign-policy predictions".[103]

Neorealist thought has expanded beyond balancing. Offensive realists like John Mearsheimer part company from Waltz and other defensive realists over how much power states seek under anarchic conditions. For the latter, states accumulate *sufficient* power to achieve security, whereas, for the former, states seek to *maximise* power. When faced with

[100] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Letter to the editor', *International Organization* (36:3, 1982, pp. 679-681), p. 680.
[101] Mearsheimer, 'Reckless States and Realism', p. 248.
[102] Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 27.
[103] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p. 33. Examples include: Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* and Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

a rising power, offensive realists predict that states may try and pass the buck to others, instead of joining a balancing coalition.[104] Some go further and suggest that states in relative decline will initiate preventive wars to derail a rival's ascent.[105]

By way of contrast, defensive realists like Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent find that preventive wars are rare as the costs are too great. They argue that declining powers are much more likely to "promptly reduce their grand strategic ambitions proportionate to the depth of decline".[106] Irrespective of these differences between structural realists, they all agree that self-interested states are incentivised to update their grand strategies according to systemic power shifts. To paraphrase Lord Nelson, neorealism expects that every state will do its duty.

*Rationality and misperceptions*

Elman writes that the "dominant reading of neorealism is that it employs a rationality assumption".[107] Even if we assume that leaders operate with the best intentions, decision-makers "can make mistakes gathering and assessing evidence and reasoning from means to ends".[108] Judgements should be objective but they often vary according to the demands of the problem and the abilities of the decision-maker. Given the complexity of the world, and mankind's inability to interpret it perfectly, decision makers employ a number of cognitive shortcuts or heuristics to simplify matters. These shortcuts range from taking an

[104] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 13.
[105] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 23-24, 187, 194.
[106] MacDonald and Parent, *Twilight of the Titans,* p. 26
[107] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p. 43.
[108] Dennis Chong, 'Degrees of Rationality in Politics' in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, edited by Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, second edition).

educated guess and employing rule of thumb to using one's intuition. They can be useful for the time-pressed decision-maker, but they are vulnerable to cognitive or unmotivated biases, which have the potential to shape his or her perceptions. The grading of power is therefore not as objective as neorealists suggest. In his seminal work, *Perception and Misperception*, Robert Jervis demonstrates how these unmotivated biases can lead to premature cognitive closure as individuals reject new information that does not correlate with their pre-existing beliefs.[109]

Some leaders are more rational than others because their they think more rationally – i.e. they are deliberative and are open to new information that may contradict their beliefs. Brian Rathbun finds that realpolitik – "the pursuit of egoistic (i.e., exclusively self-interested) state interests in light of largely material structural constraints" – and the rationality that underpins it are rare, despite being at the heart of all realist theories.[110] Classical realists accepted this. Hans Morgenthau warned that "contingent elements of personality, prejudice, and subjective preference, and of all the weaknesses of intellect and will which flesh is heir to, are bound to deflect foreign policies from their rational course".[111]

Advances in political psychology since Morgenthau's era allow us to be more specific. Scholars generally distinguish between two types of cognitive mind-sets, which can affect decision-making. "System one" is quick, impulsive, more emotional and relies on memory. It is automatic so humans have no control of it. Intuition has some advantages but it also

[109] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, pp. xxx-xxxviii.
[110] Rathbun, 'The Rarity of Realpolitik', pp. 8-9.
[111] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 7.

leads to harmful biases, particularly in certain contexts. In contrast, "system two" thinking happens when someone chooses to slow down and deliberate on a subject. Individuals vary over the extent to which they will employ "system two". Relying on the gut feeling of "system one" may be a fine for a chess grandmaster but it is wiser for most people to employ "system two" more often so as to make better decisions.[112]

Some leaders will remain in "system one" when they should really switch to "system two". In early 1941, Stalin rejected countless intelligence reports warning of an imminent German invasion, on the grounds that it was disinformation planted by the British to provoke war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.[113] If the Russian leader had been more willing to trust the judgement of his professional intelligence officers, his country might have been more prepared for the German onslaught. Leaders often remain wedded to judgements over interests, objectives and resource allocation, even as evidence mounts against their effectiveness. Yet, if the system does shape and shove decision-makers, rewarding them for successes and punishing them for failures, why are figures such as Bismarck treated as exceptional strategic geniuses?[114] Surely they should be commonplace if the system incentivises rationality.

This problem is compounded by the fact that the system does not always provide clear signals. Leaders have to operate with imperfect information about their counterparts' intentions. Even the most rational policymakers struggle to correctly judge the systemic

[112] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, fast and slow* (London: Penguin, 2011).
[113] Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941* (New York: Penguin, 2017), pp. 850-851, 890-891.
[114] Rathbun, 'The Rarity of Realpolitik', p. 53.

incentives and constraints. In the build-up to the First World War, uncertainty over British intentions may have led policymakers in Berlin to believe that they could act against France and Russia without stoking British belligerence. For their part, the Germans sent London mixed messages over the sincerity of their desire to avoid conflict.

Policymakers in Washington are confronted with the same problem today, but over the rise of China. Does Beijing aspire to regional or global hegemony? Is President Xi's assertive foreign policy the result of domestic pressures and the need to secure raw materials? How should the US respond? Should it accommodate China and withdraw from the South and East China Seas or should it push back against Beijing's territorial claims? Aaron Friedberg sagely observes that, "even if one acknowledges that structures exist and are important, there is still the question of how statesmen grasp their contours from the inside, so to speak, of whether, and if so how, they are able to determine where they stand in terms of relative national power at any given point in history".[115]

*Mobilising the state*

A second key assumption of neorealism is that states are able to respond efficiently to changes in the distribution of power. If the state needs to balance, it will be able to increase defence spending by raising revenues through higher taxation or diverting funds from other departments. It will be able to redeploy national assets in a timely manner to meet threats. In practice, however, domestic constraints often enter the equation and prevent

[115] Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 8.

states from acting as the system would suggest.[116] There may be significant and costly lag times in balancing behaviour.

Hendrik Spruyt highlights the role of interest groups, such as business interests, settler communities and the armed forces, in preventing imperial powers from abandoning colonial possessions, despite mounting economic and strategic burdens. He contends that decentralised political systems are likely to find themselves in strategic "quagmires" as there are more agents which can block changes to the status quo.[117]

The same logic applies to expanding powers. Fareed Zakaria shows how the United States was unable to translate its abundant wealth into political clout on the world stage in the late nineteenth century. The system encouraged expansion, yet the federal government was weak. As such, Washington was unable to harness the country's economic power for the purposes of foreign policy. Only when power shifted from the states to the central government, and from the legislature to the executive, were presidents able to mobilise the nation's resources for international influence.[118] The implication of Spruyt and Zakaria's neoclassical realist arguments is that policymakers often cannot respond efficiently to relative changes in the distribution of power. It would be unwise to assume, as many neorealists do, that states are unitary actors. It is imperative to look inside the "black box" of the state if we are to understand why countries do not always balance and behave according to neorealist predictions.

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[116] Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p. 24-25.
[117] Hendrik Spruyt, *Ending Empire: Contested Sovereignty and Territorial Partition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 26-28, 265.
[118] Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

**From structural to neoclassical realism**

Coined by Gideon Rose, neoclassical realism incorporates both external and internal variables to explain foreign policy behaviour and structural outcomes. It is realist in that "the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities". The "impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level". This is what makes it neoclassical.[119]

Neoclassical realists agree with structural realists that states are incentivised to behave according to systemic pressures. Yet they go further and show how unit-level intervening variables such as perceptions, biases, societal ideas, interest groups, political institutions, and civil-military relations determine how pressures from the international system are perceived by the state and translated into grand strategic outcomes. In his work on the causes of underbalancing, Randall Schweller argues that "states respond (or not) to threats and opportunities in ways determined by both internal and external considerations of policy elites, who must reach consensus within an often decentralized and competitive political process".[120]

The theory therefore amounts to more of a fine-tuning, than an outright rejection of neorealism. The latter should be seen as the "baseline" for ideal behaviour, while the former

[119] Rose, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy', p. 146.
[120] Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, p. 5.

helps to explain variation.[121] Structural realism "aims to demonstrate how power *should* be evaluated by detached, rational observers", while neoclassical realism strives "to determine how it has been or is being weighed by residents of the real political world.[122] By "layering on domestic variables", neoclassical realists hope to improve the explanatory power of neorealism.[123] I now delve into these intervening variables in greater depth.

*Intervening variable: Individual biases*

Pre-existing beliefs affect how people interpret new information. The world is complex so we use heuristics, or shortcuts, to help us cope with the plethora of confusing information we receive. National leaders are likely to have particular images of certain countries, based on their unique life experiences and values. These beliefs form quickly and are difficult to displace.[124] They can lead decision-makers to prematurely reject new information that does not correspond with their pre-existing beliefs. Similarly, leaders may cherry pick evidence to confirm prior judgements. This could impede objective threat perception.

Decision-makers are prone to reach for historical analogies to simplify their predicaments.[125] In the Anglo-American context, the Munich Summit of 1938 is often cited by leaders who are contemplating the use of force against autocratic regimes. Egypt's nationalisation of the Suez Canal reminded British Prime Minister Anthony Eden of Neville

[121] Randall L. Schweller, 'New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Waltz's Balancing Proposition', *The American Political Science Review* (91:4, 1997, pp. 927-930), p. 927.
[122] Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*, p. 12.
[123] Elman, 'Horses for courses', p. 41.
[124] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, pp. xxx-xxxvi.
[125] Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the past: the use and misuse of history in American foreign policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Chamberlain's failure to deal with Hitler and Mussolini. Across the Atlantic, the legacy of appeasement was evoked during the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and both Gulf wars. Decision-makers are disposed to drawing lessons from history to simplify complex problems, even if the context remains wildly different.

Motivational biases, Dominic Johnson writes, "lead us to interpret new information to fit preconceived notions or to rationalize an already preferred course of action".[126] Motives such as revenge, status or respect "are driven by people's emotional needs, by their need to maintain self-esteem, and by their interests – diplomatic, political, organizational, or personal".[127] Unlike unmotivated cognitive processes, which operate at all times, motivated processes operate only when individuals are confronted with consequential choices, which involve risks to important values as well as trade-offs between conflicting values.[128]

The literature on biases is highly pertinent for understanding grand strategic thinking. Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon argue that optimistic biases ingrained within the human mind cause decision-makers to be more predisposed towards their hawkish advisers who propose coercive action, are more willing to use military force, and are more likely to doubt the value of offering concessions to rival states. Thus, we are psychologically more receptive not only to hawks' arguments for war but also to their case against negotiated solutions. In the case of the latter scenario, some of this "scepticism could be the

[126] Dominic D.P. Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 8.
[127] Jack S. Levy, 'Psychology and Foreign Policy Decision-Making' in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology.*
[128] Chaim D. Kaufmann, 'Out of the Lab and into the Archives: A Method for Testing Psychological Explanations of Political Decision Making', *International Studies Quarterly* (38:4, 1994, pp. 557-586), p. 559.

rational product of past experience, but some of it may also result from unconscious — and not necessarily rational — devaluation". This "reactive devaluation" is an individual's *intuition* that something is worth less simply because the other side has offered it.[129]

Loss aversion is a similar phenomenon. We are driven, Kahneman notes, "more strongly to avoid losses than to achieve gains".[130] This helps to explain why radical reforms are rarely implemented. The losers of such policies have more at stake than the potential winners and those implementing the ideas. Their resistance often succeeds in watering down or blocking the proposals. Furthermore, people generally prefer to avoid a certain loss in favour of a potential loss, even if they risk losing significantly more. This is one part of Prospect Theory, which can be observed from gamblers on a losing streak rolling the dice once more, to states that continue fighting wars when victory is impossible. Under a rational or economic model, where the goal is maximum utility, actors would withdraw from the casino or the conflict before a manageable failure turned into a disaster.[131]

Kahneman and Renshon note that American policymakers faced this dilemma in Iraq. To withdraw in 2006, for example, would have been to accept a sure loss (an option that was deeply unattractive), meaning that a "surge" of additional troops was comparatively attractive (even though the chances of success were small, and the cost of delaying failure was high). We cannot therefore assume that decisions of grand strategic significance are taken for reasons underpinned by pure rationality. This is not to say that hawkish advisors

[129] Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon, 'Why Hawks Win', *Foreign Policy*, 13 October 2009.
[130] Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, p. 302.
[131] Ibid, p. 319.

are necessarily wrong, "only that they are likely to be more persuasive than they deserve to be".[132] This is partly due to the way in which choices are framed. *Losses* generally evoke stronger negative feelings than *costs*.[133] In Iraq in 2006, the choice was framed as a choice between a loss (defeat acknowledged by withdrawal) or a cost (additional troops).

To be clear, I do not endorse, nor propose, a theory of perceptions. To start with, measuring the impact biases and emotions is a Herculean challenge. Psychologists have used a variety of tools to gauge emotional reactions, including verbal self-reports, and human coding of facial or other body movements.[134] Unfortunately, self-reporting is not a particularly reliable method, given that individuals may not be fully aware of the depth of their own emotions. Furthermore, they may edit their responses *ex post facto*. The second approach requires direct observation of the key decision-makers, which obviously does not lend itself to historical analysis. It would be impractical in any case because key decision-makers would likely be unwilling to go under psychological evaluation during an international crisis.

Making predictions about a decision-maker's likely viewpoint is not a feasible option because we can never fully know the full range of biases that may affect an individual's perceptions of systemic threats. Why do decision-makers behave rationally on one occasion and irrationally on another? One of the leading scholars in this field, Robert Jervis, concludes that "the complexities and interaction effects among numerous variables are so

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[132] Kahneman and Renshon, 'Why Hawks Win'.
[133] Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, p. 364.
[134] Ted Brader and George E. Marcus, 'Emotion and Political Psychology' in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*.

great that we cannot make simple generalisations linking the arousal of an emotion to a perception or a response".[135]

I have outlined a range of biases to demonstrate that the decision-makers responsible for conceptualising grand strategy do not always think in a rational way. Lord Salisbury famously observed that "the commonest error in politics is sticking to the carcass of dead policies".[136] The same could be said for decisions of grand strategic significance, namely those over a state's priorities and interests, as well as the allocation of its finite resources. Biases at the individual level may therefore help to explain why states persist with grand strategies that are disproportionate to their means.

*Intervening variable: Collective biases*

The individuals responsible for conceptualising grand strategy are socialised by their particular society. This may shape their approach to norms, as well as the priority they attach to values like human rights. In contrast to the psychological literature above, constructivists focus less on the individual and more on the context in which individuals are conditioned. For some theorists, the whole of society shares cultural assumptions over the national interest, as well as judgements about other states in the system.

For one of the leading constructivist theorists, Alexander Wendt, the core elements of power politics are "socially constructed".[137] Thus, a state's interests and identity are ideas

[135] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, pp. xxii, lxxii.
[136] David Steele, *Lord Salisbury: A Political Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 121.
[137] Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics', *International Organization* (46:2, 1992, pp. 391-425), p. 395.

and not material facts as realists would suggest. That a country like Britain should even be a great power is subjective as the notion of "great powers" is in itself an idea. As with the discussion on cognitive psychology above, ideas influence how decision-makers perceive and respond to systemic pressures. Bodies of inherited ideas are important in explaining why countries prioritise certain regions. Winston Churchill cited Britain's "unconscious tradition" of supporting Europe's weaker states "to oppose the strongest, most aggressive" powers on the continent.[138] The literature on strategic culture explains how leaders and wider society are conditioned to view their security environment. Jack Snyder explained how the Soviet Union's nuclear strategy deviated from rational expectations as a result of the country's unique strategic culture:

> "Individuals are socialized into a distinctively Soviet mode of strategic thinking. As a result of this socialization process, a set of general beliefs, attitudes and behavioural patterns with regard to nuclear strategy has achieved a state of semipermanence that places them on the level of "culture" rather than mere "policy." Of course, attitudes may change as a result of changes in technology and the international environment. However, new problems are not assessed objectively. Rather, they are seen through the perceptual lens provided by the strategic culture"[139]

Through the socialisation and institutionalisation of norms, such as those relating to the use of military force, "collective assumptions and expectations become deeply entrenched and constrain a state's behaviour and freedom of action by defining what are acceptable and unacceptable strategic choices, even in an anarchic self-help environment".[140] Since the

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[138] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. I: The Gathering Storm* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), pp. 186-187.
[139] Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations, R-2154-AF* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1977), p. v.
[140] Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p. 67.

1980s, the literature on strategic culture has become more positivist. Much of the research has been centred on the cultures of particular organisations, such as the armed forces.[141]

Other scholars look at the impact of societal norms on state behaviour. John Duffield writes that "where a single political culture can be said to exist, and especially where it is detailed, comprehensive, and internally consistent, it may exert a strong influence over and thus offer a parsimonious explanation of important aspects of foreign and security policy".[142] Charles Kupchan defines strategic culture as "the set of images that shapes a polity's collective disposition toward the behaviour of its state in the international arena". He argues that elites have the capacity to "propagate strategic images to gain support for their policies", but warns that "their actions may later come to constrain them". If, for example, they encourage the public to believe that a state's interests in the periphery are just as important as those in the core, it may be difficult to shift grand strategy away from the periphery at a later date when the core is threatened. Thus, "elites eventually find themselves unable to adjust to shifts in the international environment, entrapped in a strategic culture of their making".[143]

Hew Strachan contends that strategic culture only "explains why a strategy does not change, not why it does".[144] Cultures can and do change but this tends to happen in line

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[141] Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Jeffrey W. Legro, *Cooperation under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint during World War II* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
[142] John S. Duffield, 'Political Culture and State Behavior: Why Germany Confounds Neorealism', *International Organization* (53:4, 1999, pp. 765–803), p. 778. See also Thomas U. Berger, 'From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's Culture of Anti-militarism', *International Security* (17:4, 1993, pp. 119-150).
[143] Charles Kupchan, The Vulnerability of Empire (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 88-101.
[144] Strachan, *The Direction of War,* p. 136.

with seismic structural shifts. Japan and Germany both harboured militarist cultures before the Second World War but they have since moved to the other end of the spectrum. Only recently has Tokyo signalled a desire to amend its pacifist constitution, as a result of the threat posed by revisionist China. Berlin, by way of contrast, faces a relatively benign security environment and still only feels comfortable projecting military force under a European Union or peacekeeping umbrella.

Patrick Porter argues that "habitual ideas" make grand strategies difficult to change. A "habit of primacy" has become institutionalised in the United States. Those in charge "socialise personnel into their worldview, educating and selecting individuals who conform, excluding or penalising those who do not". They also dominate public discourse so they can present alternative approaches, such as retrenchment or using means short of military force, in binary terms as retreat or isolationism. Short of "rapidly changing external conditions" sufficiently shocking to disconfirm the assumptions of those in Washington, grand strategic change is unlikely.[145] The examples of Japan, Germany and the United States underscore why strategic culture must be considered under the neoclassical realist umbrella. Systemic variables remain the most important as it takes major structural shocks to explain shifts in strategic culture.

Porter's argument is reminiscent of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher's classic work on the "official mind" of British imperialists. The policymaking elite responsible for the expansion into Africa was influenced by "the experience and beliefs of the society in which

[145] Patrick Porter, 'Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment', *International Security* (42:4, 2018, pp. 9-46), pp. 11-17.

they lived and worked". They "had inherited not only a world empire but the experience gained in bringing it together, and the assumptions and prejudices accumulated from past successes and failures inevitably influenced their behaviour". The official mind was "worlds apart" from events on the ground in Africa.[146] Victorian imperialists could not be considered as procedurally rational thinkers as they were reluctant to update their beliefs on the basis of new information.

Similarly, Corelli Barnett finds that the UK was unable to adjust efficiently to its relative decline in the early 1950s because of "nostalgic self-delusion throughout the nation". The "governing elite…interpreted Britain's self-perpetuated overseas commitments – political, military, and economic – not as the overload on a fragile economy that they were, but as the reason why Britain was a world power". In place of objective assessment, collective biases about British prestige and influence were used as the "principal justification for keeping out-of-Europe military commitments" that the country "could not afford".[147]

British policymakers' fixation with status continued after the retreat from empire. Dean Acheson once famously observed that, "Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role".[148] Generations of political leaders have since been on a "Holy Grail" like quest to identify the UK's place in the world.[149] Acknowledging that the UK was no longer a

[146] Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), p. 21.
[147] Corelli Barnett, 'The verdict of peace – Britain between her yesterday and the future, 1950–1956', *RUSI Journal* (146:6, 2001, pp. 54-58), p. 55.
[148] Dean Acheson's speech to the United States Military Academy, 'Our Atlantic Alliance: The Political and Economic Strands', West Point, New York, 5 December 1962.
[149] Christopher Hill, 'Britain's Elusive Role in World Politics', *British Journal of International Studies* (5:3, 1979, pp. 248-259), p. 250.

superpower, but still above the rest, Ted Heath characterised his country as a "medium power of the first rank".[150] Similarly, Douglas Hurd's well-known assessment that the UK "punches above its weight" suggests that policymakers are not content with the idea of Britain being in the second tier, even if its material power suggests as much. More recently, Tony Blair described the UK "not as a superpower but as a pivotal power", which "is at the crux of the alliances and international politics which shape the world and its future".[151]

I am purposefully conflating the pursuit of roles and status and it is worth noting that both concepts are subtly different.[152] The point remains that, for constructivists, policymakers have been conditioned to believe in British exceptionalism, whether that it is expressed in grandiose roles or status concerns. Neoclassical realists observe that these collective biases could limit the abilities of decision-makers to assess systemic conditions in an objective manner.

Ideas clearly have great explanatory power, but they cannot serve as this study's independent variable, because they are rarely held homogenously across and within states; many of these roles and norms conflict with each other. Moreover, it is impossible to ignore the importance of structural incentives. After all, states sometimes do respond efficiently to systemic pressures. Collective biases and ideas enjoy maximum leverage when considered as an intervening variable within a neoclassical realist framework.

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[150] Quoted in Michael Harvey, 'Perspectives on the UK's Place in the World', Chatham House, December 2011.
[151] Tony Blair's speech to Lord Mayor's Banquet, London, 22 November 1999.
[152] Role is related to but subtly different from status. The latter is concerned with relative standing and recognition, while the former relates to the behaviours anticipated by others' expectations of a state's appropriate conduct. See David Blagden, 'Two Visions of Greatness: Roleplay and Realpolitik in UK Strategic Posture', *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2018, pp. 1–22), p. 5.

*Intervening variable: domestic politics*

A medley of factors come under the umbrella of domestic politics. Neoclassical realists are primarily interested in those that can prevent decision-makers from extracting the resources of the state. Likely veto players include political parties, the bureaucracy, interest groups and the public. Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell are right that implementing grand strategies requires immense human, material and monetary resources. If the public, or groups that possess these resources, withhold them from the state, the government will have to divert resources in order to extract them. Moreover, pursuing an unpopular grand strategy in such an environment could even threaten the security of both the regime and the state itself, as the leaders of Tsarist Russia learned when the hardships of war in 1905 and 1917 led to revolutionary acts against the Romanovs.[153] Even autocracies face some obstacles to implementation.

By opening the black box of the state, neoclassical realism demonstrates that grand strategies emerge from interactions between unit-level actors, which are interpreting and responding to systemic stimuli. Graham Allison's work on the Cuban Missile Crisis alludes to the importance not only of organisational biases on grand strategic judgements (as above), but also bureaucratic politics. Decisions over priorities and the allocation of scarce resources emerge from a tussle of ideas between a small number of players at the top level of government. They bargain with each other until one actor or a coalition can secure backing from a sufficient majority to proceed with their priorities. Allison places a heavy

[153] Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, pp. 71-72.

emphasis on the impact of departmental loyalties. He writes that "the stance of a particular player can be predicted with high reliability from information about a person's seat" because "where you stand depends on where you sit".[154] Thus, decision-makers may act in their organisation's interests, even if that may conflict with the national interest.

A particularly important department that may hold sway over a country's grand strategic choices is the military. A number of scholars have traced the cause of overly ambitious grand strategies to the armed forces.[155] Civil-military relations depend on "a balance between civilian control over the military and ensuring a strong and effective military, which has its own narrow parochial interests".[156] When this equilibrium is not maintained and civilian leaders cede too much power to the military, a disproportionate grand strategy is likely. Without adequate checks, the military may go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. Overstretch becomes likely as new missions require additional resources. To paraphrase Georges Clemenceau, grand strategy is too important to be left to the generals. Yet, the reverse can also be true. Military operations are unlikely to succeed if they are micro-managed by politicians.[157]

Risa Brooks finds that the ideal civil-military conditions for grand strategy are those in which political leaders are dominant and they share the same concerns as the military over the state's interests and the threats to those interests. In contrast, the worst case scenario

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[154] Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Longman, 1999, second edition), p. 307. For a critique of this approach, see Jonathan Bendor and Thomas H. Hammond, 'Rethinking Allison's Models', *The American Political Science Review* (86:2, 1992, pp. 301-322).
[155] Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*; Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).
[156] Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p. 73.
[157] Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

involves political and military leaders sharing power and having diverging preferences. Here, the military is effectively a powerful interest group that competes with politicians for control of the process. Information over threats may not be shared and coordination for implementation will likely be error-strewn as the chain of command is blurred.[158] Healthy civil-military relations depend on a robust dialogue between political leaders and their professional military *advisers*. Debate should be able to flourish, "without risk of it devolving into disputes over control of decision-making, or being undermined by mutual alienation born of deep-seated and enduring differences" over systemic threats and grand strategic priorities, as well as internal resourcing issues (e.g. the defence budget).[159]

Beyond the military, sectional interest groups may also succeed in diverting states from their objective and prudent goals. Jack Snyder finds that great powers become overstretched by ceding power to groups that have "parochial interests in imperial expansion". These organisations effectively "hijack" the state, before commandeering its propaganda resources "to justify their self-serving policies in diffuse terms of national interest" to gain wider legitimacy.[160]

Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer contend that the Israel lobby in the United States has succeeded in diverting Washington away from its own genuinely strategic goals and towards those that coincide with Tel Aviv's.[161] The system is shoving the United States

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[158] Risa A. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 42-46.
[159] Ibid, p. 5.
[160] Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 1, 15, 17, 35.
[161] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (London: Penguin, 2008).

towards Asia, but policymakers in Washington cannot efficiently adjust grand strategic priorities. In recent years, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have also built formidable lobbying operations in Washington by hiring PR consultancies and funding influential think tanks.[162]

Snyder suggests that states become particularly vulnerable to diversionary interests when there are a small number of powerful interest groups. In such a "cartelized system", imperial and military groups gain the whip hand over grand strategy as they are "commonly more concentrated than anti-imperial and antimilitarist interests". Theoretically, democratic systems should create checks on concentrated interests that would promote overexpansion, but Snyder acknowledges that voters lacking good information make excellent targets for imperialist and nationalist mythmaking. Moreover, there is still the potential for cartelised blocks of interests to form within democracies. Snyder contends that parochial interests are likely to find least traction in unitary systems, which are dominated by one ruler or a ruling group sharing common interests.[163]

Similarly, in his study of Britain at the turn of the twentieth century, Aaron Friedberg finds that "the more widely distributed decision-making power is within a political system, the more likely it is that a nation's initial response to relative decline will be fragmented. Even if some partial responses do occur, they may not be complete or even "strategic" in any meaningful sense of the word."[164] Randall Schweller agrees that "the closer the policymaking process and actual state-society relations approximate a unitary actor, the

[162] Tom Hamburger, Beth Reinhard and Justin Wm. Moyer, 'Inside the Saudis' Washington influence machine: How the kingdom gained power through fierce lobbying and charm offensives', *The Washington Post*, October 21, 2018.
[163] Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, pp. 49-54.
[164] Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*, p. 291.

more accurate realism's predictions". For a state to balance "appropriately", Schweller argues that there needs to be consensus among elites over the nature of the existential threat. The state may be *unwilling* to balance appropriately if elites are polarised by ideological, cultural, or religious divisions; bureaucratic interests; party factions; regional and sectoral interests; or ethnic group and class loyalties. Moreover, the state may be *unable* to balance appropriately if the government is weak or there are low levels of social cohesion.[165]

It would be a mistake, however, to overstate the power of these interest groups. This is particularly the case in pluralistic societies, where organisations with contrasting interests often counterbalance each other. Indeed, "domestic-focussed interests can be just as concentrated as their foreign-focussed counterparts and often have deeper pockets".[166] They are also more likely to attract the attention of politicians concerned with electoral survival; health care and welfare are more likely to win votes than external issues relating to grand strategy.

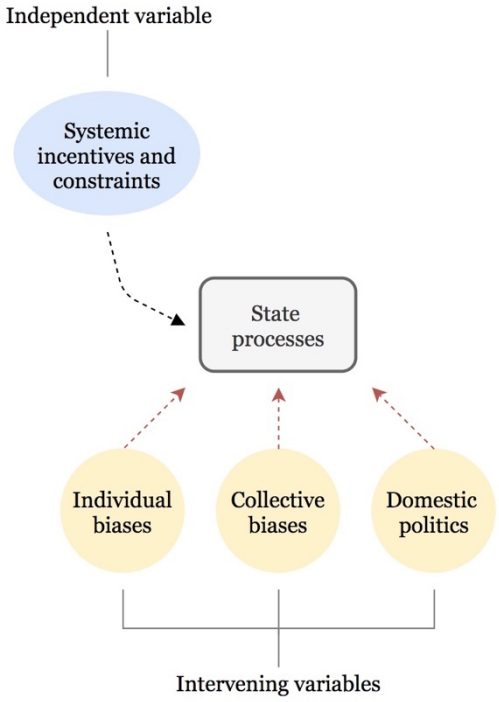
The literature on veto players, political bargaining and civil-military relations moves us one step further to understanding why states may deviate from rational behaviour. Yet, these scholars cannot explain moments when states *do* respond efficiently to structural incentives. As with strategic culture, domestic politics should therefore be considered an intervening variable, rather than an independent variable.

[165] Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, pp. 11, 46-55.
[166] MacDonald and Parent, *Twilight of the Titans*, p. 18.

*Criticisms of neoclassical realism*

Neoclassical realism has drawn flak from liberals and realists alike. For Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, the inclusion of sub-structure variables "undermines (if not eliminates)" neoclassical realism's claim to be a form of realism.[167] Kevin Narizny contends that neoclassical realism is "fundamentally flawed" because it is not clear whether systemic or domestic variables carry the most causal weight.[168] Neoclassical realists are in danger of identifying a laundry list of intervening variables without specifying how and when they matter. Figure 3.1 portrays this critique:

**Figure 3.1: Neoclassical realism according to its critics**




As the diagram shows, individual and collective biases, as well as domestic politics, interfere with how the state perceives systemic incentives and constraints (i.e. the

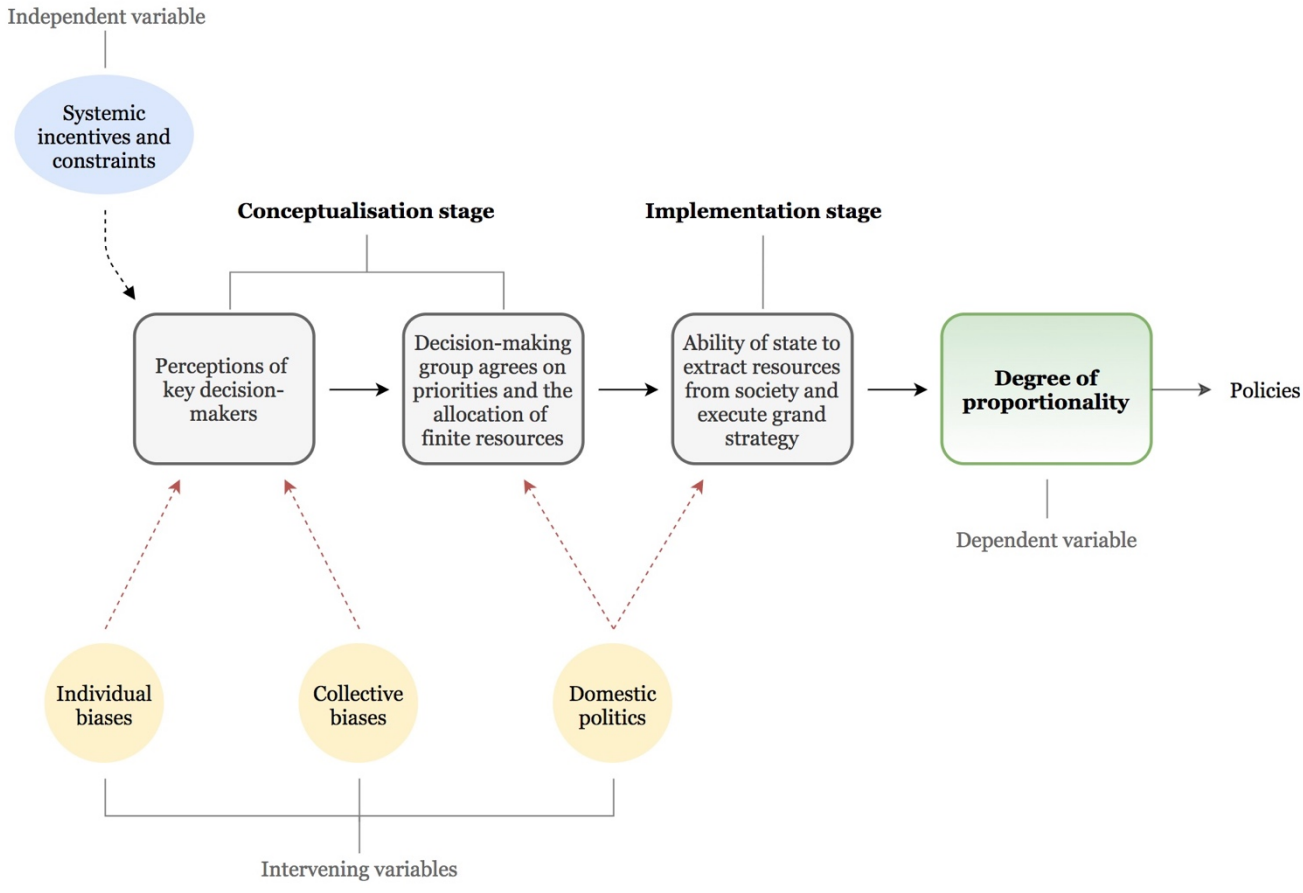
[167] Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?', *International Security* (24:2, 1999, pp. 5-55), p. 28.
[168] Kevin Narizny, 'On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics: A Critique of the Newest Realism', *International Security* (42:2, Fall 2017, pp. 155-190), p. 156.

imminence and proximity of threats). Yet, neoclassical realists do not – according to their critics – describe how or when these unit-level factors shape the state's behaviour. These are serious charges. If neoclassical realism is to improve the determinacy of neorealism, scholars have to account for the relative importance of these intervening variables.

### A neoclassical realist model of grand strategy

Early neoclassical realists opened the black box but they did not inspect to see which parts move when structural conditions change. The theory must explain how systemic signals are digested by the state. I apply my two-stage model of grand strategy to explain how variables such as biases and interest groups intervene with the process. This can be seen in figure 3.2:

**Figure 3.2: A neoclassical realist model of grand strategy**



*Stage one: Conceptualisation*

The conceptualisation of grand strategy involves policymakers agreeing on which threats are most deserving of attention. Once priorities have been set, decisions over the allocation of scarce resources can be taken. The key decision-makers at the helm of the state each have their own biases towards certain issues and countries based on their unique life experiences and values. They have also been conditioned by ingrained ideas about their state's role in the world and the use of power. Thus, the perceptions of key decision-makers are not only affected by the system, but also by individual and collective biases.

The key policymakers collectively form a decision-making group, the precise composition of which varies from country to country. Some states have formalised national security councils, whereas others take a more ad hoc approach. This group is influenced by domestic political considerations that are unique to each country. Civil-military relations, for example, vary across time and from state to state, which means the level of input from the armed forces on discussions of grand strategic significance will not be consistent across cases.

*Stage two: Implementation*

The second stage of grand strategy is concerned with the enactment of the decision-making group's deliberations. Policymaking elites may have conceptualised a reasonably proportionate grand strategy (or otherwise) but domestic veto players can still block its implementation. The state's grand strategy, which may be diluted by these blocking agents, ultimately filters out into specific foreign and defence policies.

I have shown that individual and collective biases chiefly affect the conceptualisation stage, while domestic politics primarily impacts on implementation. I argue that the relative importance of these variables depends on the intensity and imminence of systemic stimuli. Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell make a useful distinction between restrictive and permissive security environments.[169] The security environment is restrictive if the state faces imminent and pressing threats or if enticing opportunities are within reach. Conversely, the security environment is permissive if threats and opportunities are more remote or less intense. I now apply my model of grand strategy to this restrictive/permissive framework.

*Intervening variables under restrictive conditions*

When the state is at war or faces a security crisis, decisions are likely to be taken over short time horizons. Domestic veto players are likely to be excluded either forcefully or voluntarily from the process. In the first instance, the need for secrecy and quick decisions will separate the key decision-makers from the wider bureaucracy, opposition political parties, interest groups and the public.[170]

The willingness of veto players to block grand strategies is also likely to dissipate during a crisis, as the public, as well as opposition political parties and interest groups "rally round the flag".[171] Douglas Gibler finds that "opposition forces are likely to be either supportive of administration policies or stymied by broad popular support for the state" when there is

[169] Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p. 52.
[170] Ibid, p. 61.
[171] Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, pp. 208-212.

an existential threat. The latency of veto players will, however, depend on the persistence of this threat. Prolonged existential threats serve to institutionalise these weaker checks against leaders. Thus, states with centralised institutional political authority will be found in environments that suffer from extended external threats.[172] By way of contrast, short-term threats and crises may only give the foreign policy executive temporary reprieve from veto players.[173]

With regard to individual and collective biases, we can presume a degree of rationality in that leaders want what is best for their country. A challenge to the state's survival is likely to hone the minds of the decision-making group. We should therefore expect states to conceptualise and implement proportionate grand strategies when faced with an existential threat. That said, it is incredibly difficult for leaders to deliberate and not rely on heuristics when faced with short time horizons. It is important to recognise that procedural rationality – where leaders analyse information objectively – is rare.[174] Thus, states tend to balance, although individual and collective biases will shape "the types and the intensity of balancing strategies pursued".[175] The extent to which states balance (i.e. the proportionality or quality of grand strategic thinking) will vary according to the skills of those at the helm of the state at a particular time. We must therefore be comfortable with the fact that strategic geniuses are the exception, rather than the rule.

[172] Gibler, 'Outside-In', p. 520.
[173] Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, pp. 266-267.
[174] Rathbun, 'The Rarity of Realpolitik', p. 23.
[175] Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p. 13.

*Intervening variables under permissive conditions*

Neorealism holds that states are incentivised to prioritise survival and security under conditions of anarchy. Yet, the system does not always provide clear signals over threats. States may be presented with a more benign environment, which affords greater scope for action. Neoclassical realism stipulates that the foreign policy executive has three sets of goals: (1) to preserve the state's physical survival and political autonomy; (2) to maintain its power position; and (3) to safeguard all other ideological, religious, political, social, and economic goals they may possess. The foreign policy executive will tend to prioritise the first objective, but they may have the luxury of focussing on the second and third sets under permissive conditions.[176]

A more benign security environment is, however, likely to result in implementation issues. The core decision-making group is no longer the decisive stakeholder, as latent veto players *should* have greater access to information. Without a unifying existential threat, these groups no longer feel obligated to rally round the flag. As such, they can afford to push their own parochial interests. In short, more actors are given opportunities under clearly permissive conditions to "shape, constrain, or defeat policies at odds with their preferences".[177] Thus, in conditions of relative peace, leaders will have to spend more time bargaining with domestic veto players. Compromises may be necessary if they are to implement their grand strategic priorities.

[176] Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman, 'Correspondence: Neoclassical Realism and Its Critics', *International Security*), p. 198.
[177] Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, pp. 91-94.

It is logical to assume that democracies face greater barriers to implementation due to a higher number of possible veto players with greater access to information. Consider public concerns over military intervention in many western societies today. Most European and North American governments are wary of committing land forces in the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan quagmires. Many policymakers still have an interventionist impulse, but they have diluted their solutions because of expected domestic resistance.[178] Certain targets for intervention fall in the list of priorities and the allocation of resources changes. Instead of sending whole divisions, western militaries intervene using Special Forces, air power and drones. The importance of regime type is not something that this study focusses on. As the example of Tsarist Russia demonstrates, autocracies can also struggle to extract resources from society.

I have sought to demonstrate that neoclassical realism can include intervening variables in a consistent manner. Individual and collective biases chiefly affect the conceptualisation stage, while domestic political factors primarily influence implementation. These factors increase the likelihood of a disproportionate grand strategy. The extent to which these variables matter depends on the intensity and imminence of systemic stimuli.

*Caveats*

There are limits to the scope of my theory that are worth noting. It does not, for example, account for other explanatory variables of structural change, such as technological

[178] For a recent example of the enduring interventionist impulse among policymaking elites, see UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson's speech to the Royal United Services Institute, 'Defence in Global Britain', 11 February 2019.

advances, environmental disruption, demographic growth, and unexpected strategic shocks like the Global Financial Crisis. Yet, it would be unfair to be too critical of neoclassical realism for this, as no theory adequately addresses and treats all of these phenomena as endogenous.[179]

The point remains that a conceptually proportionate grand strategy is no guarantee of *success*. Such a claim would ignore the principle of equifinality in which there are multiple paths to a given goal. There may have been other explanations for a state's success or failure beyond its own grand strategy. In exceptional circumstances, a state could fail to adjust to the international distribution of power and still get lucky. The opposing or threatening state could, for example, collapse of its own accord. Similarly, two states at loggerheads could both pursue proportionate grand strategies against one another and yet one or both could fail to implement their own due to unforeseen circumstances. Severe weather conditions could, for example, not only affect a state's preparations for war but also its economic productivity.

This is not to say that grand strategy is pointless. It is clearly wiser to conceptualise a proportionate grand strategy than a disproportionate one. If the balance between means and ends is not met, "the prospects for success", Frank Hoffman notes, "are very suspect".[180] It is, however, important to recognise that even a conceptually proportionate grand strategy is no guarantee of success. Rather, a proportionate grand strategy increases the chances of a state achieving security.

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[179] Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p. 96.
[180] Frank Hoffman, 'Grand Strategy: The Fundamental Considerations', *Orbis* (58:4, 2014, pp. 472–485), p. 480.

## CHAPTER IV

## BRITISH GRAND STRATEGY DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

This chapter will examine three of the most significant debates that took place over British and Allied grand strategy during the Second World War: the decision to fight on in May 1940; the decision to prioritise the country's limited resources in the Middle East as opposed to the Far East in 1941/42; and the decision over when and where to launch "the Second Front".[181] All three cases are linked in the sense that these decisions were taken after a major strategic shock. The first two are inter-related as they both were responses to the collapse of the French Army in the early summer of 1940. British grand strategy had to be completely rewritten during this period and was primarily geared towards survival. The Second Front debate took place after the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941.

These cases also shed light on conceptualising and implementing grand strategies in unilateral and multilateral contexts. During the first two episodes, the debates at the top of government over priorities and the allocation of finite resources were intranational in the sense that they only involved decision-makers from the United Kingdom. In the third case, grand strategy was hammered out by intense and often heated debate between officials from Britain and the United States. Both sides came to the table with their own conceptions of Allied grand strategy.

[181] The very notion of the "Second Front" is quite misleading when one considers the multiple theatres of war within which the Allies engaged with the Axis powers.

It is worth emphasising that the Second World War was not won *solely* as a result of US-UK grand strategy. There were of course many other factors which contributed to the defeat of Germany. This chapter will not, for example, discuss the role of intelligence or resistance movements in depth, partly because they fed into the wider grand strategy. Most importantly, any explanation for Germany's defeat that does not account for the Eastern Front and the decisive battles of Stalingrad and Kursk would be grossly remiss. It is important to remember that, between 1939 and 1945, eighty per cent of the Wehrmacht's battlefield fatalities came at Russian hands.

## PART I: STRATEGISING SURVIVAL

### 1. The War Cabinet deliberations of May 1940

The decision made by the British government in the latter stages of May 1940 to continue the fight against Germany raises searching questions about the conceptualisation of grand strategic thought. On 10 May, Winston Churchill replaced Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister after the latter came under a hail of criticism for the government's botched operation to prevent the Germans from conquering Norway. On the same day, Hitler's armies began their long-awaited offensive in the West, thus bringing an end to the eerie period of calm – commonly known as the "Phoney War" – that had existed since hostilities broke out in September 1939. The story of the Wehrmacht sweeping across the Low Countries and dividing the Allied armies by sending Panzers through the seemingly impassable Ardennes Forest in a matter of weeks is well known. The Dutch surrendered after four days of fighting, and the Belgians followed suit shortly afterwards. Faced with

demoralised troops and faltering allies, the French government, which had little stomach for the fight to begin with, was on the verge of collapse by the end of the month.

If one reads Winston Churchill's account of the Second World War, it would seem that the thought of a negotiated peace never entered the minds of British officials. In 1950, he wrote: "future generations may deem it noteworthy that the supreme question of whether we should fight on alone never found a place upon the War Cabinet agenda. It was taken for granted and as a matter of course by these men of all parties in the state, and we were much too busy to waste time upon such unreal, academic issues".[182] This disingenuous assessment is not supported by the War Cabinet minutes. Over the course of four days in late May, as the battered British Expeditionary Force (BEF) fell back upon Dunkirk, harried by the Luftwaffe, a series of discussions took place in London as to whether Britain should continue the struggle or if peace terms should be sought.

For the political scientist, Richard K. Betts, the British government's decision was a "gamble".[183] He argues that the position taken by Churchill was only logical if it was likely that either the Soviet Union or the United States would imminently enter the war on Britain's side. For Betts, Britain therefore pursued a disproportionate grand strategy in that the ends – victory – were hopelessly out of reach, but got lucky in the end as it benefitted from events beyond its control. As another revisionist historian of the period, David Reynolds, put it: "in 1940, Churchill and his colleagues made the right decision but for the

[182] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Volume II: Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassell, 1950, second edition), p. 157.
[183] Richard K. Betts, 'Is Strategy an Illusion?', *International Security* (25:2, 2000, pp. 5-50), p. 11.

wrong reasons".[184] The implication of these arguments is that Churchill and his colleagues acted irrationally. Neorealist logic suggests that a state in Britain's position would have been wiser to engage in damage limitation. Heinz Magenheimer posits that, "at first glance, the stance of the British was in complete contradiction to the traditions of foreign policy, whereby a defeated nation seizes the first opportunity to initiate peace talks with the victorious power, before the fortunes of war result in even heavier reversals".[185] Betts concludes: "thank God for bad strategy".[186]

I contend that Betts and others downplay the rationality in Churchill's position because they misinterpret his war aims in 1940. The Prime Minister and most of his colleagues in the War Cabinet were confident that the UK had the resources to defend itself against a German invasion. This case not only demonstrates the difference between proportionate and disproportionate grand strategic thinking, but it also underscores the usefulness of a neoclassical realist framework in explaining how the decision to continue the war was reached. The choice to fight on was not axiomatic, but the result of the deliberations and political manoeuvrings of the members of the British War Cabinet.

Before delving into the deliberations of late May 1940, it is important to consider the domestic political context within which the discussions took place. Although Churchill had succeeded Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister, the latter remained leader of the Conservative Party. The majority of Tory MPs were deeply unhappy with Churchill's

[184] David Reynolds, 'Churchill and the British 'Decision' to fight on in 1940: right policy, wrong reasons' in *Diplomacy and Intelligence during the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 167.
[185] Heinz Magenheimer, *Hitler's War: Germany's Key Strategic Decisions, 1940-45* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 25.
[186] Betts, 'Is Strategy an Illusion?', p. 11.

ascendancy to the top. Here was a man who had "ratted" on them to join the Liberals earlier in his career and had then re-joined – after a brief spell as an independent – only to then snipe at the Conservative leadership from the backbenches in the 1930s. Many MPs had also not forgotten Churchill's involvement in the disastrous Gallipoli operation during the First World War, nor his ardent support for Edward VIII during the Abdication Crisis. Although Edward's successor, King George VI, later established a good relationship with Churchill, he was known to have favoured the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, as Chamberlain's replacement in May 1940.[187]

Churchill's first appearance as Prime Minister in the House of Commons, in which he pledged that he had "nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat", was greeted with stony silence from the benches behind him. In contrast, the same Tory MPs cheered Chamberlain upon their former chief's arrival to the chamber. Churchill was not a popular choice among the aristocracy either. Many of them viewed Churchill as a traitor to his own class, an ungentlemanly rogue who had poor taste in friends, such as the press baron Lord Beaverbrook. Additionally, there were many Nazi sympathisers among Britain's ruling class, who regarded Germany as a useful bulwark against communism, and were now unhappy that Britain had a belligerent prime minister. In summary, Churchill's political position was tenuous. He may have achieved his goal of reaching Number 10, but it was far from clear that he would be allowed to remain its occupant for long. Indeed, there was "an almost universal expectation that Churchill's ministry was going to be short-lived".[188]

[187] John Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940* (London: The Folio Society, 1999), pp. 17-18, 53.
[188] Andrew Roberts, *Holy Fox: the life of Lord Halifax* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), p. 203.

The new prime minister immediately took steps to slim down the War Cabinet from nine members to five.[189] Neville Chamberlain was made Lord President of the Council and Lord Halifax kept his post as Foreign Secretary. Churchill recognised how reliant he still was on Neville Chamberlain, who was widely respected by most Conservative MPs, despite his error-strewn premiership. On the day he became Prime Minister, he wrote to Chamberlain telling him: "to a very large extent I am in your hands".[190] Churchill also invited Labour's Clement Attlee and Arthur Greenwood into his war ministry as Lord Privy Seal and Minister without Portfolio respectively. These changes were to prove decisive in the contest that was to emerge between the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary.

While Churchill was busy reshuffling his team, the Wehrmacht was carving a path through the Allied armies. On 15 May, the French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud told Churchill: "we have been defeated…we are beaten; we have lost the battle".[191] The shock in Whitehall was palpable. The Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Cadogan, recorded in his diary on 16 May that the last six days had been "the blackest" he had lived through.[192] The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Edmund Ironside, wrote a day later that he was bearing witness to "the greatest military disaster in all history".[193] The British had placed a great deal of faith in the capacity of the French Army to withstand the initial German onslaught. Indeed, the BEF only made up ten of the 140 Allied divisions on the

[189] The War Cabinet was a smaller version of the Cabinet, which was regarded as too large to make effective decisions at times of war. The Cabinet still existed but it had no input on decisions of grand strategic significance.
[190] Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions that Changed the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 25.
[191] Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, p. 38.
[192] Alexander Cadogan, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945*, edited by David Dilks (London: Cassell, 1971), p. 284.
[193] Edmund Ironside, *The Ironside Diaries*, edited by Roderick Macleod and Denis Kelly (London: Constable, 1962), p. 316.

western front. France, which was providing one hundred divisions, had just cause in complaining that Britain's military strategy was to fight to the last Frenchman.

On 25 May, the commander of the BEF, Lord Gort, unilaterally decided to withdraw to Dunkirk to prepare for evacuation. On the same day, Lord Halifax told the War Cabinet that he had indirectly received overtures from Italy, implying that they would not be averse to mediating between the warring parties – if the British and French asked.[194] Churchill declared himself open to these informal talks on the condition that they did not become public knowledge, as it would be a "confession of weakness".[195] The British Chiefs of Staff then presented a paper to the War Cabinet, anticipating French defeat and an Italian declaration of war. They argued that, in such circumstances, Britain's ability to withstand a German invasion would hinge on the RAF's ability to prevent the Germans from obtaining sufficient air superiority to support an invasion.[196] They produced another paper the following day, in which they concluded that the remnants of the British Army would be "insufficient to deal with a serious invasion".[197] At this stage of course, they had no idea that over 330,000 Allied soldiers would be rescued over the next week from the beaches of Dunkirk. The best hope was thought to be for 45,000 soldiers to be rescued.[198] Yet, the Chiefs were optimistic that "while our air force is in being, our navy and air force together should be able to prevent Germany carrying out a serious seaborne invasion of this country".[199]

[194] This approach originally stemmed out of a French diplomatic initiative to keep Italy out of the war.
[195] Kew, United Kingdom, The National Archives, CAB[inet Office Records] 65/7, War Cabinet (138) minutes, 25 May 1940.
[196] CAB 66/7, 'British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality', folder 168.
[197] CAB 66/7, 'British Strategy in the Near Future', folder 169.
[198] Lukacs, *Five Days*, p. 137.
[199] CAB 66/7, 'British Strategy in the Near Future', folder 169.

This conclusion was of crucial importance, as it came to underpin Churchill's rationale for fighting on.

The Italian proposal was discussed again on 26 May. Despite pressure from the French Prime Minister, Churchill was firmly against a negotiated peace as "there was no limit to the terms which Germany should impose upon us if she had her way". He added that Britain must not be dragged by France into a "weak position, in which we went to Signor Mussolini and invited him to go to Hitler and ask him to treat us nicely". For his part, the Foreign Secretary did not think that Hitler would ask for "outrageous terms", such as an end to rearmament or a demand to reduce the size of the Royal Navy or the RAF. If he did, however, Halifax thought the British government should not "look at them". That being said, the Foreign Secretary saw "no harm" in giving diplomacy a chance.[200]

During the meeting, the Foreign Secretary outlined a draft approach to Mussolini requesting negotiations and a new European peace settlement, in which Italian "grievances" in the Mediterranean would be redressed.[201] The Prime Minister surmised that this meant giving Germany back her colonies and making certain territorial concessions to Italy in the Mediterranean. He did not think that "such an option was open" to the British and predicted that Hitler "would certainly prevent us from completing our re-armament". Labour's Arthur Greenwood agreed that "Mussolini would be out to get Malta, Gibraltar and Suez". He also warned that the negotiations would inevitably break down and that

[200] CAB 65/13, War Cabinet (140) minutes, 26 May 1940.
[201] CAB 66/7, 'Suggested Approach to Signor Mussolini: Memo by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs', 26 May 1940, pp. 335-336.

Hitler would make them public knowledge, which would have "a bad effect on our prestige". Despite securing Greenwood's endorsement of his own position, Churchill did not rule out Lord Halifax's suggested approach.[202] It is worth noting that Chamberlain had not come off the fence at this stage. Thus, despite Churchill's clear difference of opinion with his foreign secretary, he did not feel politically strong enough to overrule him.

The momentum began to swing behind Churchill the following day, courtesy of some effective political manoeuvring. The Prime Minister invited his old friend and the leader of the Liberal Party, Archibald Sinclair, to join the inner War Cabinet discussions. Sinclair warned that "any weakness on our part would encourage the Germans and the Italians". Moreover, "the suggestion that we were prepared to barter away pieces of British territory would have a deplorable effect and would make it difficult for us to continue the desperate struggle which faced us". Clement Attlee saw "no practical effect" in approaching the Italians and warned that it could be "very damaging". Having gained the upper hand against Halifax, the Prime Minister observed that British "prestige in Europe was very low" and that the only way to get it back was "by showing the world that Germany had not beaten us".[203]

Matters came to a head on the afternoon of 28 May. Churchill warned that "the French were trying to get us on to the slippery slope" and that "the position would be entirely different when Germany had made an unsuccessful attempt to invade this country". Lord Halifax contended that "we might get better terms before France went out of the war and before

[202] CAB 65/13, War Cabinet (140) minutes, 26 May 1940.
[203] CAB 65/13, War Cabinet (141) minutes, 27 May 1940.

our aircraft factories were bombed". The Prime Minister hit back that the odds of "decent terms" being offered were "a thousand to one against". He predicted that the Germans would not "be so foolish as to let us continue our re-armament". He added: "if we once got to the table, we should then find that the terms offered us touched our independence and integrity. When, at this point, we got up to leave the conference table, we should find that all the forces of resolution which were now at our disposal would have vanished". Churchill believed that "we should get no worse terms if we went on fighting, even if we were beaten, than were open to us now". He concluded that, "nations which went down fighting rose again, but those which surrendered tamely were finished".[204]

Chamberlain agreed with Churchill that "decent terms" would not be on the table and that, consequently, an approach to Italy would be "useless" at the present time.[205] Attlee and Greenwood, who had been keeping Churchill "afloat" against Halifax up to this point, concurred with the Lord President of the Council, thereby leaving the Foreign Secretary isolated.[206] At this point, the War Cabinet took a short break, during which Churchill went to see his wider cabinet. Upon reporting this meeting to the inner War Cabinet when it reconvened that evening, he said that his other colleagues had "expressed the greatest satisfaction when he had told them that there was no chance of our giving up the struggle". Furthermore, he could not "remember having ever before heard a gathering of persons occupying high places in political life express themselves so emphatically". Their backing sealed Churchill's victory over Lord Halifax. Britain would fight on, alone if necessary.

[204] CAB 65/13, War Cabinet (145) minutes, 28 May 1940.
[205] Ibid.
[206] John Bew, *Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee* (London: Riverrun, 2016), p. 257.

Lord Halifax then proposed that an appeal be made to the United States to mediate. The Prime Minister, however, now clearly felt that he had the requisite political support to overrule his foreign secretary. He said that, "if we made a bold stand against Germany, that would command their [the United States] admiration and respect; but a grovelling appeal, if made now, would have the worst possible effect".[207]

**May 1940 and the grand strategy ledger**

It is only fair to evaluate the War Cabinet's decision from the information that they were operating from at the time, rather than with hindsight. Revisionists such as Betts and Reynolds suggest that Hitler was willing to "partition the world" with the British.[208] The implication of these arguments is that London could have made terms with Berlin and kept its empire. These scholars implicitly assume that the War Cabinet was aware of this but, even with the benefit of hindsight, it would still be unwise to take Hitler at his word. Although he did indeed later state that he would have wanted to maintain the British Empire, "it is unthinkable that this meant preserving it in any position of independent power".[209] Powerful voices in German High Command would have lobbied hard to ensure that Britain could never again pose a military threat. The *Kriegsmarine*, for example, had long considered the Royal Navy as its principal adversary.[210]

Part of the problem with the revisionist interpretation and those critical of Churchill's grand strategic thinking is that they misjudge his war aims. Many scholars make Lord Halifax's

[207] CAB 65/13, War Cabinet (145) minutes, 28 May 1940.
[208] Betts, 'Is Strategy an Illusion?', p. 11; see also Reynolds, 'Churchill and the British 'Decision' to fight on in 1940: right policy, wrong reasons', pp. 158-159.
[209] Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*, p. 51.
[210] Magenheimer, *Germany's Key Strategic Decisions*, p. 22.

mistake of taking the Prime Minister's public rhetoric, such as his "victory at all costs" speech, at face value. Richard Betts, for example, slams Churchill's "poor excuse for a victory strategy".[211] Revisionists acknowledge the undisputable role of Churchill's oratory in rallying the British people but, in terms of grand strategy, they like to portray Churchill as foolhardy and emotional (in a pejorative sense), and Lord Halifax as calculating and logical. Churchill succumbed to biases over status concerns, while Halifax behaved in a procedurally rational manner. They quote officials such as Alexander Cadogan who found the Prime Minister too "romantic and sentimental".[212] Robert Jervis, for example, concludes that Churchill "carried his colleagues along through his passion and heartfelt convictions, not his logic or evidence".[213] This view is echoed in popular culture through the 'British Bulldog spirit' and was embodied most recently in the film, *Darkest Hour*, where Churchill was depicted drawing strength from members of the public on the London Underground, before going into battle with Halifax on 28 May.

Yet, the case against Churchill's position does not stack up when one considers the archival evidence. His strategic rationale was sound, and it is clear that he won the support of his colleagues by having superior arguments to Lord Halifax. The Prime Minister may have expressed himself in an animated manner but that should not detract from the logic and cogency of his points. The "victory at all costs" rhetoric was exactly that – rhetoric to bolster morale. No one in the War Cabinet, including the Prime Minister, was confident of total victory in May 1940. Churchill's vision was one of survival. He was even open to a

[211] Betts, 'Is Strategy an Illusion?', p. 11.
[212] *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, p. 290.
[213] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, p. lxxii

negotiated peace but, crucially, at a later stage. The Prime Minister believed that a negotiated settlement would only be favourable after Britain had proven that it could withstand invasion and that it did not *need* to seek peace. The terms would only be generous if Hitler thought that Britain would be a tough nut to crack. Unlike his Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister did not think that a triumphant Hitler would be magnanimous enough to offer decent terms after the fall of France. He had long distrusted the German *Fuhrer's* intentions, whereas the Foreign Secretary had a record of misjudgement. The showdown in May 1940 was not about the alternative means of winning but about how best to avoid humiliating terms.[214]

Furthermore, it was not foolish or reckless of Churchill to assume that Britain could successfully resist a German onslaught. His professional military advisers were optimistic about the country's chances, given the preparedness of the RAF and the strength of the Royal Navy. The Chiefs' report added a great deal of ballast to Churchill's position. Contrary to the claims of Halifax and the revisionist scholars since, Churchill's aims were fairly limited in May 1940. He was targeting survival, which was a realistic ambition, given the defensive advantages that the UK would hold over the Germans. It could therefore be considered proportionate grand strategic thinking. Counterfactually, if Lord Halifax had succeeded Chamberlain, Britain would have likely pursued a disproportionate grand strategy of underreach.

[214] Freedman, *Strategy*, p. 140.

Finally, Churchill believed that, were it to emerge that Britain was suing for peace terms, the effect on the fighting morale of the nation would be utterly devastating. He was surely right. If the talks broke down and Hitler made them public, it would have been difficult to rally the British people behind a government which had implicitly conceded defeat. This was grand strategic thinking of the highest order at arguably the most important juncture in the country's modern history.

**Neoclassical realism and the deliberations of May 1940**

What should we expect of this case from neoclassical realist theory? With an imminent and clear existential threat, potential domestic veto players like the public should almost have no influence on the process. Moreover, it is likely that the danger posed to the state's very survival will hone minds. That said, there may be some divergence within the decision-making group (the War Cabinet) because individuals will have slightly different perceptions based on their own biases and unique life experiences. This case largely bears out these predictions.

Neoclassical realism goes further than neorealism as it highlights the importance of particular individuals and their varying perceptions of a country's interests. The British government was not of one mind during this dark period in May. There were two competing visions that the War Cabinet had to choose between, based on competing views of Britain's vital and major interests. Lord Halifax was prepared to live with Nazi hegemony over the continent if it meant England could be saved from the *Luftwaffe's* bombs. He "had a resigned desire to preserve as much as he could of the England that he

knew and loved".[215] He was prepared to sacrifice what he regarded as peripheral interests – namely British possessions in the Mediterranean – as well as its major interests – the sovereignty of France and the Low Countries – for the continued guarantee of British independence. Halifax "was not much interested in Europe". When Hitler annexed Austria in March 1938, he asked his cabinet colleagues: "was there any useful purpose served by treading on the landslide and being carried along with it?"[216] In contrast, German hegemony over continental Europe was strategically untenable for Churchill. He believed that it would inevitably mean the reduction of Britain to some kind of "minor partner or even a satellite of Germany".[217]

Counterfactually, if Lord Halifax had succeeded Chamberlain and excluded Churchill from the inner War Cabinet, the next stages of the war could have been substantially different. This was not an implausible scenario, as Lord Halifax had been the popular choice to replace Chamberlain within the Conservative Party and with the King. The Foreign Secretary, however, was aware of his own shortcomings – having little knowledge of military matters – and decided against taking the top job, thereby leaving the field clear for Churchill.

It is clear that Churchill and Halifax had wildly different views on Britain's interests and objectives but how did the former emerge triumphant? Despite having positional advantages as prime minister, Churchill did not, at first, feel politically strong enough to

[215] Roy Jenkins, *Churchill* (London: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 599-600.
[216] Lukacs, *Five Days*, p. 49.
[217] Ibid, p. 99.

overrule his foreign secretary. Thus, despite his own confidence in continuing the war, he allowed Lord Halifax to explore the diplomatic option for several days. Given the dire state of his relations with the wider Conservative Party, he could not afford to alienate Chamberlain or Halifax.

Churchill skilfully mustered support among the Labour and Liberal members of the government. It is fair to say that the structure of the War Cabinet meetings helped to facilitate the emergence of a proportionate grand strategy. Churchill appointed his rivals to key posts and the heated debates ensured that there was no danger of groupthink taking hold. The opposing grand strategic visions of Britain's interests were hammered out over the course of a week in May. The Prime Minister had to convince his colleagues through the logic and cogency of his arguments. This was particularly important in the case of Chamberlain, who was on the fence at the beginning of the showdown between Churchill and Halifax. Attlee and Greenwood evened the scales for Churchill against Lord Halifax. Inviting his old friend and colleague, Archibald Sinclair, into the War Cabinet to bolster his position on 27 May was a stroke of genius.

It is worth noting that this case supports Kahneman and Renshon's claim that decision-makers (in this case, Attlee, Greenwood, Sinclair and the wider cabinet) are more likely to be swayed by hawkish arguments. In this example, the hawkish response was the rational approach to follow; the dovish response would have seen Britain reduced to a vassal state. With the steadfast backing of Attlee, Greenwood and Sinclair, Churchill secured the upper hand against Halifax. Winning the support of Chamberlain and the wider cabinet on 28

May was the pivotal moment. Churchill only felt confident enough to dismiss Halifax's negotiated peace plan once he had sufficient political backing.

One final observation from this case is that the media and the public had no influence over grand strategic thinking. Only members of the War Cabinet (and the wider cabinet on 28 May) were privy to the discussions. Indeed, it is clear that the public were blissfully unaware of the scale of the disaster unfolding in France. This was largely because the newspaper editors were not apprised of the latest developments.[218] As such, there was no clamour of opinion for or against a negotiated settlement. It was only on 29 May (the day after Churchill had secured the backing of his colleagues against Lord Halifax's plan) that the newspapers revealed that the BEF was surrounded at Dunkirk.[219] There was no mention of the War Cabinet deliberations or any talk of a negotiated peace.

In conclusion, a neoclassical realist framework enriches our understanding of this case. A purely neorealist analysis would ignore the logic of Churchill's position, and it would overlook how close the UK came to pursuing a disproportionate grand strategy. If Lord Halifax had succeeded Chamberlain, Britain would have yielded to German dominance when it could have successfully withstood invasion. Thus, to understand the British decision to fight on May 1940, one must look inside the "black box" of the state.

[218] Ibid, pp. 75, 101.
[219] Ibid, pp. 154-155.

2. Singapore or Egypt?

After the fall of France on 22 June 1940, Britain stood alone. The bulk of the British Army was safely back on home shores, but its tanks and artillery remained stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk. The "only instrument capable of bringing them decisive victory in the classic style, the French Army, had been broken".[220] For the rest of the year, the government was largely absorbed with the threat of invasion. The Royal Navy found itself spread thin between home waters and the Mediterranean where it had to contend with the Italian fleet without the help of the *Marine Nationale*. The Royal Air Force heroically survived the Luftwaffe's fierce onslaught in the late summer of 1940, thus denying Germany the air supremacy that was necessary for a successful invasion. Churchill had been vindicated but Britain's position was still precarious.

British grand strategy therefore remained defensively orientated, and areas of vital interest were prioritised for the allocation of increasingly finite resources. In July 1940, the Chiefs of Staff and War Cabinet agreed that the defence of the United Kingdom, followed by British possessions in North Africa and the Middle East were the core interests. British colonies in the region were vulnerable to Italian predation.[221] Given these priorities, the Chiefs determined that the British government should do "everything short of sacrificing vital interests to avoid an open clash with Japan".[222] Given that a fleet could not be spared from other theatres, the British military recognised that they "could not prevent damage to

[220] Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), p. 7.
[221] CAB 66/10, Memorandum by the Chiefs of Staff on 'Preparation of more troops in India for service overseas'.
[222] CAB 66/10, 'Far East Policy' Report by the Chief of Staff, 27 July 1940.

our interests in the Far East".[223] This was a substantial and necessary break from pre-war grand strategy, which had placed Singapore above Egypt in importance.[224] It further underscores the argument put forward that grand strategy should be seen as an adaptive process, rather than a fixed plan.

The question that followed was: how much damage could be sustained in the Far East? A brutal assessment of the strategic value of assets took place, in which India, Malaya (including Singapore), and Australasia emerged as the key priorities for the allocation of limited means. The Burma road was deemed of peripheral importance and any Japanese aggression in Indochina or Thailand was to go unchecked. The Chiefs regarded the British garrisons in North China as "strategically useless" and recommended their redeployment, even if this meant "some loss of prestige".[225] They also told the War Cabinet that "Hong Kong is not a vital interest" and that "our position in the Far East would be stronger without this unnecessary commitment". These two assets, they recommended, should be used to buy Japan off as part of a general settlement.

On 3 September 1940, Churchill urged for more reinforcements to be sent to the Middle East at the expense of home defence.[226] The next day, the British Chiefs of Staff endorsed his proposals and outlined their views on Britain's future strategy. They defended their decision to neglect the Far East on the grounds that, "while it is obviously desirable to

[223] CAB 66/10, 'The Situation in the Far East in the event of Japanese intervention against us' Report by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 31 July 1940.
[224] This was official British policy after the Imperial Conference of 1937 and documents confirm it as late as February 1939. See, for example, CAB 16/183A, Committee for Imperial Defence, 'European Appreciation, 1939-40' Report by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee.
[225] CAB 66/10, 'The Situation in the Far East'.
[226] CAB 66/11, Memorandum by the Prime Minister, 3 September 1940.

secure every part of the British Empire against enemy aggression, it is clear that, with the forces at our disposal, the allocation of defence resources to different areas must be directly related to the extent that each will contribute to the defeat of Germany". The Chiefs believed that the Reich's economy was weak and that the German public's will to fight could be undermined by a combination of economic blockade and strategic bombing. They estimated that, by 1942, the British Army would be strong enough "to strike…at outlying enemy positions", thereby sapping the enemy's morale and forcing him to disperse his forces across a wide front.[227] The Royal Navy's command of the seas gave the British freedom of choice for these operations. Furthermore, the Chiefs also endorsed Churchill's idea to foment partisan movements in occupied territories.[228] Crucially, they argued that it would not be British policy "to attempt to raise, and land on the Continent, an army comparable in size with that of Germany. We should aim, nevertheless, as soon as the action of the blockade and air offensive have secured conditions when numerically inferior forces can be employed with good chance of success, to re-establish a striking force on the Continent with which we can enter Germany and impose our terms".[229] Thus, Britain's best hope lay in buying time before the decisive encounter in France with the Wehrmacht.

Many of the assumptions in this strategy paper turned out to be woefully inaccurate, as is often the case with long-term plans. The Chiefs of Staff and much of the War Cabinet optimistically clung on to the *belief* that Germany might collapse from within due to economic weakness. In reality, Germany's economy only reached its production peak in

[227] CAB 66/11, 'Future Strategy', Appreciation by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 4 September 1940.
[228] In July 1940, the Special Operations Executive was established to "set Europe ablaze".
[229] CAB 66/11, 'Future Strategy'.

1944. Meanwhile, resistance movements ultimately had little strategic impact outside of Yugoslavia and occupied Russia.[230] Strategic bombing only began to achieve the results that its proponents had predicted towards the end of the war (and at great cost).[231] Yet, this could not have been known at the time and there were so many uncertainties that it seems injudicious to be too harsh on British strategic planners in the heat of 1940.

The decision to reinforce Britain's position in North Africa proved vital when, later that month, the Italians invaded Egypt from Libya and Somaliland from Abyssinia. By December, the strengthened British Western Desert Force was in a position to counterattack and they succeeded in driving the Italians back into Libya, taking 130,000 prisoners, along with nearly 400 tanks. As Jeremy Black has argued, the defeat of the Italian force "owed much to Churchill's decision to send to Egypt tanks that were a key part of Britain's strategic reserve".[232] Unfortunately for the British, their own success led to further troubles as it exposed the Italian military's weaknesses to Hitler, who realised that he had an exposed southern flank.

In February 1941, the first German units of the new *Afrika Korps* arrived in Tripoli, under the command of General Erwin Rommel, who the British would come to grudgingly respect as an inspired military commander – bestowing on him the nickname, "the Desert Fox". Over the space of a twelve-day offensive in March/April, the Germans succeeded in pushing the British back into Egypt. The disaster was such that three British generals,

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[230] Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy*, pp. 14-15; David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 176.
[231] Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy*, p. 8.
[232] Jeremy Black, 'Churchill as Strategist in the Second World War' in *Winston Churchill: Politics, Strategy and Statecraft*, edited by Richard Toye (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 143.

including the architect of Britain's success against the Italians, General O'Connor, were captured.

On 12 April, Churchill announced his intention to send more tanks to reinforce the depleted British force in the desert. This plan met resistance from the Army who wanted to keep tanks in the United Kingdom in case there was an invasion. Alan Brooke, Commander-in-Chief of the Home Forces, was averse to Churchill "raiding his orchard".[233] He had the support of his boss, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), John Dill, as well as the Director of Military Operations and Plans at the War Office, John Kennedy. On 20 April, the Prime Minister summoned the Chiefs of Staff to discuss his plan to send several hundred tanks directly through the Mediterranean (as opposed to the much longer but safer Cape route). The Chiefs grudgingly endorsed Churchill's plan after several hours of debate.[234] The decision to send the convoy, codenamed Operation Tiger, ultimately proved to be worthwhile: only one ship was sunk and the Commander of British forces in the Middle East, General Wavell, received close to 300 tanks in May.[235]

The Chiefs, however, remained unhappy at being outflanked and the stage was now set for a fierce debate between the Prime Minister and his generals over the country's grand strategic priorities. On 27 April, Churchill got wind of the British Army's contingency plans for the evacuation of Egypt and the closure of the Suez Canal in the event of another German breakthrough. He erupted, accusing the General Staff of defeatism. "If they lose

[233] John Kennedy, *The Business of War*, edited by Bernard Fergusson (New York: William Morrow, 1958), p. 91. See also *War Diaries, 1939-1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke*, edited by Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman (London: Phoenix Press, 2002), pp. 134, 152.
[234] Hastings Ismay, *The Memoirs of General Lord Ismay* (London: Heinemann, 1960), pp. 202-203.
[235] CAB 65/18, War Cabinet (49) minutes, Annex: Operation Tiger, 12 May 1941.

Egypt", he bellowed, "blood will flow. I will have firing parties to shoot the generals". The following day, he issued a directive ordering all plans for the withdrawal to be rescinded. He declared that "the loss of Egypt and the Middle East would be a disaster of the first magnitude to Great Britain, second only to successful invasion".[236] One would be hard pressed to find a clearer articulation of Churchill's grand strategic priorities.

On 6 May, John Dill responded in kind. He accepted that the loss of Egypt would be a calamity but regarded it as unlikely. Middle East reinforcements, he argued, had already pushed the defence of the United Kingdom "to the limit, if not beyond it". Furthermore, "Egypt is not even second in the order of priority, for it has been an accepted principle in our strategy that in the last resort the security of Singapore comes before that of Egypt".[237] He was quoting pre-war strategic plans, which had assumed the French Navy could pick up the slack in the Mediterranean. Churchill countered a week later that he would be prepared to lose Singapore if it meant holding onto Egypt.[238] Churchill later claimed in his memoirs that he was supported by the other chiefs and that Dill, seeing this, let the matter drop.[239] The reality was quite different. The other chiefs were with Dill, who did not let the matter drop. He reiterated his belief on 13 May that reinforcements should be sent to Malaya as soon as possible.[240] The Prime Minister, however, overruled his Chiefs of Staff and continued to prioritise the Middle East over the Far East. This was the only time during

[236] Kennedy, *The Business of War*, pp. 105-110.
[237] War Office paper (WO) 216/5, Prime Ministers directive on global strategy: Appreciation of the situation in the Middle East by C.I.G.S. and Commander-in-Chief Middle East, Dill to WSC, 6 May 1941.
[238] WO 216/5, WSC to Dill, 13 May.
[239] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume III: The Grand Alliance* (London: Cassell, 1950), p. 377.
[240] WO 216/5, Dill to WSC, 13 May 1941.

the entire war that Churchill disregarded the advice of his chiefs on a matter of grand strategy.

**Egypt and the grand strategy ledger**

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was strategically important to Churchill for three primary reasons. First, it was the only area that British troops could be put into action against the enemy in late 1940 and 1941. This was important for public morale as much as military reasons. With the British mainland under threat of invasion, Churchill was keen for the wider Empire to be on the offensive against Germany and her allies. Second, the Middle East was the "strategic centre for Commonwealth communications".[241] Finally, the region contained a great deal of Britain's oil reserves. Although the United Kingdom imported much of its fuel from the United States, Britain could not allow either Germany or Italy to gain access to the Persian oil fields.

Churchill's critics blame the loss of Singapore on his decision to prioritise Egypt. For historian Corelli Barnett, the "imperial catastrophe in the Far East owed itself to English chivalry over Abyssinia". By the time of Pearl Harbour, "England had become deeply embroiled in the war with Italy in the Mediterranean and the Middle East; a war to which Churchill had given naval, air and military priority over the Far East, thus reversing pre-war English strategy and compounding the ill-consequences of Italy's hostility".[242] David Reynolds believes that Churchill covered up most of the argument with Dill in his memoirs

[241] Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy*, p. 9.
[242] Corelli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1986), p. 585.

so as to hide his "complacency about Japan".[243] Churchill was also heavily criticised in some quarters of the Antipodes. John Kennedy, one of the Army officers who had been overruled by Churchill, later approvingly quoted the Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, in his memoirs as saying, "only Churchill's magnificent and courageous leadership compensated for his deplorable lack of strategic sense".[244]

The Prime Minister may have downplayed the chances of Japan's entry into the war, but he did so on the assumption that the United States would enter the war. This was something that the Chiefs of Staff had also assumed in their report of September 1940.[245] The Prime Minister was justifiably confident that, in the event of war, the Japanese would never attempt a siege of Singapore with a hostile US carrier fleet in the vicinity.[246] It is important not to judge a statesman with the benefit of hindsight and, at the time, "a disaster like Pearl Harbour was just as unthinkable as that of the Meuse had been before May 1940".[247] As such, the involvement of the US Pacific Fleet was, quite understandably, factored into Churchill's calculations.

Furthermore, it is not clear that Singapore could have been saved even if Churchill had sided with his military advisers. The eminent historian and former solider, Michael Howard, argues that the outcome would not have been different because, in the early 1940s,

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[243] Reynolds, *In Command of History*, p. 248.
[244] Kennedy, *The Business of War*, p. 115.
[245] CAB 66/10, 'The Situation in the Far East'.
[246] J.R.M. Butler, *Grand Strategy, Volume II: September 1939-June 1941* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1957), p. 497.
[247] Ibid.

the Japanese were unquestionably superior at the operational level of war.[248] What is clear is that Churchill's decision prevented Rommel's forces from pushing the British out of North Africa. If we assume that Singapore had been reinforced at the expense of Cairo and both were lost, Churchill would have been blamed for spreading the Empire's resources too thinly.

The Prime Minister recognised that Britain would not successfully be able to fight on three fronts: at home, in the Mediterranean, and in the Far East. He thought it more prudent to concentrate resources in two of these theatres. This was brave in itself if one considers that some voices in the British Army advocated the consolidation of limited resources in the UK. Churchill was right to focus on the Middle East throughout 1940 and 1941 as that was the only region where a discernible enemy could be fought. Many of the Chiefs, in contrast, favoured deterring the Japanese. This was a bizarre volte-face on the agreed strategy of the late summer of 1940, in which the Middle East was explicitly placed above the Far East in terms of grand strategic priorities. When Dill made the point on 6 May that it had long been British strategy to prioritise the defence of Singapore, he was quoting pre-war strategic documents, which assumed that the French would be able to hold the Mediterranean while the British redeployed to the Far East. After the fall of France, this strategy was null and void so it seems most peculiar that he should have reverted to it. General Hastings Ismay, who served as Churchill's Chief of Staff, wrote, "our pre-conceived plans had to be entirely recast" after France's capitulation.[249]

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[248] Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), p. 141.
[249] Ismay, *Memoirs*, p. 191.

Thus, Churchill advocated a proportionate grand strategy, while the Chiefs proposed an alternative which would have left British forces dangerously overstretched. In the brutal assessment of interests and resource allocation, Churchill prioritised real as opposed to hypothetical threats. He effectively passed the buck on the Japan problem to the United States, which was eminently sensible, given the size of the US Pacific Fleet, as well as Britain's overstretch dilemma after the fall of France.

**Neoclassical realism and the decision to prioritise the MENA region over the Far East**

How does my neoclassical realist theory hold up against this case? Churchill behaved in a procedurally rational manner. He updated his assessment of where Britain's priorities lay in light of the fall of France. There were two discernible enemies for the British in 1940/41 (Italy and Germany) and it was logical to prioritise resources to meet that threat instead of a hypothetical Japanese attack. In contrast, the chiefs, who were perhaps motivated by anger after having lost the debate over Operation Tiger, acted in an irrational manner in prioritising the Far East. They succumbed to collective biases over the importance of the Singapore base, which had been an obsession of military planners during the 1920s and 1930s. They remained wedded to their pre-war conceptions of Britain's core interests, which ironically, were actually in the periphery.

A neorealist would surely approve of Churchill's actions during this period. Resources were allocated according to the most pressing dangers, while potential threats were passed over to allies. It was fortunate for the UK that the Chiefs were unable to disrupt British grand strategy and implement their own agenda because they did not have sufficient

control over the process of conceptualisation. Had the chiefs been able to exercise the same degree of control over grand strategy as they did during the First World War, the outcome could have been substantially different. The civil-military relationship was more balanced thanks to Churchill's organisational adjustments. Upon becoming Prime Minister, he appointed himself as Minister of Defence. He was concerned that important decisions would be diluted or ignored as they were passed down the chain of command. To solve this problem, he established ad hoc committees on particular issues such as the Battle of the Atlantic, which brought the relevant government departments together to delineate responsibilities and deal with any potential problems. In July 1940, he convened a committee "to keep under review the conduct of the war in the Middle East".[250] He also replaced the Ministerial Committee for Military Coordination with two Defence Committees, one for supply and the other for operations, both of which he chaired. This ensured that grand strategy, once conceptualised, would be implemented. Eliot Cohen regards Churchill's management of the government as one of his "greatest contributions to the war".[251] Even Richard Overy, whose account of the Second World War is not exactly sympathetic towards Churchill, wrote that one of the Prime Minister's "main contributions" to victory was "his construction of a clear, centralised system to run the war".[252]

These measures brought politicians into regular and direct contact with Britain's military chiefs. They were "revolutionary" changes that had very little precedent in recent British

[250] CAB 66/9.
[251] Cohen, *Supreme Command*, p. 114.
[252] Richard J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 266.

civil-military history.[253] During the First World War, the generals had been given a great deal of autonomy by the politicians on the War Council. Churchill's power grab in 1940 was borne out of a desire to avoid the errors of the last war. He did not blame the generals for the carnage of the trenches, but rather the politicians who failed to keep men like Lord Kitchener, a generalissimo in all but name, in check.[254] Andrew Roberts notes that Churchill's organisational changes were "the culmination of a lifetime's thought about civil-military relations".[255]

Churchill's military experience and expertise in international affairs meant that he was able to ask probing and insightful questions of the chiefs. Inexperienced leaders, Elizabeth Saunders notes, are unable to monitor their advisers. In contrast, "leaders with significant knowledge of foreign policy are more likely to know what questions to ask and what information may be missing from the discussion and thus are better equipped to assess the quality of proposals".[256] Eliot Cohen accepts that Churchill's military judgement was frequently inferior to that of the chiefs but he suggests that "Churchill exercised one of his most important functions as war leader by holding their calculations and assertions to the standards of a massive common sense informed by wide reading and experience at war".[257]

It is also evident that certain individuals are better suited to debating grand strategy than others. Churchill not only prevented the Chiefs from dominating the conceptualisation

[253] Ismay, *Memoirs*, p. 159.
[254] Cohen, *Supreme Command*, p. 111.
[255] Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (New York: Viking, 2018), p. 524.
[256] Elizabeth N. Saunders, 'No Substitute for Experience: Presidents, Advisers, and Information in Group Decision Making', *International Organization* (71, Supplement 2017, pp. S219–S247), p. S226.
[257] Cohen, *Supreme Command*, pp. 123-124.

process by appointing himself Defence Minister and chair of the relevant sub-committees, but he also outmanoeuvred Dill and the other chiefs with relative ease. Dill, who was reputedly in poor health when he took up his post, freely admitted that he did not have the wit required to engage in a verbal wrestling match with Churchill.[258] Unfortunately for the CIGS, this was how the Prime Minister liked to hammer out grand strategy.[259] Dill struck Churchill as "being very tired, disheartened, and over-impressed with the might of Germany".[260]

As expected, there were no other significant veto players that could have derailed Churchill's grand strategy. The Prime Minister's methods did draw flak from other politicians. The main charge was that Churchill had made an unconstitutional power grab. There was also a belief that no one person could effectively make decisions while serving as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence concurrently. He faced criticism in the House of Commons and a Vote of No Confidence in May 1941, which he won convincingly by 447 votes to three – although it should be noted that this motion was partly driven by the operational disasters in Greece and Crete. By this stage, he had secured the grudging support of the Conservative Party, after taking over as leader in October 1940 when Chamberlain had been forced to retire due to poor health. Furthermore, he had sent his political rival, Lord Halifax, to serve as ambassador to the United States in December 1940. The Coalition remained broadly united, thanks to Attlee's steadfast support of Churchill on the grand strategic debates of the war.[261] Thus, despite growing unhappiness with his

[258] Alex Danchev, ''Dilly-Dally', or Having the Last Word: Field Marshal Sir John Dill and Prime Minister Winston Churchill', *Journal of Contemporary History* (22:1, 1987, pp. 21-44), p. 22
[259] Kennedy, *The Business of War*, p. 75.
[260] Danchev, ''Dilly-Dally', or Having the Last Word', p. 25.
[261] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, pp. 279, 286.

prosecution of the war, Churchill was able to ride roughshod over his critics during this period. Potential veto players rallied round the flag and the leader at a time of national crisis.

It was fortunate for the UK that Churchill, who had a hold over the conceptualisation process, was striking the right balance between overstretch and underreach. In May 1940, Halifax had pressed for the latter through a negotiated peace, while in 1941, the Chiefs had leaned towards the former in advocating the dispersal of forces across the globe. In both instances where Churchill got his way, the UK behaved in accordance with neorealist expectations. Parochial interests and domestic political factors did not derail Churchill, and, by extension, British grand strategy.

At this point, it is prudent to remind the reader that this chapter is not designed to be a robust defence of Churchill's decision-making against revisionists. While the evidence so far shows that the Prime Minister was a skilful political operator with a clear and sensible grasp of Britain's vital, major, and peripheral interests, his record at the operational level of war was profoundly mixed. Between 1940 and 1945, he was, to varying degrees, responsible for a number of risky and ill-advised military initiatives that were unsuccessful – Norway, Greece (in 1941), Crete, and the Dodecanese to name but a few. He also infuriated many of his generals by micro-managing their campaigns, constantly urging the offensive. General Alan Brooke, who replaced Dill as CIGS in December 1941 and Admiral Dudley Pound as CSC Chair in March 1942, was scathing about Churchill's methods in his diaries.[262]

[262] It is worth noting, however, that these entries were only meant for his wife and were his way of venting the frustrations that he could not air in public.

It is important to be sensitive to the conditions that Churchill was operating in, as well as the pressures that he was under. "Forgetting that most human beings usually err in predicting the future" Eliot Cohen argues, "too many seem to grade statesmen (and Churchill in particular) as if they were scrutinising the footnotes of a sloppy undergraduate's term paper". Revisionists, he contends, often have a "selective reading of the record" when it comes to Churchill and his military advisers, which apportions blame to the former but not the latter.[263] Churchill is, for example, often held accountable for the disastrous Greek adventure in spring 1941, but he made it clear that if local commanders were against the operation, then he would not press for it.[264] The Chiefs of Staff also endorsed the mission so they are surely as culpable as Churchill.[265]

Some revisionism is welcome and indeed necessary, given the Churchill-mania that gripped academia, the media, political discourse and public opinion in the United Kingdom and further afield in the wake of the Second World War. To this day, many political leaders still revere Churchill. His views on Europe were invoked by both the Remain and Leave campaigns during the 2016 Referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union. The slightly melodramatic reaction over President Obama's decision to remove Churchill's bust from the Oval Office (which was later reinstated by President Trump) demonstrates how the former prime minister is still idolised in some circles beyond the United Kingdom. This all underscores the importance of delving into the historical record and providing a

[263] Cohen, *Supreme Command*, pp. 112-113.
[264] Ismay, *Memoirs*, p. 196-197.
[265] CAB 66/15, 'Policy in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean', Report by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 24 February 1941.

balanced verdict. Looking specifically at decisions taken during the Second World War, Churchill's record at operational level was undoubtedly mixed. His judgement at the grand strategic level, however, was exemplary. Brian Rathbun is right that strategic geniuses like Bismarck are rare.[266] Churchill's decision-making during the early 1940s warrants his inclusion in that small and exclusive club.

## PART II: STRATEGISING VICTORY

### 1. 'Germany First'

Before delving into the principal grand strategic debate of the Second World War between the Allies – the location and timing of the Second Front – it might help the reader to briefly explain how Britain and America came to be brothers in arms. It may seem obvious today that Britain's clearest strategy in June 1940 – devoid of allies in Europe – was to turn to the United States.[267] At the time, however, this view only became commonplace as a result of Churchill's efforts. Much of the British establishment, particularly the old guard of the Conservative Party, were disdainful of their American cousins. In December 1937, Chamberlain was quoted as saying: "it is always best and safest to count on nothing from the Americans except words"[268]. He had virtually ignored President Franklin Roosevelt whilst in Number 10. In contrast, Churchill cultivated a relationship with the US leader from his first days in office. With an American mother, Churchill considered himself ideally

[266] Rathbun, 'The Rarity of Realpolitik', p. 38.
[267] It is worth noting that Britain sent a great deal of aid to the Soviet Union after Hitler invaded in June 1941.
[268] David Dimbleby and David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: The Relationship between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), p. 118.

placed to build a "Special Relationship" with Washington. Throughout 1940 and 1941, Churchill pressed the Americans for military aid and an official declaration of war on Germany.

On the other side of the Atlantic, there were further impediments to a closer partnership. Despite being no lover of the British Empire, Roosevelt was keen to assist in the struggle against fascism. Yet, he was constrained by public opinion, which was heavily influenced by a strong isolationist lobby led by Charles Lindbergh and the America First movement, which had pro-German sympathies. The President faced re-election in November 1940 and his Republican rival, Wendell Willkie, was warning the American public that Roosevelt would drag their sons into another European war. Although not a central case of this study, this episode further reinforces my neoclassical realist argument. Geographically and economically insulated from Europe's woes, the United States faced a permissive security environment. Domestic veto players were therefore able to block and dilute Roosevelt's schemes.

The US Neutrality Act still required arms to be paid up-front and in cash. The British did therefore receive weaponry but at a considerable price. Several UK companies were forced to sell their American assets at knock-down rates to pay their motherland's debts. The British War Cabinet was initially reluctant to accept a deal which would see Britain hand over sovereignty of several military bases for a period of 99 years in exchange for fifty American destroyers.[269] The Prime Minister convinced the War Cabinet that selling

[269] CAB 65/8, War Cabinet (227) minutes.

destroyers "to a belligerent was certainly not a neutral action" and that "the United States would have made a long step towards coming into the war on our side".[270] It later transpired that the vast majority of these ships were of poor quality.

Where others would have reacted in outrage to such treatment, Churchill maintained his composure. He recognised that wooing such an isolationist country would require perseverance. Privately, he bitterly resented the harsh terms that America was extracting from the only nation that was fighting fascism. In November 1940, he told John Colville that "we must be patient and we must conceal our irritation".[271] This frustration came close to boiling over at times. When an American warship collected Britain's last gold reserves in South Africa, Churchill penned a note to Roosevelt, saying: "it is not fitting that any nation should put itself wholly in the hands of another, least of all a nation which is fighting under increasingly severe conditions for what is proclaimed to be a cause of general concern".[272] He likened the American action to that of a "sheriff collecting the last assets of a helpless debtor".[273] Both sentences were omitted from the telegram that was ultimately sent to Washington.

American aid was stepped up after Roosevelt's electoral victory in November 1940. The British not only lacked weaponry but also the capital to pay for it. The war was putting tremendous strain on the British Exchequer. In April 1941, the UK's reserves of gold and

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[270] Premier Papers (PREM) 3/462/1 in Martin Gilbert, *The Churchill War Papers, Volume II: Never Surrender, May 1940-December 1940* (London: Heinemann, 1994), pp. 1296-1297.
[271] John Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries, 1939-1955* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), p. 283.
[272] PREM 4/17/1 in Gilbert, *The Churchill War Papers*, p. 1311.
[273] Ibid, p. 1309.

dollars reached their lowest ever level: $12m.[274] The Americans stepped in to bankroll Britain's war effort with the signing of the Lend-Lease Act in March 1941. The historian Corelli Barnett is disdainful of the British government for placing the country in America's debt to such a great extent. Lend-Lease, he writes, "consummated the process Churchill had begun of transforming England into an American satellite warrior-state dependent for its existence on the flow of supplies across the Atlantic".[275] Ministers effectively "chose to sacrifice England's existence as an independent power, a power living and waging war on her resources, for the sake of 'victory'".[276] He is right that the Americans were acting out of self-interest by using the UK as a shield against fascism but his criticism of the British government is overly harsh. How else could the war have been prosecuted were it not for American loans? He overlooks the alternative, which would have been defeat and an unedifying peace settlement with Hitler, who would have offered far less generous terms than Washington.

Roosevelt also sought to directly relieve the burden on the overstretched British forces. US naval patrols were extended to the mid-Atlantic by the end of April 1941 and American troops took over the garrisoning of Iceland. He also agreed to meet with Churchill at Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, in August. The two leaders agreed on a set of common principles, the Atlantic Charter, but Roosevelt continued to resist Churchill's appeals for American belligerence against Germany. The following month, the President issued a

[274] Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, p. 591.
[275] Ibid, p. 560.
[276] Ibid, p. 588.

"shoot first" order to the US Navy, and by the end of the year, American warships were escorting convoys across the whole Atlantic.

The historian Michael Howard contends that "Churchill's greatest achievement lay…in the clarity with which he saw, from the very beginning of his administration, that Britain was now dependent on the United States for her continued survival, and in the patience, the skill, the tenacity and charm with which he coaxed the American people and their president into underwriting British independence".[277] This period is, however, a telling example of the limits of individuals in shaping grand strategy. For all of Churchill's efforts and powers of persuasion, it would take a Japanese carrier group to guarantee America's entry into the war.

The attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 left America reeling. Churchill, meanwhile, "slept the sleep of the saved and thankful" on the night after the attack.[278] On 11 December, Hitler rashly declared war on the United States, thereby removing a potential stumbling block for Roosevelt in dealing with potential domestic veto players, who would have advocated restricting the war to Japan. The following day, the Prime Minister began his journey to Washington with most of his senior military advisers. While on board the *Duke of York*, he dictated three papers on the future conduct of the war: 'The Atlantic Front', 'The Pacific Front' and '1943'. The first document envisaged Anglo-American landings in French North Africa in 1942.[279] The second was defensive in nature, in that it recognised

[277] Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy*, p. 144.
[278] Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, p. 540.
[279] Ibid, pp. 574-578.

that nothing could be done to counter Japanese expansionism until the Allies had restored their naval superiority in the Far East.[280] The third document declared that the "war can only be ended through the defeat in Europe of the German armies, or through internal convulsions in Germany produced by the unfavourable course of the war, economic privations and the Allied bombing offensive". The Allies, however, should not "count" on an internal German collapse. As such, plans should be made for American and British armies to land at several points on the continent – supported by an "amphibious outfit" for "large-scale disembarkations".[281] The Germans, he judged, were in a precarious position as they would either have to spread their forces across occupied Europe – leaving them "hopelessly dispersed" – or concentrate them in a central position, which would allow the Allies to establish secure bridgeheads. He was hopeful that Allied forces might have established a "footing" in Sicily and Italy by the end of 1942. The decisive landings would ideally take place in the summer of 1943, but he warned:

> "we must face here the usual clash between short-term and long-term projects. War is a constant struggle and must be waged from day to day. It is only with some difficulty and within limits that provision can be made for the future. Experience shows us that forecasts are usually falsified and preparations always in arrear. Nevertheless, there must be a design and theme for bringing the war to a victorious end in a reasonable period"[282]

This paragraph gives us an insight into Churchill's understanding of grand strategy. For Churchill, it was not something that could always be written down and rigidly adhered to.

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[280] Ibid, pp. 578-581.
[281] This idea was the basis for the famous Mulberry floating harbours that were towed across the English Channel. Churchill later used his advocacy of these engineering feats to claim that he was always supportive of Operation Overlord.
[282] Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, pp. 582-584.

It was a process that required flexibility in the face of changing circumstances. Churchill's vision for victory was based on taking the offensive in Europe and the defensive in the Far East (at least to begin with). Given how long it would take for the Americans to recruit and train their new armies, he believed that the decisive battle with the Wehrmacht could only take place in 1943. Churchill recognised, however, that British and American troops could not remain idle for the entirety of 1942. North Africa was the ideal location for an operation, given that the bulk of the British effort was already there. When it came to the final assault on mainland Europe, Churchill did not commit himself exclusively to Northern France. Instead, he wanted multiple landings on the continent to disperse German divisions. This reflected Churchill's healthy respect for the fighting prowess of the Wehrmacht.

The Washington conference, codenamed Arcadia, established the Combined Chiefs of Staff Committee. Grand strategy would now be decided upon by both sets of military chiefs, under the direction of the President and the Prime Minister. Thus, it was now going to be hammered out and acted upon multilaterally, which was a significant change for both countries. During the First World War, America refused to merge its war effort with the other allies but General George Marshall, the US Army's Chief of Staff, was adamant that the same mistake would not be made again.[283] The British were reasonably used to conceptualising a grand strategy alongside an ally, having fought closely with the French on two occasions. They had, however, been acting unilaterally for much of the past 18 months. An Anglo-Soviet alliance had been signed in July 1941, following Hitler's invasion

[283] Reynolds and Dimbleby, *An Ocean Apart*, p. 140.

of Russia the month prior, but there was little beyond supply convoys in terms of cooperation. At this stage, Churchill was yet to even meet Stalin.

Both sides also agreed at Arcadia to concentrate on the defeat of Germany ahead of Japan. The Chiefs concluded that "once Germany is defeated, the collapse of Italy and the defeat of Japan must follow". As such, "only the minimum force necessary for the safeguarding of vital interests in other theatres should be diverted from operations against Germany".[284] At first glance, it would appear as if the British had scored a diplomatic and strategic success. The United States had been attacked on home soil by an enemy in the Far East and yet its main strength was to be deployed in Europe – in accordance with Churchill's papers. As with American support to the United Kingdom before Pearl Harbour, however, this was not a decision taken out of sentimentality towards the British. Roosevelt and Marshall regarded the war against the Japanese as a formality once Germany was defeated. They also thought that it was essential to relieve pressure on the beleaguered Russians as soon as possible. The Chief of the US Naval Staff, Admiral King, who was in favour of going all out in the Pacific, was overruled. A neorealist would be right to contend that, in this case, individuals were of minor importance to the grand strategic choice that was made. The greater threat was posed by Germany and Allied grand strategy was orientated accordingly.

[284] 'Washington War Conference; American and British Strategy; Memorandum by the United States and British Chiefs of Staff' in J.R.M. Butler, *Grand Strategy, Volume III, Part II: June 1941-August 1942* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1964), Appendix I.

## 2. The Second Front

*Modicum*

Over the next few months, the Japanese scored a number of military successes over the Allies. By the end of February 1942, the British garrisons in Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore had surrendered. To add insult to injury, the Australian port of Darwin was bombed, further undermining Britain's security guarantee to the Antipodes. By the end of March, the Japanese captured Rangoon, threatening British India, and they were on the verge of evicting the Americans from the Philippines. Nevertheless, the Allies pressed ahead with the 'Germany First' strategy.

In April 1942, an American military delegation arrived in London with their own idea of how the war should be prosecuted. During the conference, which was codenamed Modicum, General Marshall proposed: (1) the build-up of US forces in Britain (Operation Bolero) in preparation for a 48-division assault on France the following year (Operation Round Up); and (2) a cross-Channel operation made up of nine divisions to capture the Cotentin Peninsula so as to take pressure off the Eastern Front (Operation Sledgehammer). The Americans regarded Sledgehammer as a "sacrifice in the common good".[285] Yet, they would only be able to provide two to three divisions and 700 of the 5,700 combat aircraft required for the operation.[286] Marshall said that the "chief burden" would therefore "fall on the UK".[287] In summary, it is clear that the American military wanted to focus exclusively

[285] 'General Marshall's Plan; Operations in Western Europe', Appendix III.
[286] Brooke diary, 9 April 1942, p. 246; Martin Gilbert, *Road to Victory: Winston S. Churchill, 1941-1945* (London: Heineman, 1986), p. 86.
[287] 'General Marshall's Plan; Operations in Western Europe', Appendix III.

on France, at the expense of an invasion of French North Africa (now codenamed Operation Gymnast). Their plan represented an explicit rebuttal of Churchill's first paper.

At this stage, Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff agreed to Bolero and Round Up for 1943. General Alan Brooke, who was now Chief of the Imperial General Staff and Chair of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, was, however, privately sceptical about Operation Sledgehammer. Writing to his wife, Brooke was scathing about Marshall's "castles in the sky" as well as his abilities as a strategist.[288] He told his subordinate, John Kennedy, that the Allies could only hope to hold a front of 20 miles wide, which would be "ridiculous" when compared with the 1,500-mile-wide Russian front.[289] He voiced some of these concerns to Marshall but agreed that planning for the operation should proceed.

One of Marshall's staff officers, Alfred Wedemeyer, later recalled saying to Marshall on their journey home that: "the British may have bought your plan, but they did so through gritted teeth".[290] It is impossible to know with certainty whether the American delegation were genuinely suspicious of the British commitment to Sledgehammer at the time. This particular officer was so distrustful of the British that he kept a tape recorder in his office to record conversations with them, so his account should therefore be treated with caution.[291] That said, Wedemeyer was right to believe that the British Prime Minister's heart lay elsewhere.

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[288] Brooke diary, 14-15 April 1942, pp. 248-249.
[289] Papers of Major General John Kennedy, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London, KENN 4/2/4.
[290] Wedemeyer interview with David Dimbleby, *An Ocean Apart*, p. 141.
[291] Alfred C. Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer Reports!* (New York: Henry Holt, 1958), p. 164.

*Argonaut*

By June, Churchill was back in the United States to lobby Roosevelt over the merits of Operation Gymnast. This conference, codenamed Argonaut, was the first time that the four key architects of Anglo-American grand strategy – Churchill, Roosevelt, Brooke, and Marshall – were gathered together. Both Marshall and the US Secretary of State for War, Henry L. Stimson, however, remained strongly opposed to the operation on the grounds that it would delay Bolero, and possibly Round Up.[292] Interestingly, Brooke was also opposed to Gymnast. He wrote of his concern about "the plans that the PM and the President had been brewing up together. We fear the worst and are certain that North Africa and North Norway plans for 1942 will loom large in their proposals, whilst we are convinced that they are not possible!".[293]

It became increasingly clear that Roosevelt was open to *any* operation that would see American troops in action against the Germans in 1942. He was concerned that American public opinion might demand an all-out effort in the Pacific and he wanted to instil in them the will to fight in Europe.[294] The President's preconditions effectively put the British in the driving seat as any cross-Channel assault force would have to be based in the United Kingdom. More importantly, the British would have to provide the bulk of the troops for any undertaking in France that year. In early July, Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff agreed that Sledgehammer was impractical for 1942 – a decision which the War Cabinet endorsed.[295] The War Cabinet also backed Churchill's pet project, Gymnast, as a

[292] Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), pp. 216-219.
[293] Brooke diary, 20 June 1942, pp. 267-268.
[294] Reynolds & Dimbleby, *An Ocean Apart*, p. 142.
[295] CAB 65/31, War Cabinet (87) minutes, 7 July 1942.

replacement operation for 1942. On 8 July, Churchill telegrammed Roosevelt to inform him that "no responsible British General, Admiral or Air Marshal is prepared to recommend Sledgehammer as a practicable operation in 1942". He continued: "all of our energies would be absorbed in defending the bridgehead". As such, "premature action in 1942 would decisively injure the prospects of well-organised, large-scale invasion in 1943". Finally, he wrote, "I am sure myself that Gymnast is by far the best chance for effecting relief to the Russian front in 1942. This has all along been in harmony with your ideas. In fact, it is your commanding idea. Here is the true Second Front of 1942".[296]

Upon hearing this, several senior figures in the Roosevelt administration toyed with the idea of threatening to abandon the 'Germany First' strategy. This reflected the view of the US Navy, the majority of the American public, and (perhaps unsurprisingly) Congress. On 10 July, Stimson wrote in his diary: "as the British won't go through with what they agreed to, we will turn our backs on them and take up the war with Japan". Stimson later claimed that "this drastic threat was designed mainly as a plan to bring the British into agreement with Bolero".[297] This seems credible, particularly in the case of Marshall who was committed to the 'Germany First' strategy. It is difficult to understate the divisions within the Roosevelt administration on this issue. General Ismay wryly observed that the US Navy's Admiral King was almost as "intolerant of the American Army" as he was of the British and the Royal Navy.[298] There was to be no attempted bluff, however, after Roosevelt likened the idea to "taking up your dishes and walking away".[299] He sent Marshall, King,

[296] CAB 65/31, 'Former Naval Person to President', 8 July 1942.
[297] Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service*, pp. 220-221.
[298] Ismay, *Memoirs*, p. 253.
[299] Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service*, pp. 220-221.

and one of his closest advisers, Harry Hopkins, to London later that month to secure agreement on a plan for 1942. He gave them instructions to the effect that, "if Sledgehammer is finally and definitely out of the picture, I want you to consider the world situation as it exists at that time and determine upon another place for US troops to fight in 1942". He asked them to consider "a new operation in Morocco and Algeria intended to drive in against the back door of Rommel's armies". Finally, he asserted that he was "opposed to an American all-out effort in the Pacific" because "the defeat of Germany means the defeat of Japan, probably without firing a shot". He took the unusual step of signing this memo off with "Commander-in-Chief" to emphasise his authority.[300]

Marshall once again presented his case for Sledgehammer to the British Chiefs on 20 July but to no avail. At a meeting of the British War Cabinet on 22 July, Brooke tore the case for Sledgehammer apart. The operation, he said, would require ten divisions, only three of which would be American. He also doubted whether the force could even hold the 20km wide peninsula, given that the Germans had twenty-seven divisions which could be used against it. He predicted that the Allies "might well be driven back into the sea", meaning that all troops and the equipment "would be lost". This would, in turn, have negative repercussions for Round Up in 1943. Furthermore, the Chief of the Air Staff could not guarantee air supremacy. The War Cabinet unanimously rejected Sledgehammer, opting instead for an Anglo-American invasion of North Africa.[301] The British veto effectively ended Marshall's conception for operations in 1942. It was a victory for Brooke – who had

[300] FDR 'Memorandum for Hon. Harry L. Hopkins, General Marshall and Admiral King, 16 July 1942, quoted in Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume IV: The Hinge of Fate* (London: Cassell, 1951) pp. 398-400.
[301] CAB 65/31, War Cabinet (94) minutes.

dissuaded the Americans from a premature invasion of western Europe – but also for Churchill, whose pet project now had the backing of his colleagues and the President of the United States. The operational details over the landing areas still had to be finalised but Operation Gymnast (later rechristened Torch) would go ahead. It was to be the most prominent Allied operation of 1942.

This episode was only the first in a series of a verbal battles between the British and American generals and political leaders over the conceptualisation of Allied grand strategy. It is a most illuminating case as it unveils a clash of interests and strategic culture, which would come to dominate Allied discussions for the rest of the war. The American generals had been schooled in the Clausewitzian approach: the concentration of force at the decisive point for a pivotal battle with the enemy.[302] Invading France was the quickest way to Berlin and anything else was a sideshow. Michael Howard has convincingly argued that the American approach to grand strategy involved first deciding on a target and then assembling the resources to accomplish it.

In contrast, Howard wrote, the British preferred to assess their current and probable resource strength before deciding on a location for the Second Front.[303] The British Chiefs of Staff were open to a cross-Channel invasion in 1943 – if the conditions were suitable – and so they supported Bolero and Round Up. They were extremely sceptical about the chances of Sledgehammer's success, but they did not dismiss the operation out of hand, as

[302] Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall, and Alanbrooke Won the War in the West* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 196.
[303] Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy*, pp. 22-23.

there was a very real danger that the Americans might divert resources to the Pacific. They also privately wanted US troops in Britain as a further bulwark to invasion. Their reservations over Sledgehammer led to a "misunderstanding", as General Ismay delicately put it, over whether the British were really committed to reinvading the continent.[304]

Some of the American delegation were later very bitter about the April 1942 meeting, accusing the British of misleading Marshall over their enthusiasm for Sledgehammer. The diary entries of Henry Stimson make this clear as does Alfred Wedemeyer's account:

> "The British were masters in negotiations – particularly were they adept in the use of phrases or words which were capable of meaning of more than one meaning or interpretation…. our British opposite numbers had elastic scruples. To skirt the facts for King and Country was justified in the consciences of these British gentlemen…. There was no expressed opposition to Marshall's ideas at this first meeting – just polite suggestions that there might be difficulties in undertaking this task or that. What I witnessed was the British power of diplomatic finesse in its finest hour, a power that had been developed over centuries of successful international intrigue, cajolery, and tacit compulsions.".[305]

After the war, the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Charles Portal, denied that there had ever been a deliberate deception. He said that, "when Winston described Marshall's suggestion as a "momentous plan", he was certainly not thinking of Sledgehammer but rather of Marshall's idea that the final blow to Germany must be delivered across the Channel". Churchill was just "being polite to Marshall and was anxious not to discourage his general conception, but at no time did he or we agree to Sledgehammer…none of us

[304] Ismay, *Memoirs*, p. 250.
[305] Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer Reports!*, pp. 105-106.

believed that we could possibly hold any bridgehead".[306] This is somewhat at odds with the post-war testimony given by Hastings's deputy, Ian Jacob, who said the Allies had agreed that:

> "Bolero should continue full blast until September 1st but we never seriously contemplated using these forces for a cross-Channel invasion that year. Our idea was to get them onto our side of the Atlantic so that they would be committed to the war for the war against Germany, and we hoped that if we had the forces in England we could persuade Roosevelt to use them in Africa".[307]

He was undoubtedly speaking for Churchill rather than the British Army, given that the CIGS was certainly not convinced of an operation in North Africa. Nevertheless, the British were united in their aversion to a premature cross-Channel assault. The Americans believed that the spectre of the First World War as well as the more recent battles in northern France loomed large over the British psyche. Marshall later attributed Brooke's resistance to Sledgehammer to the fact that his British counterpart "had a hard schooling in the battles of the Somme and had suffered the shock of the highly modernized Nazi Army. This, for a year or more in our earlier negotiations, made it difficult for him to meet our theory and battle inexperience with his practical and rather desperate experience".[308]

There was a great deal of truth in this. When they considered Sledgehammer, both Churchill and his Chiefs were mindful of the mauling they had received at the hands of the Wehrmacht in 1940. The British Army had been forced out of Norway, France, Greece,

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[306] Quoted in Roberts, *Masters and Commanders,* p. 149.
[307] Ibid, p. 211.
[308] Papers of Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke (ALAB), Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London, ALAB 11/9.

Crete, and Libya by the Germans. Churchill and Brooke both harboured doubts over their soldiers' ability to match the Wehrmacht in the field. Churchill was quoted as saying that "if Rommel's army were all Germans, they would beat us" (the *Afrika Korps* had been augmented with several Italian divisions).[309] For the Prime Minister, Tunisia – as with Egypt and Libya in 1941 – was the only place that the Allies could engage the enemy in 1942 and have a chance of success. When he explained his strategy to Stalin in August 1942, Churchill drew a picture of a crocodile, emphasising that France was the hard snout, while North Africa was the soft underbelly.[310] This analogy was to come back to haunt Churchill when operations in Italy – also part of the supposedly soft underbelly – came to a bloody standstill later in the war.

The multiple setbacks in the Far East seemed to confirm Brooke's suspicions about the British Army. After the fall of Singapore, the CIGS noted in his diary: "Cannot work out why our troops are not fighting better. If the Army cannot fight better than it is doing at present we shall deserve to lose our Empire!".[311] Later that year, he wrote to General Wavell: "we are not anything like as tough as we were in the last war". He attributed this to the First World War, which "took the cream of the generation that should be providing division and corps commanders now".[312]

The British also believed that the Americans underestimated the Wehrmacht and overestimated their own abilities. During the Argonaut conference in June 1942, the British

[309] KENN 4/2/4.
[310] Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, p. 433.
[311] Brooke diary, 18 February 1942, p. 231.
[312] ALAB 6/2/7.

delegation was treated to a demonstration by the US Army. Observing the American troops, General Ismay commented to Churchill that it would be "murder to pit them against continental soldiery". Churchill agreed but added that they had a good deal of potential.[313] He later wrote that it took at least two years to make a good soldier.[314] Meanwhile, Brooke concluded that Marshall did not appreciate that "raw American divisions" would be little match for the highly trained Wehrmacht.[315] According to his biographer, the CIGS "reckoned that the Americans had no knowledge of the modern German soldier and seriously underestimated him".[316] The baptism of fire that the Americans endured at the Kasserine Pass in Tunisia in February 1943 confirmed Brooke's belief that "time must be elapsed before the decisive battles of the war could be faced".[317]

Although this explains Brooke's reservations over Sledgehammer, it is difficult to see what he – or the rest of the British military – would have done in 1942. Operation Torch would not have taken place if it had not been for Churchill. Roosevelt's support was important but he would have been content with *any* operation against the Germans in 1942. Once Sledgehammer was vetoed by the British, he was happy to go along with the Prime Minister's pet project. It was therefore the politicians – not the generals – leading Allied strategy during the early stages of the war. It is also worth noting the importance of power in these international negotiations. As the British would be providing the bulk of the troops, they were able to control the conceptualisation of Allied grand strategy. At least to begin with, London was able to set the timing and location of the Second Front to its own interests.

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[313] Ismay, *Memoirs*, p. 257.
[314] Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, p. 347.
[315] Brooke diary, 17 July 1942, p. 281.
[316] David Fraser, *Alanbrooke* (London: Harper Collins, 1982), p. 240.
[317] Ibid, p. 287.

The Torch landings took place in November 1942 and the Allies quickly subdued Vichy French resistance. The assault came off the back of a decisive British military victory at El Alamein in Egypt. The German position in Libya and Tunisia was therefore threatened from two sides. Yet Hitler refused to countenance a withdrawal and poured reinforcements into North Africa. The arrival of these additional troops ensured that Operation Torch would not yield the quick victory that Churchill was hoping for. The strengthened Wehrmacht counter-attacked in early December and inflicted heavy losses on the fresh American troops. The remarkable speed at which the Germans responded further solidified the British generals' grudging respect for their German counterparts.

Brooke was the first to realise that Hitler's actions would have profound implications for Round Up. Churchill and the Americans still harboured hopes for a cross-Channel assault in August or September 1943. This had been agreed during Marshall's first visit to London and the Prime Minister had promised as much to Stalin during his visit to Moscow earlier in the year. The frustrated Prime Minister complained that North Africa was supposed to be a "springboard, not a sofa".[318] Brooke and the other Chiefs of Staff, however, believed that there would be insufficient troops in Britain to launch Round Up in late 1943. The precarious shipping situation meant that the requisite troops could not be redeployed before the weather turned foul in autumn 1943. Furthermore, Bolero had not been carried out to the hilt (partly because of Torch) and so there were not enough American troops in the United Kingdom.

[318] Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, p. 260.

Brooke therefore urged caution. At a meeting in early December 1942, the CIGS told Churchill that "he would ruin everything by a premature attack in France".[319] He also said that he was not beholden to Churchill's unilateral promises to Stalin.[320] The CIGS favoured Sicily and Italy for operations in 1943 and Round Up for 1944 when German morale or strength might be on the verge of collapse. The logic underpinning the Mediterranean strategy in 1943 was threefold. It would knock Italy out of the war. This would result in two further advantages. First, the Wehrmacht would have to redeploy troops to protect its southern flank. This would relieve pressure on the Russians, and, crucially, draw divisions away from guard duty on the English Channel. Secondly, it would also free up the Mediterranean for Allied shipping, which would be of paramount importance to Round Up. By 16 December 1942, Brooke and the other Chiefs had convinced Churchill and the rest of the War Cabinet to postpone the invasion of France.[321] Now they had to persuade their American allies.

*Symbol*

The big four – Churchill, Roosevelt, Brooke and Marshall – and their entourages assembled at Casablanca in January 1943 to hammer out Allied strategy post-Torch. The British were united in their objectives for the conference, codenamed Symbol. In contrast, the Americans "were at sixes and sevens amongst themselves".[322] Admiral King remained intent on securing more resources for the Pacific, while Marshall still wanted Round Up in 1943. Both

[319] KENN 4/2/4.
[320] Brooke diary, 3 December 1942, pp. 345-6.
[321] CAB 79/58.
[322] Ismay, *Memoirs*, p. 286.

were opposed to further action in the Mediterranean as it could not directly bring about the defeat of Germany. The meetings were at times ill-tempered. The Americans never warmed to Brooke's manner at these conferences, partly because he made no effort to charm them. Their suggestions would often be met with: "I flatly disagree".[323] In his diaries, he was scathing about many of the Americans as strategists, particularly Marshall, and this must have, at times, become evident. Casablanca was, however, a complete success for the British and a personal victory for Brooke. Michael Howard later argued that the Mediterranean strategy was only "in gestation between September and December 1942 but that "it was born and legitimised" at Casablanca.[324] Ian Jacob later remarked that "if I had written the report I had wanted beforehand, it would have been the one I wrote at the end".[325]

The more Anglophobic elements of the Roosevelt administration suspected that the British had pernicious motives in advancing the Mediterranean strategy. After the war, Wedemeyer wrote resentfully:

> "Our own chiefs were not at all in accord with the British. But General Marshall's relationship with Roosevelt differed subtly from the relationship that existed between the British Chiefs of Staff and the Prime Minister. They had frequent, almost daily, access to their political leader…this close informal contact between the political and military leadership in Britain made for unanimity of purpose and insured a united front whenever the Britishers marched off to conferences. They always knew in advance what they wanted. They had aims. Usually their aims could be related to Empire or their post-war position in the world of commerce".[326]

[323] Fraser, *Alanbrooke*, p. 233.
[324] Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy*, p. 35.
[325] Jacob interview with Dimbleby, *An Ocean Apart*, p. 145.
[326] Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer Reports!*, p. 179.

This was a grossly unfair and slightly absurd accusation. First, the Mediterranean strategy was not borne out of a desire to accrue financial rewards or colonise Italy and Sicily but because it was the only place that the Germans could be fought in 1943. Round Up was impractical in 1943 as there would be insufficient time and shipping to ferry the troops from North Africa to staging points in England.

Second, it is hardly reasonable to begrudge a country's negotiators for arriving at conferences well-prepared. Being united certainly helped the British but this was not a victory for diplomatic finesse – as Brooke aptly demonstrated on several occasions. The reality was that the British would once again be providing the bulk of the forces for European operations in 1943 and this allowed them to call the shots. Actual, as opposed to latent, power was decisive for the British in the bilateral conception of Anglo-American grand strategy. In January 1943, the Americans had 150,000 troops in the Mediterranean while the British had 450,000 at their disposal, as well as four times as many warships.[327]

Throughout the spring of 1943, the Allies slowly tightened the ring around German forces in North Africa. Even the reinforced Wehrmacht could not hold off the numerically superior Allied forces on two fronts. In May, 240,000 troops surrendered, which was double the number that capitulated to the Russians at Stalingrad. Hitler's decision to reinforce Tunisia had inadvertently forced the Allies to rethink the timing of Round Up but he had lost three field armies in the process. These troops could have been invaluable in the close battles fought on the Eastern Front later in 1943. Thus, Churchill's project had exceeded

[327] Max Hastings, *Finest Years: Churchill as Warlord, 1940-45* (London: Harper Press, 2009), p. 358.

expectations, although it had taken longer than expected. This episode demonstrates that grand strategy does not need to involve having a rigid plan. Grand strategic thinking is an adaptive process, as it is impossible to know exactly how decision-makers in allied and rival states will act. With the benefit of hindsight, Churchill later said that the Allies were "fortunate in their disappointment" over the delay in North Africa.[328]

*Trident*

Despite the success of Torch, many Americans continued to believe that the British had outplayed them in the negotiations in London, Washington, and Casablanca over the direction of Allied grand strategy. Upon arriving in the United States in May for the next Anglo-American conference, codenamed Trident, Brooke observed that, "the Americans are now taking up the attitude that we led them down the garden path [by] taking them to North Africa. That at Casablanca, we again misled them by inducing them to attack Sicily!! And now they are not going to be led astray again. Added to that the swing towards the Pacific is stronger than ever and before long they will be urging that we should defeat Japan first!"[329] After the war, Brooke concluded that he went through a "phase of deep depression" during the Trident conference, which he attributed to the American Chiefs of Staff who "still failed to grasp how we were preparing for a re-entry into France through our actions on the Mediterranean". Marshall supposedly said to Brooke after a meeting that: "I find it very hard even now not to look on your North Africa strategy with a jaundiced eye!!". Brooke asked him what he would have preferred, to which Marshall replied: "Cross-Channel operations for the liberation of France and advance on Germany,

[328] Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, p. 586.
[329] Brooke diary, 18 May 1943, p. 405.

we should finish the war quicker". Brooke wryly hit back, "yes, probably, but not in the way we should hope to finish it". This was a post-war recollection so it is difficult to say with certainty whether this exchange actually took place. After all, it had been Churchill, not Brooke, who originally favoured North Africa. Brooke had no reason to lie, however, and this was an accurate summation of their contrasting views on operations for 1943.

Brooke was concerned that "any attempts to unduly push our strategy on Marshall had a distinct tendency to drive him into King's Pacific Camp".[330] The historian Andrew Roberts believes that this was "wildly unfair", as Marshall perfectly understood Brooke's strategy but simply disagreed with it. Furthermore, Marshall was committed to 'Germany First'.[331] These are all cogent points although it is also possible that Brooke did not realise that Marshall was bluffing over the Pacific.

Despite American reservations, it was agreed that the invasion of Sicily (Operation Husky) would go ahead. Marshall, however, refused to countenance an assault on mainland Italy at this stage – a decision that would later prove costly as it allowed the Germans to evacuate from Sicily unharried. At Trident, the Americans secured British agreement for a twenty-nine-division assault on Northern France the following spring (Round Up was rechristened Overlord). The Americans would be providing *over* half of the invasion force. For their part, the British agreed to withdraw seven divisions from the Mediterranean theatre for Overlord by November 1943. Yet, within two months, Churchill started to have doubts about the timing of Overlord. He was concerned that the German's fighting morale and strength was

[330] Ibid, p. 406.
[331] Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 368.

seemingly inexhaustible. Allied forces landed in Sicily on 10 July but the Wehrmacht inflicted heavy losses on the British. A week later, the US Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, visited the UK and telegrammed Roosevelt to tell him that Churchill:

> "broke into a new attack on Roundhammer [Overlord]. The check received by the British attack at Catania, Sicily, during the past few days had evidently alarmed him. He referred to it and praised the superlative fighting ability of the Germans. He said that if he had fifty thousand men ashore on the French Channel coast, he would not have an easy moment because would feel that the Germans could rush up sufficient forces to drive them back into the sea. He repeated assertions he had made to me in previous conversations as to the disastrous effect of having the Channel full of corpses of defeated allies".[332]

This was a fair representation of Churchill's view. A few days after this meeting, the Prime Minister wrote to the Chiefs of Staff Committee: "I do not believe twenty-seven Anglo-American divisions are sufficient for Overlord in view of the extraordinary fighting ability of the German Army and the much larger forces that they could so readily bear against our troops even if the landings were successfully accomplished". Instead, "the right strategy for 1944 is maximum post-Husky, certainly to the [River] Po, with the option to attack westward in the south of France or north-eastward towards Vienna, and meanwhile to procure the expulsion of the enemy from the Balkans and Greece".[333] It was unsurprising that Churchill chose not to share this last idea with Stimson, considering that it represented a radical departure from the agreed Allied grand strategy.

[332] Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, pp. 225-226.
[333] Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy*, p. 45.

Stimson was no fool though; he guessed that Churchill was trying to delay or avoid Overlord. Ahead of the forthcoming Allied conference in Quebec, codenamed Quadrant, he told Roosevelt that, "we cannot now rationally hope to be able to cross the Channel and come to grips with our German enemy under a British commander. His Prime Minister and his Chief of the Imperial General Staff are frankly at variance with such a proposal. The shadows of Passchendaele and Dunkirk still hang too heavily over the imagination of these leaders of his government". Roosevelt agreed and said that "he was for the setting up as rapidly as possible a larger force in Great Britain for the purpose of Roundhammer so that…we should have more soldiers in Britain dedicated to that purpose than the British".[334] It was clear that the Americans were not prepared to allow further delays to Overlord for the sake of the Mediterranean. The only way to ensure this was to outnumber British forces, thereby gaining the whip hand over the implementation of Allied grand strategy.

*Quadrant*

The Allies met again in Canada in August 1943 to ascertain the thrust of grand strategy post-Sicily. The British managed to secure agreement on the invasion of mainland Italy while the Americans locked in Overlord for 1 May 1944. Churchill also agreed to Roosevelt's request for an American to command Overlord, despite having offered the post to Brooke on several occasions. In his memoirs, he justified this on the grounds that the Americans would be providing the bulk of the forces for the operation.[335] Whilst this was true, it was slightly disingenuous as there was an element of hedging in Churchill's approach. As early as 1942, the Prime Minister observed to his inner War Cabinet that an

[334] Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, pp. 228-230.
[335] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Volume V: Closing the Ring* (London: Cassell, 1950), p. 76.

American commander would be preferable for the decisive cross-Channel invasion as "there could be no reproach, if any part of the operation was not successful, that this was due to there being a British Generalissimo".[336] He was concerned about undertaking such a difficult amphibious operation and did not want the blame to fall on the British – should the assault go awry.

The British Eighth Army landed on the Italian mainland at Calabria on 3 September. Five days later, the Italian government surrendered. The Germans had pulled back further north, in preparation for an amphibious landing closer to Rome. It came at Salerno on 9 September. The ferocity of the German counterattack nearly pushed the American Fifth Army back into the sea. The British Eighth Army fought their way north to relieve the bridgehead a few days later. The Germans fell back in good order to the first of a series of pre-prepared defensive lines.

The British were delighted with the Allies' progress – they had succeeded in knocking Italy out of the war and in diverting German divisions away from France and Russia. There were fourteen German divisions in Italy when the Allies landed in early September. By the end of October, there were twenty-five.[337] Thanks to a clever deception (Operation Mincemeat), the Allies had also fooled Hitler into thinking that they were about to invade the Balkans from Egypt. By the end of 1943, a further twenty German divisions had been redeployed to Greece and Yugoslavia.[338] Furthermore, the Allies had taken the Foggia airfields in southern

[336] CAB 65/31, War Cabinet (88) minutes, 8 July 194.
[337] Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy*, p. 42.
[338] Ibid.

Italy, which enabled them to conduct nightly bombing raids on southern Germany. The British now wanted to exploit the early successes in Italy and draw more German resources away from the Overlord landing sites.

On 19 October 1943, Churchill criticised the provisional date for Overlord in front of the War Cabinet. He secured the backing of Brooke, who noted in his diary, "I am in many ways entirely with him, but God knows where this may lead us to as regards clashes with the Americans".[339] During the meeting itself, Brooke – making reference to the seven divisions that were about to be withdrawn from the Mediterranean for Overlord – warned about conducting strategy on the basis of "lawyers' contracts".[340] On 23 October, Churchill telegrammed Roosevelt:

> "Our present plans for 1944 seem open to very grave defects…I do not doubt our ability in the conditions laid down to get ashore and deploy. I am however deeply concerned with the build-up and with the situation that may arise between the thirtieth and sixtieth days…My dear friend, this is much the greatest thing we have ever attempted, and I am not satisfied that we have yet taken the measures necessary to give it the best chance of success".[341]

On 27 October, he told the War Cabinet that he opposed the May date for Overlord as it would prevent the Allies "from reaping the fruits of our successful Mediterranean strategy". During the same meeting, Brooke argued that it would be "folly to withdraw forces from Italy until it was clear that we were in a position to carry out Overlord successfully".[342] To be fair to Churchill, he continued to support the planning of Overlord

[339] Brooke diary, 19 October 1943, p. 461.
[340] CAB 79/66.
[341] WSC to FDR, 23 October 1943, quoted in Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, p. 538-9.
[342] CAB 65/40, War Cabinet (147) minutes, 27 October 1943.

and pressed Roosevelt to appoint a commander – in spite of his clear doubts about the operation. It was a question of timing and preparedness. He would, however, continue to send mixed messages about his commitment to the operation right up until the evening of the assault.

Brooke, meanwhile, savaged the Americans in his diary throughout the autumn of 1943. He blamed the "standstill" in Italy on the Americans for "their insistence to abandon Mediterranean operations for the very problematic cross-Channel operation. He wrote sarcastically of "the full beauty of the Marshall strategy" in depriving the Mediterranean theatre of requisite divisions.[343] "To satisfy American short-sightedness", he wrote bitterly on 1 November, "we have been led into agreeing to the withdrawal of forces from the Mediterranean for a nebulous 2nd Front, and have emasculated our offensive strategy".[344] This was slightly harsh as the Americans merely wanted the British to honour their commitments from Quadrant. Besides, the impasse in Italy had more to do with the skill of the Wehrmacht's defence, as well as the fact that the terrain favoured the defender, than the imminent withdrawal of seven divisions – five of which were still fighting in Italy when he wrote this.[345]

This October/November period is significant as it was the only time during the war that the CIGS exhibited serious misgivings about Overlord. Brooke later reflected that he must have been on the verge of a nervous breakdown. By 9 November 1943, his issue with Overlord

[343] Brooke diary, 25 October 1943, pp. 462-3.
[344] Brooke diary, 1 November 1943, p. 465.
[345] Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, pp. 425-6.

had morphed back into one of timing. He was still in favour of a 1944 cross-Channel assault but he wanted a two-month delay so as to first reach the Pisa-Rimini line in Italy.[346] Churchill, meanwhile, was becoming increasingly resentful towards the Americans. It was during this time that he pushed for the disastrous Dodecanese operation. The Americans had wanted nothing to do with his Balkan schemes. The Aegean campaign, which only involved around 5,000 British troops, was of marginal importance to the Allies' grand strategy but it was an operational calamity and signified a concerning shift in Churchill's calculations. On 18 November, Brooke noted that the Prime Minister "gave a long tirade on evils of Americans and of our losses in the Aegean…He is inclined to say to the Americans, all right if you won't play with us in the Mediterranean, we won't play with you in the English Channel. And if they say all right well then we shall direct our main effort in the Pacific, to reply you are welcome to do so if you wish!". After the war, Brooke surmised that Churchill's "spitefulness" owed much to the fact that:

> "the strength of the American forces were now building up fast and exceeding ours. He hated having to give up the position of the dominant partner which we had held from the start. As a result, he became inclined at times to put up strategic proposals which he knew were unsound purely to spite the Americans…It was usually fairly easy to swing him back onto the right line and get rid of these whims…There lay, however, at the back of his mind the desire to form a purely British theatre when the laurels would be all ours…Austria or the Balkans seemed to attract him to such a front".[347]

Churchill's concerns for British prestige were to become detrimental to the conceptualisation of British grand strategy. He had though correctly surmised that materiel

[346] Brooke diary, pp. 466-468.
[347] Ibid, pp. 472-473.

power was essential to the negotiations that determined the conceptualisation of Allied grand strategy – just as Roosevelt had several months earlier. On 6 November, he wrote: "I would like to be able to tell them: 'we will match you man for man and gun for gun on the battlefront', and also that we have made exertions for this. In this way, we shall maintain our right to be effectively consulted in operations which are of such capital consequence". He cited the fact that Britain had been able to keep some of landing craft in Italy that had been earmarked for Overlord because it "had preponderance on the battlefront".[348]

*Eureka*

The Tehran Conference, codenamed Eureka, took place in late November 1943 and was the first meeting between "The Big Three" – Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt. During the discussions, Stalin mischievously sought to drive a wedge between London and Washington by asking whether the British were even serious about Overlord. The Soviet leader dismissed the capture of Rome and other Mediterranean operations as "diversions".[349] The British, however, were not beholden to Russian demands and a compromise was eventually hammered out with the Americans. The British signed off on the invasion of southern France (Operation Anvil), which would coincide with D-Day. For their part, the Americans agreed to the postpone Overlord until the beginning of June. They also accepted the British request to retain sixty-eight landing craft in the Mediterranean until mid-January (this was later extended until February).[350]

[348] Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, p. 548.
[349] Ibid, p. 579.
[350] Ibid, pp. 619-621.

The Allies could only attack on Italy's coastal plains because the Apennine spine, which runs through the centre of the country, was impassable. Geography therefore suited the German defenders. If the Allies were to advance they had to outflank the Wehrmacht's defensive line by landing divisions further up the coast. They did so on 22 January. Two divisions landed at Anzio (Operation Shingle), whilst the bulk of the Allied forces further south launched an assault on the German Winter Line at Cassino. Despite achieving complete surprise, the Germans responded with characteristic efficiency and surrounded the Anzio bridgehead within days. Churchill observed to his general in the field, Harold Alexander, that, "the ease with which the enemy moved their pieces about on the board and the rapidity with which they adjusted the perilous gaps they had to make on their own southern front is most impressive. It all seems to give us very awkward data in regard to Overlord".[351]

The Anzio experience was not lost on the rest of the War Cabinet in London either. The Labour leader, Clement Attlee, warned that Overlord had the potential of becoming another Anzio: a static, besieged bridgehead.[352] Churchill, who still harboured misgivings about Overlord, was inclined to agree. The Supreme Commander of Overlord, General Dwight Eisenhower recalled that Churchill said, "when I think of the beaches of Normandy choked with the flower of American and British youth, and when, in my mind's eye, I see tides of running red with their blood, I have my doubts".[353] The Prime Minister continued to send mixed messages. He described himself as "hardening" to the enterprise on multiple

[351] Churchill College, Cambridge, UK, Churchill Papers (CHAR), CHAR 20/156/97-98, Telegram from WSC to General Harold Alexander, 10 February 1944.
[352] Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, p. 704.
[353] Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 273.

occasions in March, April and May of 1944.[354] He even set up a weekly committee under his chairmanship to review the preparations.[355]

Meanwhile, the Italian campaign had descended into one of attrition. Both sides dug trenches and the fighting became reminiscent of the First World War. The "soft underbelly" was becoming the "tough old gut" in the words of one American commander. Despite this, the Mediterranean strategy continued to achieve its aims. Hitler believed that destroying the Anzio beachhead would deter the Allies from invading France. Accordingly, he poured reinforcements into Italy once again (to the despair of his generals in France and Russia). Over the following months, four extra divisions were sent to Italy, ensuring that one-seventh of the entire Wehrmacht was stationed there by mid-1944.[356] Brooke had now achieved his aims and yet the British would continue to advocate the Mediterranean strategy until the end of the year.

Throughout the spring of 1944, a new argument arose between the Allies over whether resources should remain in Italy or be sent to assist the landings on the French Riviera. The British could not stop Operation Anvil, as it was largely going to involve American and French troops. They were anxious, however, to keep the maximum number of American troops and landing craft in Italy. Brooke was concerned that if the Allies withdrew too many divisions for Anvil and ceased their offensive in Italy, the Germans could take

[354] Colville diary, *The Fringes of Power*, 4 April 1944, p. 483; Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, pp. 712-13, 737.
[355] CAB 65/41, War Cabinet (10) minutes, 23 January 1944.
[356] Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 459.

advantage of the terrain, which favoured the defenders, and hold their position with a skeleton force, thus freeing up divisions for the fighting in France.[357]

The case for Italy was enhanced when Allied forces broke through the Wehrmacht's Gustav defensive line at Cassino in mid-May and relieved the Anzio bridgehead. Unfortunately, the American Fifth Army headed straight for Rome, instead of cutting off the German Tenth Army's escape route. This operational error allowed the Wehrmacht to retreat to the pre-prepared Gothic Line of fortifications south of Bologna. On 6 June, Operation Overlord began and the Italian campaign became overshadowed by events in Normandy.

Even after this all-important "second" front had been opened, the British continued to press for more resources to Italy. Churchill and the British Supreme Allied Commander in Italy, General Harold Alexander, wanted to smash through the Gothic Line, stage landings at Istria and Trieste, and then advance through the Ljubljana Gap to Vienna – "an objective of great political and psychological value".[358] Andrew Roberts has convincingly argued that "Churchill was deeply influenced by the fact that the Mediterranean theatre was principally British", and that the American-dominated Anvil would weaken that.[359] Brooke warned that the Allied forces would not breach the defensive line until September, which would mean advancing through the Alps in winter. It was hard, he noted in his diary, to make Churchill realise that, with the poor weather and rough terrain, "we should have three enemies instead of one".[360] The CIGS instead wanted to pin down as many German units

[357] Brooke diary, 19 & 20 May 1944, pp. 548-549.
[358] Harold Alexander, *The Alexander Memoirs, 1940-1945* (London: Frontline Books, 2010), p. 138.
[359] Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 497.
[360] Brooke diary, 23 June 1944, pp. 561-562.

in Italy as possible. Despite these differences, Churchill, Alexander, and Brooke were all united against the withdrawal of seven divisions (four French and three American) for the "strategically useless" Anvil operation.[361]

On 28 June, British intelligence decrypts revealed that Hitler intended to defend northern Italy – despite its comparatively limited strategic value. Brooke observed that, "Kesselring's army is now a hostage to political interference with military direction of operations; it would be madness to fail to take advantage of it, and would delay the conclusion of the war. We spent most of the day drafting a reply refusing to withdraw forces at present for a landing in South France…Winston is also sending a wire to President to back up our message".[362] Yet Roosevelt's response was a categorical 'no'. "My interest and hopes", he wrote, "centre on defeating the Germans in front of Eisenhower and driving on into Germany rather than limiting this action for the purpose of staging a full major effect in Italy". Furthermore, "I should never survive even a slight setback to Overlord if it were known that fairly large forces had been diverted to the Balkans".[363] This infuriated the British as the President was implying that the choice was between Overlord and Italy when, in reality, it was between Italy and Anvil (the Americans would counter that Anvil should be seen as complementary to Overlord, instead of an independent operation). Moreover, the British had mentioned Istria and Trieste – not the Balkans.

[361] Alexander, *The Alexander Memoirs*, p. 136.
[362] Brooke diary, 28 June 1944, p. 563.
[363] CHAR 20/167/96-98, FDR to WSC, 29 June 1944.

The President's veto on Italy was final. The seven divisions were withdrawn and sent to southern France. Churchill could do nothing more than submit a "solemn protest" to Roosevelt. He added that the decision was their "first major strategic and political error" of the war.[364] The balance of power had shifted in the relationship between the British and the Americans, now that the latter's strength had been brought to bear on the European continent. Since January 1944, the United States had more men fighting the Wehrmacht than the British Empire, giving them the upper hand in the bilateral negotiations. This gave Roosevelt and Marshall the ability to control the conceptualisation of Allied grand strategy – just as the British had done in 1942 and 1943.

Brooke later blamed the American decision on Churchill and Alexander's Vienna schemes. On 2 August, he wrote to General Maitland "Jumbo" Wilson, the Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean: "Alex's wild talk about his advance on Vienna killed our arguments dead! It is a pity because I do not see Alex advancing on Vienna this year".[365] It is worth noting that Brooke clearly harboured some sympathy for the Vienna endeavour – despite slamming the idea in his diaries. Indeed, he was to fully support Churchill and Alexander's strategy at the Octagon Conference in Quebec later that year.[366] Another important point to note from this telegram was his view on the shifting balance of power in the Anglo-American alliance:

> "The Americans now feel that they possess the major forces at sea, on land and in the air, in addition to all the vast financial and industrial advantages which they

[364] CHAR 20/167/106-108, WSC to FDR, 1 July 1944.
[365] ALAB 6/3/6, CIGS to General Wilson, 2 August 1944.
[366] John Ehrman, *Grand Strategy, Volume V: August 1943-September 1944* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1956), p. 510.

> have had from the start. In addition, they now look upon themselves no longer as apprentices at war, but on the contrary as full blown professionals. As a result of all this they are determined to have an ever-increasing share in the running of the war in all its aspects. I can assure you that we are watching these unpleasant new developments very carefully".[367]

**The Second Front debate and the grand strategy ledger**

It may seem bizarre to the reader that there has been such little discussion of British grand strategy in the Far East. This is due to the ruthless prioritisation of resources for the 'Germany First' strategy. After the early losses in 1941 and 1942, Britain's war against Japan was largely confined to Burma, while assets were concentrated in Europe and the Middle East. There is a reason that General Slim's forces in Burma were referred to as the "forgotten army". London was quite content to mount a holding operation until Germany was defeated. Brooke's biographer believes that "after India was clearly safe – after the tide of Japanese victory had been turned, notably at the battle of Midway – Brooke put the defeat of Japan into a compartment of his mind which he did not frequently inspect".[368] The same could be said for Churchill. It was only in April 1944 that a Map Room was set up at his Chequers retreat to show the Pacific theatre.[369] Both Churchill and Brooke assumed that the Americans would do the lion's share of the fighting in that theatre. The priority for the British was the decisive Second Front in Europe. This prioritisation of interests and the prevention of possible overstretch was grand strategic thinking at its finest.

[367] ALAB 6/3/6.
[368] Fraser, *Alanbrooke*, p. 312.
[369] Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, p. 731.

In the wake of Operation Overlord, Churchill observed to Henry Stimson, "it was a wonderful triumph but we couldn't have done it last year".[370] For all of the Prime Minister's wobbles, both he, Brooke, and the rest of the British government accepted that the only way to defeat Germany was to face the Wehrmacht in France. The question was one of timing.

In the spring of 1942, the British may not have been united in their support for Operation Torch in North Africa but they were all convinced that the American plan for a cross-Channel assault that year would be a disaster. They were undoubtedly right, given that the invasion force would have been hopelessly outnumbered and could not be sure of sufficient air support. Even Marshall conceded that the operation was a "sacrifice" to take pressure off of the Russians. A cross-Channel invasion in 1943 was also unworkable because of the fortuitous delay in North Africa. Even if there had been no delay, the shipping situation was still precarious in 1943 and the Allies had not achieved air superiority. The Germans would have been able to rush reinforcements to the beaches relatively unhindered. In mid-1943, the Wehrmacht was yet to suffer the horrific casualties that it would on the Eastern Front that year, most notably at the titanic battle of Kursk. Additionally, the Allies were not accustomed to mounting large-scale amphibious operations; the Sicilian and Italian campaigns gave them an opportunity to hone their skills in preparation for the assault on France. The fact that the Germans nearly succeeded in throwing the American Fifth Army back into the sea at Salerno demonstrates how difficult these operations were. The near-disaster had a sobering effect on those who believed that Round Up/Overlord could have been launched in 1943. Even with the extra year of preparation, Overlord was still

[370] Stimson, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, p. 235.

astonishingly costly in terms of manpower – as Churchill had predicted. 4,570 Allied soldiers fell on 6 June. Over the next thirty-five days, Allied casualties (killed & wounded) ran at an average of 1,800 per day – compared to 2,121 per day during the Battle of Passchendaele in 1917.[371]

Delaying the Second Front until the opportune moment was therefore logical for the British. The Americans were right to suspect that the British were deeply influenced by their memories of the last war. The British could not afford to lose hundreds of thousands of men. Channelling the views of Fuller and Liddell Hart, British grand strategy was very much geared towards the post-war world and the preservation of a generation. The cost of victory would be *proportionately* higher for the British than the Americans if the casualties were anything like the First World War. Given their vast reserves of manpower, the Americans could afford a more direct strategy, which may have higher costs with the chance of quicker gains.

It was also better from Brooke and Churchill's perspective to see the German Army bled dry at the expense of Russian lives instead of British – although they would never admit to this. The longer the Anglo-American Second Front was delayed, the fewer German divisions they would have to contend with on the European mainland. In summary, the way British grand strategy was conceptualised reflected the fact that the United Kingdom "could neither afford the manpower losses of the Russians nor the *materiel* losses of the

[371] Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 487.

Americans".[372] With such differences in potential strength, a proportionate grand strategy had different connotations for the British and the Americans. Brooke was right that the British had to "relate strategy to manpower".[373] An Allied victory in the Second World War would have been rather meaningless for the UK if it had been of the pyrrhic variety.

Furthermore, Churchill and his military chiefs harboured doubts about the fighting efficacy of their own men. Since the *Blitzkrieg* of May 1940, they had also shouldered a grudging respect for the fighting skill of the Wehrmacht. Both of these judgements were accurate. Throughout the war, the German soldier consistently outperformed his British, American, and Russian counterparts both in offence and defence. On a man-for-man basis, the Wehrmacht inflicted casualties at about a 50% higher rate than they incurred from the British and American troops. The figure rises to 300% for the Eastern Front.[374]

Thus, the British were only prepared to sanction the decisive Second Front once they had an overwhelming majority of men, tanks and aircraft. Brooke was right to "fear above all things a premature and unsuccessful return to the mainland of Europe".[375] This rationale was evident at the operational level as well. British commanders were reluctant to go on the offensive against the Germans unless they had numerical superiority. At the battle of El Alamein, for example, Montgomery only felt confident to attack once he had double the number of tanks and men as Rommel.

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[372] Paul M. Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy: Background Influences on British External Policy, 1865-1980* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 356.
[373] Brooke diary, 16 July 1943, p. 430.
[374] T.N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and the General Staff, 1807-1945* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1977), pp. 253-254.
[375] Fraser, *Alanbrooke*, p. 240.

The second, inter-related aspect of British grand strategy was the pursuit of the Mediterranean campaign. This originated not out of some grand design (as Brooke later claimed) but out of a need to keep the Russians in the war by drawing German divisions away from the Eastern Front. Furthermore, it was important that British and American troops were not standing idle in 1942. The Mediterranean campaign was complementary to the Second Front in France. After Hitler reinforced Tunisia, the British realised that the German leader would command his generals to fight for every inch of territory, even if it was strategically useless. Hopping from North Africa to Sicily and then Italy was strategically sensible as it would facilitate the toppling of Mussolini's regime. This would, in turn, force Hitler to cover his exposed southern flank. Their assessment was vindicated when German divisions were drawn away from France and the Eastern Front. During the decisive battle of Kursk, for example, Hitler withdrew two of his elite SS Panzer divisions in the middle of the fighting to reinforce Italy.[376] Contrary to the views of some Anglophobic Americans, the British had no imperial designs on the Mediterranean. They regarded operations in Italy as inherently linked to the decisive cross-Channel assault. To begin with at least, the British successfully avoided the error of "theatreitis" – the tendency to look only at the needs of one theatre of operation, and not at the requirements of fighting the war as a whole.[377] The same could not be said for the Americans in 1942 and 1943 because they regarded the North African and Italian campaigns as distracting and separate from the decisive invasion of France.

[376] Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 383.
[377] Gaddis, 'What is Grand Strategy?'.

Delaying the Second Front and pursuing the Mediterranean strategy were integral pillars of British grand strategy. There was a point, however, at which the latter could serve no more useful purpose to Overlord, and the British failed to realise this. By the start of 1944, the Allies had successfully drawn nearly fifty German divisions into southern Europe. The Mediterranean had been cleared for shipping and Allied planes were able to bomb Germany from airfields in Italy. There was no more that could be accomplished in this theatre. The desire to push on through Ljubljana Gap and onto Vienna in late 1944 was a pipe dream.

After the war, some claimed that the British were far more clear-headed about Soviet intentions than the Americans. The Vienna plan, they alleged, was strategically sound as it would have given the Western Allies a greater say in the post-war ordering of central and eastern Europe.[378] Was the Vienna scheme pursued with one eye looking towards the post-war world? There is an element of plausibility in this, given that Churchill still held his old suspicions of the Soviet Union, long after the Anglo-Soviet alliance had been signed. In 1942, he stated, "I do not want to be left alone in Europe with the bear".[379] Two years later, he urged his Foreign Secretary and protégée Anthony Eden, to "never forget that Bolsheviks are crocodiles".[380]

This argument over Churchill's clairvoyance ignores the fact that the three allies had already agreed upon a number of the more contentious European border issues during the

[378] Hanson W. Baldwin, *Great Mistakes of the War* (London: Alvin Redman, 1950).
[379] Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, pp. 372-3.
[380] Ibid, p. 754.

Tehran Conference in 1943. The desire to march on Vienna had more to do with bolstering British prestige than it did with preventing the spread of Bolshevism. Churchill and his colleagues knew that the Americans would get the lion's share of the credit for the liberation of France. The British still commanded and made up the bulk of the forces in the Mediterranean. Vienna would therefore be their tangible prize after the hard slog of Italy. In July 1944, Churchill wrote to his Chiefs of Staff: "the one thing to fight for now is a clean cut…let them monopolise all the landing craft they can reach. But let us at least have a chance to launch a decisive stroke with what is entirely British and under British command".[381]

It is understandable that Churchill craved the prestige of capturing Vienna, as it would have given him and the British greater clout among the "Big Three" after the war. Many in London believed that "the capture of Vienna by General Alexander's armies would strengthen their hand against both their giant allies".[382] It was never a realistic option though. The Germans would have been falling back on their own lines of communication through a mountain range in winter. The conditions could not have been worse for an attacking army. It is particularly surprising that Brooke, who recognised these difficulties, should have advocated the route at the Octagon Conference.

Once the Allies had landed in Normandy, the British should have recognised that France was now the overarching priority and allocated resources accordingly. Fortunately, the Americans, who realised this and had effective control of Allied grand strategy by this

[381] Ibid, p. 843.
[382] Howard, *The Continental Commitment*, pp. 145-146.

point, ensured that there was no deviation from the plan agreed at the 1943 Quadrant conference. Eliot Cohen concurs that "the Italian campaign came, in 1944, to exercise an undue fascination on the British Chiefs of Staff and their Prime Minister, who began to see possibilities for a decisive breakthrough that did not exist".[383] If the British were serious about preventing the Soviets from dominating large swathes of Europe, they would have had to launch a cross-Channel invasion in 1943. As explained above, this was impractical in terms of manpower and shipping, and it would have probably ended in failure, even if it had been feasible.

Britain's grand strategy for victory was proportionate for most of the Second World War. The British were right to resist the premature calls from the American military to open the decisive Second Front in France in 1942 and 1943. The Mediterranean strategy, meanwhile, succeeded in dispersing German forces across a wide front, which, as Churchill and Brooke both predicted, would prove impossible to maintain. That said, the Prime Minister and his Chiefs of Staff came to attach too much importance to the Italian theatre. What started as a complementary campaign to Overlord morphed into an unhealthy obsession for the British.

**Neoclassical realism and the Second Front debate**

How does my neoclassical realist argument stand up against the Second Front debates? As with the previous cases, we should expect a minimal role for domestic veto players, but some room for individual and collective biases. Neorealists would be right to assert that power concerns (i.e. the strength of the Wehrmacht and the relative strength of Allied

[383] Eliot Cohen, 'Churchill and Coalition Strategy in World War II' in *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, p. 63.

forces) were inherent in the calculations made by British and American officials over when and where to launch the "true" Second Front. Once again though, this is not a wholly sufficient explanation because American military officials weighed these power considerations differently. Unlike their British counterparts, who preferred at first to pursue an indirect approach in order to disperse German forces, Marshall and the other members of the Roosevelt administration advocated an immediate and direct assault on northern Europe.

This divergence in the beliefs of British and American planners can be explained by differences in strategic culture. These ingrained assumptions over the use of force were based on contrasting levels of latent power. The US adopted a Clausewitzian approach, which called for the concentration of force at the decisive point, whereas the British preferred to weaken the Germans before attempting the pivotal cross-channel assault. With such differences in potential strength, a proportionate grand strategy meant different things in London and Washington.

As with the previous two cases, the importance of individual perceptions of power in the conceptualisation of this grand strategy cannot be overstated. It was Churchill who first envisaged how the war should be prosecuted. Allied grand strategy loosely followed the course that he set out in the three papers composed aboard the *Duke of York* in December 1941. The Allies placed the defeat of Germany above that of Japan and then invaded North Africa in 1942 (despite the reservations of the Anglo-American military advisers). They also adopted an indirect strategy to weaken the Wehrmacht before the decisive battle in France. Naturally, there were some aspects that were not implemented. The Prime Minister hoped

to reinvade northern Europe in 1943 but he could not have foreseen the delay in capturing Tunisia, which was the result of Hitler's strategically illiterate decision to hold every inch of territory in North Africa. "In his grasp of the broad sweep of strategy" General Ismay concluded, Churchill "stood head and shoulders above his professional advisers".[384]

The role of General Alan Brooke should not be downplayed either, but for different reasons. At the turn of 1942, it was Brooke who convinced the other Chiefs of Staff, the War Cabinet, the Prime Minister and, ultimately, the Americans of the need to delay the Second Front until 1944 in order to consolidate their gains in the Mediterranean in 1943. In the balance of power among the British military chiefs, Brooke was *primus inter pares*.[385] His biographer is right to claim that, without him, "there might have been no Italian campaign at all", which would have meant no dispersal of German forces.[386] Brooke's pragmatism over the Second Front, combined with Churchill's visionary thinking were of paramount importance to the conceptualisation of British and Allied grand strategy. Neither had the upper hand over the direction of British grand strategy and this rivalry of sorts ensured that ideas were debated thoroughly. Despite their almost daily arguments over the prosecution of the war, both men had a great deal of respect for each other.

Yet it must be stated that these men were also largely responsible for the flawed Vienna scheme, which was an unnecessary distraction. It is difficult to generalise about why an individual may exert certain biases on one occasion but not another. In this instance,

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[384] Ismay, *Memoirs*, p. 163. It is important to note that Ismay was very close to the Prime Minister and is not the most impartial of sources. His account of the Second World War was a riposte to several revisionist critiques of Churchill.
[385] Fraser, *Alanbrooke*, p. 500.
[386] Ibid, p. 453.

groupthink appears to have affected the British decision-makers towards the end of the conflict. The fact that Churchill and Brooke, among others, tried to persevere with the Mediterranean strategy – long after it had achieved its objectives – can be explained by neoclassical realism. With the existential threat waning towards the end of the war, policymakers had greater room for manoeuvre. As it became more obvious that Germany was going to be defeated, harmful biases crept into Churchill's thinking. Individuals cannot always be expected to operate in a procedurally rational way. By 1944, British leaders had endured five years of war. Brooke and Churchill could be forgiven for resenting their country's growing marginalisation in the prosecution of Allied grand strategy, after having invested so much effort in such a long struggle. They placed great symbolic value on the capture of Vienna and Churchill particularly was drawn to the idea of an exclusively British front and the laurels that it might bring. They would have succeeded in diverting Allied grand strategy – had it not been for the shift in power between the British and Americans at the beginning of 1944.

As expected, domestic veto players played very little role in the conceptualisation of British and, by extension, Allied grand strategy. There was a strong clamour in the UK for a Second Front throughout 1942, which was partly driven by the substantial pro-Russian lobby, but this was virtually ignored. Left-wing activists organised marches in the centre of London, while the Russian Ambassador, Ivan Maisky, was cheered in the street.[387] This movement garnered the support of Churchill's former ally, Lord Beaverbrook, who controlled the right-wing press. As such, an "unlikely coalition between left and right-wing critics of

[387] Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 119.

Churchill's strategy was formed".[388] Brooke wrote despairingly the following day that "this universal cry to start a western front is going to be hard to compete with, and yet what can we do with some 10 divisions against the German masses? Unfortunately, the country fails to realise the situation we are in".[389] In April, the government lost a by-election to a candidate standing on a 'Second Front Now' ticket.[390] There were also a handful of Conservative MPs, who openly criticised their leader's strategy. For Paul Kennedy, the Second Front lobby was "the only significant domestic pressure upon the government's strategic conduct of the war".[391] Despite this, the government did not bend to public opinion or media pressure. One month before the launch of Overlord in 1944, the Canadian Prime Minister, William Mackenzie King, congratulated Churchill on successfully preventing a premature invasion of France. It was, he said "perhaps the greatest of the many great things that Mr Churchill had done that he had withstood this pressure until the time was ripe".[392]

There was only one stage of the war when Churchill's political power, and therefore his hold over the conceptualisation of grand strategy, was tenuous. At the beginning of 1942, he came under sustained criticism after a series of military setbacks. In February, Singapore fell to the Japanese and a *Kriegsmarine* squadron managed to evade the Royal Navy's blockade and sail through the English Channel almost completely unscathed. This precipitated a wave of criticism from parliament and the media. Even the *Daily Mail* led with an anti-Churchill piece.[393] The pressure was such that Churchill felt compelled to make

[388] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, p. 286.
[389] Brooke diary, 30 March 1942, p. 243.
[390] Hastings, *Churchill as Warlord*, p. 287.
[391] Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy,* p. 353.
[392] CAB 99/28, minutes from meeting of Prime Ministers, 1 May 1944.
[393] Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, p. 56.

changes to his inner war cabinet. He brought in Labour's Stafford Cripps as Leader of the Commons and Privy Seal. Cripps, who favoured an early Second Front, had secured the alliance with the Soviet Union while serving as ambassador to Moscow. He was also the popular choice to replace Churchill. A poll in September 1942 found that 24% of the public favoured Cripps as Churchill's successor if the latter left office. The Deputy Prime Minister and Labour leader, Clement Attlee, scored only 2%.[394]

The pressure mounted in June after Rommel's *Afrika Korps* captured the Libyan city of Tobruk, along with 33,000 British and Empire soldiers. Churchill later described the setback as "one of the heaviest blows" of the war. "Defeat is one thing", he wrote, but "disgrace is another".[395] The Prime Minister, who was in Washington when he heard the news, called Eden to ascertain "the position at home".[396] Despite easily seeing off a motion of no confidence by 475 votes to 25 later that month, Churchill felt insecure throughout the summer of 1942. In October 1942, Cripps threatened to resign over the Prime Minister's handling of the war. Churchill's political future was very much contingent on the outcomes of Operation Torch and General Montgomery's forthcoming attack at El Alamein. "If Torch fails", he told Attlee and Eden, "then I am done for and must go and hand over to one of you".[397]

Fortunately for Churchill and his supporters, both operations were successful and the political crisis passed. By November, he felt confident enough to exclude Cripps, who was

[394] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, p. 292.
[395] Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, pp. 343-44.
[396] Anthony Eden, *The Eden Memoirs: The Reckoning* (London: Cassell, 1965), p. 331.
[397] Ibid, p. 343.

not a constructive rival, from the inner War Cabinet. This was the last challenge to Churchill's hold over British grand strategy. Attlee later recorded that "what [Montgomery] did was important, but tremendously important was that he did it at a critical time. We badly needed a victory".[398] Churchill named the fourth volume of his memoirs *The Hinge of Fate* in deference to this moment. "It may almost be said", he wrote, that "before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat".[399]

This episode underscores the importance of political power in the conceptualisation of grand strategic thinking. The actors at the table are only as influential as the cards they hold. If Churchill had fallen, the conceptualisation and implementation of British and, by extension, Allied grand strategy could have been remarkably different. The Prime Minister was fortunate that Attlee was Labour leader and not Cripps. Churchill's wartime political partnership with the Gallipoli veteran is key to understanding his hold over the decision-making process in the UK. Andrew Roberts contends that the War Cabinet was a "lapdog over grand strategy" for most of the war.[400] This is an overly harsh verdict as Attlee often had to make painful concessions to keep in step with Churchill's position. The Labour leader resisted strong pressure from within his own party to push for an early Second Front.[401] His support for the Prime Minister was therefore proactive rather merely reactive as Roberts seems to imply.

[398] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, p. 295.
[399] Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, p. 541.
[400] Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 256.
[401] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, p. 279.

As expected, the public played little role under restrictive conditions. The Second Front movement was popular in some circles but the overwhelming majority of the electorate supported Churchill. Even after the losses of Singapore and Tobruk in 1942, Churchill's approval rating was still at 78%. This was the lowest figure he registered during the entire war; the Prime Minister regularly scored in the high 80s and low 90s.[402] The rallying effect of an existential threat evidently minimised the public's role as a potential veto player.

Separately, the Second Front debate shows that hard power capability matters when two sovereign states share a grand strategy. The British were able to get their way on the major debates over grand strategy in 1942 and 1943 because they were providing the bulk of the forces. Until the spring of 1944, the United Kingdom had between a quarter and a third more divisions in contact with the enemy than the United States.[403] The Americans were forced to shelve Sledgehammer and a 1943 Round Up/Overlord in favour of North Africa and then Italy. By January 1944, however, the total US strength in Europe was 60% larger than Britain's.[404] Thus, by the beginning of 1944, the Americans were able to govern the conceptualisation grand strategy. In December 1944, Churchill lamented to one of his advisers, General Smuts, that "it is not so easy as it used to be for me to get things done".[405] Four months later, the Prime Minister's private secretary, John Colville, observed that "up till Overlord he [Churchill] saw himself as Marlborough, the supreme authority to whom all military decisions were referred" but now "he is by force of circumstances little more than a spectator".[406]

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[402] Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, pp. 741, 747.
[403] Cohen, 'Churchill and Coalition Strategy', pp. 50-51.
[404] Ibid.
[405] Gilbert, *Road to Victory*, p. 1081.
[406] Colville diary, 20 March 1945, p. 574.

It was fortunate for Allied grand strategy as a whole that the Americans were able to exercise control over the conceptualisation process just as the British were becoming obsessed with Vienna. Michael Howard sagely concludes that "the United States had cause to be grateful to British caution and realism during the early years of strategic planning; but it was largely thanks to the stubborn perseverance of the American military leaders that the strategy, for better or worse, was ultimately carried out as had been jointly planned".[407]

**Conclusion**

What do Britain's experiences in the Second World War tell us about proportionate and disproportionate grand strategic thinking? First, it is clear that no grand strategy is perfect. There is evidence of proportionate grand strategic thinking in the decision: to fight on in May 1940; to prioritise the Middle East over the Far East in 1941; to place the defeat of Germany over that of Japan; to delay the Second Front until the opportune moment; and to pursue the Mediterranean campaign in order to disperse German strength. That said, the British record is slightly tainted by Churchill's unhealthy fixation with Vienna towards the end of the war.

These cases support my neoclassical realist argument. In a restrictive security environment, we should expect existential threats to hone minds and reduce barriers to implementation. Domestic veto players played no significant role in any of the three episodes examined. In

[407] Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy*, pp. 70-71.

most cases, the imminence and urgency of the situation drove decision-makers towards the most prudent course of action.

There were, however, several instances where domestic political and cognitive factors *could* have jeopardised the conceptualisation of grand strategy. It was not pre-ordained that Britain would follow this course and many factors could have derailed the process. This is why neoclassical realism and process tracing offer such rich insights. If Lord Halifax had succeeded Churchill, the outcome of the war almost certainly would have been entirely different. Both men had conflicting reactions to the fall of France, which reflected their different perceptions of Britain's vital and major interests. Similarly, Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff held opposing views over the prioritisation of British interests in 1941. A weaker prime minister, or one who had not studied civil-military relations as Churchill had, might have given the generals freer rein over the conceptualisation of grand, as well as military, strategy.

An actor's power is decisive to the outcome of these bargaining games, a lesson that any decision-maker should heed. In the intranational deliberations over whether to fight on in May 1940, Churchill was at first unable to dismiss Lord Halifax's negotiated peace plan because of his tenuous political position. It was only once he had secured the support of Attlee, Greenwood, Sinclair, Chamberlain and the wider cabinet that he felt confident to reject the Foreign Secretary's approach to Mussolini. In the second example, Churchill was able to overrule the Chiefs' views only because he had already prevented the military from controlling the committees and decision-making process.

With regard to the Second Front debate, the state which held greater *actual* power effectively had a veto over grand strategy. As the British fielded more troops in Europe in 1942 and 1943, they were able to call the shots. The reverse was true once the Americans had amassed a preponderance of force on the continent by January 1944. The Allies were fortunate that the Americans were in the ascendancy as British grand strategic thinking veered slightly awry in 1944. Capturing Vienna would have been an outstanding victory for the British but, post-Overlord, the Americans were right to insist on concentrating resources in France.

Finally, this chapter suggests that the structure of the decision-making, as well as the balance of experience between leaders and their advisers, can affect the quality of a grand strategic thinking. In the first case, the makeup of the War Cabinet allowed for a heated and productive debate between a small number of actors. Churchill knew that Halifax's contrarian stance was not borne out of a desire to oust him from Downing Street. The peer had already refused the chance to become prime minister; his advocacy of a negotiated peace came from genuine beliefs, rather than political opportunism. Later in the war, the same could not be said of Stafford Cripps, who would have liked to topple Churchill from power. Evidently, certain rivals are more conducive to decision-making and preventing groupthink from taking hold.

Like Halifax, Brooke posed no threat to Churchill's premiership. It was a healthy rivalry in the sense that both men were able to debate the country's interests and priorities with great vehemence, while safe in the knowledge that there were no pernicious, ulterior motives. Before Brooke became Chair of the Chiefs of Staff Committee in early 1942, the civil-military

relationship had probably become slightly unbalanced given that Churchill, in addition to making the necessary organisational changes, was so dominant over Dill and the other Chiefs. Although the Prime Minister was right to concentrate resources in Egypt in 1940/41, it would have been folly to rely exclusively on one individual for the duration of the war. The Prime Minister was wise to promote Brooke to CIGS and then Chair of the Chiefs of Staff Committee; he needed someone who was prepared to stand up to him when it came to the all-important Second Front. Other politicians might have replaced Dill with a yes-man, but "Churchill chose someone who he knew would not back down, except to overwhelmingly convincing argument".[408] Despite being temperamental opposites, the eccentric Englishman and the sober Ulsterman made an unlikely but effective duo in conceptualising Britain's grand strategy for victory. The United Kingdom owes them both a great debt.

[408] Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, p. 689.

## CHAPTER V

## ON THE ROAD *FROM* MANDALAY: BRITISH GRAND STRATEGY AND THE WITHDRAWAL FROM 'EAST OF SUEZ'

*"Ship me somewheres east of Suez, where the best is like the worst,*
*Where there aren't no Ten Commandments an' a man can raise a thirst;*
*For the temple-bells are callin', an' it's there that I would be*
*By the old Moulmein Pagoda, looking lazy at the sea;*
*On the road to Mandalay…*

– Extract from Rudyard Kipling's 1890 poem, Mandalay

In January 1968, Harold Wilson announced that Britain would withdraw from 'East of Suez'. The decision was described by one of the leading politicians at the time as "the most momentous shift in our foreign policy for a century and a half".[409] The phrase, 'East of Suez', was shorthand for Britain's world role and described its military bases in Malaya, Singapore and the Gulf, which London had clung on to since the end of the Second World War, despite shedding colonies in Africa and the Indian subcontinent.[410] This chapter will not only attempt to explain how withdrawal from East of Suez came about but it will also consider whether it is a case of proportionate grand strategic thinking.

To this day, a consensus has yet to emerge between academics as to the motivations or timing of the withdrawal. This chapter therefore contributes to an ongoing debate. The first

[409] Patrick Gordon Walker, *The Cabinet* (London: Collins, 1972), p. 122.
[410] Harold Wilson's speech to the House of Commons, London, 16 December 1964, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1964/dec/16/foreign-affairs.

judgement that emerged was one of economic determinism. Phillip Darby concludes that "ultimately lack of resources rather than intellectual rejection ensured its abandonment".[411] Similarly, Michael Dockrill writes that the withdrawal is "the one clear case where economic circumstances forced Britain into a sudden change of course".[412] This suggests that Britain acted according to neorealist expectations, in that the country experienced a relative decline in economic power after the Second World War and contracted its commitments accordingly.

Others have suggested that biases, related to status concerns, delayed the inevitable drawdown. Robert Holland observes that East of Suez was, in effect, "synonymous with the nation's determination to maintain its prestige in the world" and was only ended by the great currency crisis of November 1967.[413] John Darwin agrees that the "reluctance to contemplate complete and final withdrawal was [partly due to] a view of Britain's interests and place in the world that was emotional and romantic rather than coldly rational and cost-effective".[414] For historian Corelli Barnett, the country's:

> "political leaders and the governing Establishment, conditioned as they had been from their Edwardian childhoods to take it for granted that Britain stood in the first rank of nation states, simply could not accept that British power had vanished amid the stupendous events of the Second World War, and that the era of imperial greatness that had begun with Marlborough's victories had now ineluctably closed. Instead they thought that Britain was suffering short-term weaknesses in the wake of her wartime sacrifices; and they were resolved to restore and perpetuate Britain's traditional role. The pursuit of this hallucination in the next quarter of a century was

[411] Phillip Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez, 1947-1968* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 334.
[412] Michael Dockrill, *British Defence since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 126-127.
[413] Robert Holland, *The Pursuit of Greatness: Britain and the World Role, 1900-1970* (London: Fontana, 1991), p. 9, 330.
[414] John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The retreat from empire in the post-war world* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 294.

> to cost Britain in defence expenditure up to double the proportion of GNP spent by European industrial competitors."[415]

For these scholars, successive British politicians and civil servants, all of whom were wedded to the idea of Britain's great power status, wilfully pursued a disproportionate grand strategy of overstretch until they were forced to accept the reality of decline.

Another group of scholars allude to the importance of particular individuals and their beliefs, as well as the importance of domestic politics. Jeffrey Pickering believes the changing composition of Harold Wilson's Cabinet in late 1967 was the decisive factor in bringing about this substantive shift in grand strategy. After a series of economic crises, which resulted in the Labour government devaluing the pound, the political balance of power within cabinet shifted away from those who supported the maintenance of a world role.[416] Pickering stresses the importance of the role played by ardent Europeanist Roy Jenkins, who replaced James Callaghan as Chancellor following the devaluation of sterling in November 1967. David Reynolds agrees that that the appointment of Jenkins finally upset the globalist, "Bevinite" consensus at the heart of Cabinet.[417] Historian Gill Bennett's analysis of the East of Suez decision in her book, *Six Moments of Crisis*, also focusses on the political machinations of the Cabinet in late 1967 and early 1968.[418]

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[415] Corelli Barnett, *The Pride and the Fall: The Dream and Illusion of Britain as a Great Nation* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 304.
[416] Jeffrey Pickering, 'Politics and 'Black Tuesday': Shifting Power in the Cabinet and the Decision to Withdraw from East of Suez, November 1967–January 1968', *Twentieth Century British History* (13:2, 2002, pp. 144-170).
[417] David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (Longman: London, 1991), p. 230.
[418] Gill Bennett, *Six Moments of Crisis: Inside British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 95-121.

Matthew Jones contends that Wilson and the Labour top brass were more realistic than others have suggested. Focussing on the Far East, rather than the Gulf, he argues that withdrawal was impractical when Wilson came to power in 1964 because Britain was duty-bound to assist the fledging Malayan Federation in its Confrontation with Indonesia. There was also the "interconnected desire of the United States for Britain to retain an overt military presence in the region", which only eased once the Confrontation came to an end in 1966.[419] The "rubicon of a pullout" was crossed that year but the timetable for withdrawal was accelerated in January 1968 in the wake of the sterling crisis and devaluation in late 1967.[420] Similarly, Saki Dockrill contests the focus placed by Pickering, Bennett and Reynolds on the importance of devaluation. For her, the decision was taken in 1967, although she observes that "the last years of the Macmillan government witnessed the serious beginning of discussions both at ministerial and official levels about Britain's East of Suez role".[421]

There have been many other excellent contributions, but this snapshot of the literature demonstrates how contested this topic is. This case therefore makes for an interesting contrast with the previous chapter. The debates above suggest that conceptualising grand strategies is a more arduous and challenging process in peacetime, than in war. As David Greenwood put it, "during the Second World War defence enjoyed overriding priority in the competition for scarce national resources and security priorities themselves were

[419] Mathew Jones, 'A Decision Delayed: Britain's Withdrawal from South East Asia Reconsidered, 1961-68', *English Historical Review* (117:472, 2002, pp. 569–595), p. 571.
[420] Ibid. p. 594.
[421] Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 209.

determined by grand strategy. After the war the resource allocation problem assumed its more familiar form: how much for military purposes as opposed to other things?"[422]

The literature proffers a range of factors that may have influenced grand strategic thinking, from individual biases to alliance pressures. How important were these intervening variables? The 1960s offered a more benign security environment than the early 1940s. To be sure, the threat posed by the Soviet Union is likely to hone minds and reduce potential barriers to implementation. Yet, the danger posed by Moscow waxed and waned during the 1960s. Thus, we should expect domestic veto players to exert greater influence than they did during the Second World War. Moreover, policymakers had more room for manoeuvre, which provides greater scope for the role of harmful biases – as the Conservative government of the 1950s aptly demonstrated.

I argue that the key decision-makers in both the Macmillan and Wilson governments were more pragmatic than they are often given credit for. To varying degrees, both administrations tried to retrench when conditions were favourable. That said, they had to be mindful of internal party politics. Macmillan faced the imperialist Tory old guard and Wilson had to contend with an unlikely coalition of leftist little Englanders and Europeanists. Thus, the Conservative right pushed Macmillan outwards, while the Labour factions tried to pull Wilson back from the periphery without delay. Macmillan and Wilson were forced to walk a tightrope. Withdraw too soon and Britain would disappoint allies

[422] David Greenwood, 'Defence and National Priorities since 1945' in *British Defence Policy in a Changing World*, edited by John Baylis (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 182.

and cede ground to Nasser and the Soviet Union. Withdraw too late (or not at all) and the burdens of empire would damage the British economy.

*Events, dear boy, events*

When Harold Wilson became prime minister in 1964, the UK was responsible for the defence of dozens of countries across the globe. The government was spending £85m per year on forces in West Germany and £97m on deployments East of Suez, £73m of which was in the Far East.[423] This was the result of a bloody standoff with Indonesia over the territorial integrity of the new Federation of Malaya. Before delving into the Labour government's decision-making in the 1960s, it is worth briefly detailing how Britain found itself so overstretched.

Throughout the 1950s, Britain entered into a series of burdensome alliances which put a tremendous strain on its shrinking resource base. The principal culprit for this was Anthony Eden, first as Foreign Secretary and later as Prime Minister. On his watch, the UK joined the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954, and signed Baghdad Pact in 1955 (later renamed CENTO – the Central Treaty Organisation). The UK therefore had formal treaty obligations in the Mediterranean, Gulf and Indo-Pacific regions.

A further significant commitment was made in Europe, where the Conservative government agreed in 1954 that the British Army would have a *permanent* presence on the continent. The UK's obligation to Europe, which was already enshrined through NATO

[423] PREM 13/18, Note by HM Treasury for the Prime Minister on Overseas Expenditure, 10 November 1964.

and Article V, was intentionally ambiguous on force levels so that London could have the flexibility to decide where it needed to station the bulk of its assets – in Europe or East of Suez. The revised Brussels Treaty required Britain to "maintain on the mainland of Europe…four divisions and the Second Tactical Air Force, or such other forces as the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, regards as having equivalent fighting capacity".[424] This was the first time in over two hundred and fifty years that the British had agreed to station major ground forces on the continent in peacetime as part of a military alliance.[425] In his desire to placate French concerns over German rearmament, whilst keeping the Americans tied into European defence, Eden stretched British forces to the limit. The pressures of the Cold War and the threat posed by the Soviet Union warranted a greater British presence on the continent. Yet, Eden acted as if there were no trade-offs in being committed to NATO, CENTO and SEATO.

How did this come to pass? Eden was under the delusion that Britain had emerged from the Second World War as one of the victorious "big three", alongside the Soviet Union and the United States. Several members of the post-war Labour government, as well as Churchill's subsequent administration, had fallen into the same trap. It is difficult to disagree with Corelli Barnett's conclusion that the UK "emerged into the post-war era with the foundations of her former independent national power as completely destroyed as those of France and Germany, but with the extra, and calamitous drawback that, as a 'victor', she failed to realise it".[426]

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[424] CAB 148/52, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee: Defence Review Working Party – Memo on Reduction by Half of British Forces in Germany. Annex – Western European Union and NATO obligations, 3 May 1965.
[425] David French, *The British Way in Warfare, 1688-2000* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 215.
[426] Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, p. 561.

This belief was not just held by political leaders, but wider society. Victory, Michael Charlton notes, "meant that the British held a different view of themselves – it was a national attitude of mind – which reinforced the more obvious differences [with comparable European powers]. 'We were alone', 'We fought on', and, in the end, 'We won'. It would transpire that we too, however, were ruined".[427] Overstretch incentivised retrenchment, yet policymakers held onto many overseas commitments. Victory had proven to them that the beacon of British power was undimmed. This is a perfect example of the role of psychological biases. The implication is that "states will readily repeat policies that were perceived as successful in the past, even if those policies, in tangible terms, had neutral or negative effects or produced positive results simply because of good fortune".[428]

The Suez Crisis of 1956 put an end to such illusions. The UK, France and Israel invaded Egypt in response to Colonel Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal, but they were forced into an embarrassing retreat after the United States put financial pressure on the pound. The operation cost Eden his job and centred "public attention on the level of defence spending", with the consensus emerging that "Britain had not been getting full value for money".[429] As a result of its involvement in the Korean War and its wider commitments, the UK was spending 9.8% of GDP on defence in 1953 (as opposed to West Germany's 4.2%).[430] This was having a detrimental impact on the economy, which had performed

[427] Michael Charlton, *The Price of Victory* (London: BBC, 1983), p. 11.
[428] Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, *Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 16.
[429] Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez*, p. 102.
[430] Data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 'Military Expenditure Database', https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex.

surprisingly well in the wake of the Second World War, compared to its continental rivals. This comparative success was illusionary and fleeting, stemming more from the temporary weaknesses of its bludgeoned neighbours than from its own strengths. In 1950, the UK's share of global manufacturing output was 25.5% to West Germany's 7.3%, but, by 1960, the FRG was at 19.3% and the UK at 16.5%.[431]

Eden's successor, Harold Macmillan, seemed to recognise the strain that his predecessors had placed on the country's scarce resources. Within a month of entering Number 10, he requested "a profit and loss account for each of our Colonial possessions, so that we may be better able to gauge whether, from the financial and economic point of view, we are likely to gain or lose by its departure". This would, he added, need "to be weighed against the political and strategic considerations involved in each case".[432] He also wanted to lower the defence burden on the economy.

His defence minister, Duncan Sandys, ended conscription, thereby reducing the size of the British Army from 735,000 in 1956 to 375,000 in 1962. Sandys and Macmillan believed that a credible nuclear deterrent could help to compensate for this loss of manpower. The British had been developing their own nuclear weapons since the Americans had frozen them out of their collaborative, wartime research programme in 1946, but they lacked the means to deliver the payload. The British missile programme, Blue Streak, was cancelled in February 1960 amid escalating costs. After many years of courting both the Eisenhower and Kennedy

[431] Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, p. 207.
[432] 'The Balance Sheet of Empire: Personal Minute from the Prime Minister to the Lord President of the Council', 28 January 1957, CAB 134/1555 in A.N. Porter and A.J. Stockdale, *British Imperial Policy and Decolonization, 1938-64: Vol II, 1951-64* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 451.

administrations, Macmillan finally secured the Polaris missile system. The cost of acquiring and maintaining a nuclear deterrent consumed much less of the defence budget then than it does today. Defence spending fell from 7.7% of GDP in 1956 to 6.2% in 1962 as table 5.1 below demonstrates:

**Table 5.1 British defence expenditure as a % of GDP, 1956-71**[433]

| 1956 | 1957 | 1958 | 1959 | 1960 | 1961 | 1962 | 1963 | 1964 | 1965 | 1966 | 1967 | 1968 | 1969 | 1970 | 1971 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7.7% | 7.1% | 6.8% | 6.5% | 6.3% | 6.2% | 6.2% | 6.1% | 5.9% | 5.8% | 5.6% | 5.6% | 5.3% | 4.9% | 4.6% | 4.5% |

Beyond the streamlining of its capabilities, the Macmillan government liquidated much of Britain's Empire in Africa, which was largely regarded as strategically and economically unprofitable.[434] The Conservative Party's "nuclear patriotism" made "Macmillan's task of modulating his party's grievances in the Age of Decolonisation more manageable than it might otherwise have been".[435] The imperialistic "Monday Club" of backbenchers had the potential to cause him a great deal of trouble. Macmillan's careful management of these actors dampened the role of potential veto players for much of his tenure.

What of London's vital and major interests? At first, the government aimed to reduce its commitments to Europe in order to maintain its world role. Duncan Sandys "envisaged using a nuclear tripwire strategy to deter the Soviets in Europe thereby dedicating those conventional forces that were retained to East of Suez where it would not be effective to

[433] SIPRI, 'Military Expenditure Database'.
[434] It is worth noting that this was not the UK's only motive for withdrawing from Africa; London was also anxious not to fall behind on the decolonisation curve.
[435] Holland, *The Pursuit of Greatness*, p. 282.

coerce minor non-nuclear powers with the threat of strategic nuclear attack".[436] In 1957, ministers agreed that the British Army on the Rhine (BAOR) should be reduced from 77,000 to 44,900 by 1963.[437] The British realised that there was some flexibility in their treaty obligation of four "divisions" so they rather cannily proposed a major reorganisation of the BAOR. Despite strong European opposition, the British succeeded in reducing their commitment to the continent to 55,000 troops, whilst maintaining the pretence of a four division BAOR.[438]

The Macmillan government would have sought further reductions had it not been for the Berlin Crisis of 1958-61.[439] Tensions between the American and Soviet-led blocs escalated further the following year with the Cuban Missile Crisis. In such a febrile atmosphere, Britain's allies would not have welcomed further cutbacks to the BAOR. Accordingly, the continental commitment was effectively ring-fenced. It should be noted that the Conservative government's decision to uphold the strength of the BAOR was not designed to improve the country's chances of joining the European Economic Community (EEC), but rather out of the vital importance it attached to the NATO alliance. Indeed, Macmillan's application to join the community in 1961 "was more a tactical than a strategic change to ensure that the EEC would not replace Britain as the European pillar of the Atlantic alliance".[440] Even after Charles De Gaulle vetoed the bid in January 1963, the British

[436] Edward Longinotti, 'Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: From Economic Determinism to Political Choice', *Contemporary British History* (29:3, 2015, pp. 318-340), p. 331.
[437] Saki Dockrill, 'Retreat from the continent? Britain's motives for troop reductions in West Germany, 1955–1958', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (20:3, 1997, pp.45-70), p. 59.
[438] Ibid, p. 61.
[439] Ibid.
[440] Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, p. 221; Peter Mangold, *Success and Failure in British Foreign Policy: Evaluating the Record, 1900-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 66.

government was still determined to uphold its European commitments. When the subject of the BAOR was raised again in February 1963, the defence sub-committee of the British Cabinet agreed that further reductions were not worth the inevitable backlash and resentment it would cause with its NATO allies.[441] In short, the Atlantic alliance and European security were accorded highest priority.

What of Britain's East of Suez commitments? Could economies be sought there? In truth, ministers made no real attempt to slim down the country's obligations in the Middle East. In response to the Iraqi revolution of 1958, Macmillan sent troops to reinforce the newly independent states of Jordan and Kuwait in 1958 and 1961 respectively. Both were bold moves in the aftermath of Suez and demonstrated that Britain was still the principal external power in the region.

Macmillan's interest in preserving regional stability did not stem from some misplaced sense of altruism or a hankering for glories past. Rather, his primary objective was the free flow of oil from the Gulf, which was vital to the economies of western Europe. By 1961, Kuwait alone was providing 40% of Britain's total oil requirements.[442] Furthermore, British Petroleum, in which the UK government maintained a controlling interest, had a stake in Kuwait Oil.[443] London was also mindful of the fact that the Emir of Kuwait held one-third of total sterling reserves.[444]

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[441] CAB 131/28, Defence Committee, 3rd meeting, 9 February 1963.
[442] Simon C. Smith, 'Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf: A Pattern Not a Puzzle', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (44:2, 2016, pp. 328-351), p. 332.
[443] Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez*, p. 154.
[444] Anthony Parsons, 'Gulf withdrawal', *Contemporary Record* (2:2, 1988, pp. 41-43), p. 41.

With the exception of Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran, most of the states in the region were newly independent or organised in weak federations. The modern UAE, for example, was a loose collection of sheikhdoms known as the Trucial States. The British kept them under their security umbrella because they were resource-rich and vulnerable to predation from aspiring regional hegemons. London was also concerned that the region might fall under Russian influence in the event of withdrawal.[445] A physical British presence was seen as a bulwark against these malign actors.

Given these interests, the military base at Aden (located in modern day Yemen) quadrupled in size between 1957 and 1960.[446] The deep water port, which was ideally situated between the Red Sea and Arabian Sea, was to become one of the busiest in the world by 1962. Not only did it serve as a deterrent to potential revisionist powers in the region, but it also served as a "vital stepping stone" to the base in Singapore.[447]

At the political level, these commitments were regarded as sacrosanct. Macmillan was convinced that "Kuwait, with its massive oil production, is the key to the economic life of Britain – and of Europe".[448] In the wake of the Suez crisis, however, a number of civil servants began questioning whether a British military presence was necessary to secure the country's oil interests. Having trawled through the Foreign Office archives, Simon Smith observes that several ambassadors in the region voiced their reservations as early as 1958.[449]

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[445] Frank Heinlein, *British Government Policy and Decolonisation 1945-1963: Scrutinising the Official Mind* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p. 163.
[446] Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez*, p. 209.
[447] Duncan Sandys quoted in James Barr, *Lords of the Desert: The Battle Between the United States and Great Britain for Supremacy in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), p. 348.
[448] Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm, 1956-1959* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 523.
[449] Smith, 'Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf'.

Their concerns were shared in the Treasury. One official doubted whether "any conceivable British military presence in the Middle East could have any value against a major Russian attack" or in "preventing violent internal changes" in the region. Furthermore, he reasoned, the Gulf states would not hold Europe to ransom as they were the region's most important customers.[450] These views were disregarded by senior mandarins and ministers, with the result being that the Middle East, like Europe, was effectively ring-fenced from any reductions.

The Far East was seen as a region where Britain could reduce its overstretch dilemma. Britain had major military bases in Malaya and Singapore, which were regarded by Australia and New Zealand as symbolic of London's commitment to their security. Malaya also made a significant contribution to the sterling zone (a group of countries that either kept the British pound or pegged their own currency to its value) as a major exporter of rubber and tin. Further, Singapore was regarded as an economic asset given its strategic position as a choke point for maritime trade.

Yet, the costs of stationing forces so far from home outweighed these benefits. During the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, Malaya fell victim to a communist insurgency. The "Malayan Emergency" was over by 1960, but the counter-insurgency campaign had consumed a great deal of London's time and scarce resources. Publicly, the government continued to emphasise its commitment to East of Suez. In 1961, the Defence Minister stated

[450] T 317/42, 'Note (for circulation beyond HM Treasury)' by J.E. Lucas, 8 March 1963

that the government had "no intention of backing out of our world obligations".[451] Behind closed doors, however, the Far East was being eyed for economies.

The Prime Minister had long been interested in winding down Britain's physical presence on the "Asian mainland" (i.e. Malaysia and Singapore). While discussing the region in 1958, he likened Britain to "a great land-owner who, faced with high taxation and heavy death duties, declined to give up the house even though he had to close some of the wings and cut down some of the trees".[452] Malaya had been granted independence in 1957, albeit under the auspices of British protection. In the wake of the "Malayan Emergency", London quietly encouraged its other territories in the region – Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo – to unite with Malaya as part of a federation, which they did in 1963 (thereby creating Malaysia). The former Commander for British forces in the Far East, Field Marshal Lord Carver, later stated that, "the whole concept of Malaysia…was designed by Macmillan, with Duncan Sandys, in order to extract us from our military commitments in the Far East".[453]

Unfortunately, London neglected to consider how Jakarta might react to such a federation being established on its border. President Sukarno of Indonesia ordered his military to infiltrate northern Borneo and undermine the new grouping. The British were obliged to defend the Federation under the 1963 Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement. The resulting

[451] Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez*, p. 147.
[452] Heinlein, *British Government Policy and Decolonisation 1945-1963*, p. 160.
[453] Lord Carver's contribution, Peter Catterall, 'Witness seminar The East of Suez decision', *Contemporary Record* (7:3, 1993, pp. 612-653), p. 623.

"Confrontation" with Indonesia would absorb 68,000 British, Australian and Malaysian soldiers and one third of the Royal Navy's surface fleet (including two carriers).[454]

Macmillan's record was not one of blind overstretch; the notion that he was motivated by prestige concerns is misguided. The Prime Minister and several of his colleagues made serious attempts to bring Britain's commitments back into line with its resources, which would have led to a diminution in the UK's world role. The Confrontation and alliance obligations in the Far East, however, undermined his efforts to reduce profligacy.

The Prime Minister's management of the grand strategy process is also noteworthy. Decisions were generally taken by the Defence Committee of the Cabinet, which included the PM, the Defence Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor, as well as the Commonwealth Secretary and the service chiefs. If their judgements were deemed to require a larger mandate, the situation was presented before the Cabinet. During the Kuwait crisis of 1961, he wrote:

> "The Cabinet left the whole management of this affair to me. I got the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of Defence to work side by side with me, which they did with admirable loyalty and skill. But, remembering Suez, I was careful throughout to have meetings of Ministers (including Chancellor of Exchequer; Lord Chancellor; and Home Secretary) and also – before the final decision to launch forces – of the whole Cabinet"[455]

[454] William Roger Louis, 'The Dissolution of the British Empire in the Era of Vietnam', *The American Historical Review* (107:1, 2002, pp. 1-25), p. 13; Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 290.
[455] Harold Macmillan, *The Macmillan Diaries: Prime Minister and After, 1957-66*, edited by Peter Catterall (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2011), 8 July 1961, p. 398.

His management of grand strategy was about as similar as one could get to Churchill's War Cabinet setup in peacetime. Indeed, the position of Minister of Defence, which Churchill had created for himself in 1940, was given formalised powers at Macmillan's direction. Although the Attlee, Churchill and Eden administrations had kept the post, successive defence ministers found themselves undermined by the fact that each of the services also had ministerial status.[456] Macmillan believed that this gave each of the services an "unduly independent and inward-looking" culture.[457] This underscores Allison's claim that "where you stand depends on where you sit".[458] The Cabinet brought these departments under a unified MoD in 1963. They also created the Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (DOPC), which became a key forum for debates on grand strategy. The DOPC was chaired by the Prime Minister and attended by the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor, the Home Secretary, the Commonwealth and Colonial Secretary and the Minister of Defence.[459]

These improvements to the conceptualisation of grand strategy were commendable on Macmillan's part. They reduced the role of harmful organisational biases from the individual branches of the military. In the final analysis, however, the Conservatives left the incoming Labour government with a host of problems. Britain remained overstretched in the Middle East and the Far East. Senior civil servants justifiably surmised that ministers

[456] Ewen Broadbent, *The Military and Government: From Macmillan to Heseltine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 25.
[457] Harold Macmillan's foreword to *The Military and Government*, p. viii.
[458] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, p. 307.
[459] The Official Committee was chaired by the Secretary of the Cabinet and attended by the PUS at the Foreign Office, the Joint Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, the PUS at the Commonwealth Relations Office, the PUS at the Colonial Office, the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Permanent Secretary at the Board of Trade.

were "not prepared to abandon any of our roles".[460] It is therefore difficult to disagree with Peter Mangold's assessment that "good intentions were not matched with results".[461] There was some evidence of proportionate grand strategic thinking, particularly in relation to the Far East, but events – both foreign and domestic – came to undermine Macmillan.

Mounting tensions with the USSR over Berlin and Cuba had prevented a drawdown of the BAOR. In the Far East, Britain was bound by its treaty obligations to the fledgling Malaysian Federation. Closer to home, the Profumo affair and De Gaulle's veto both served to undermine the government. In the last months of his tenure, Macmillan concluded that there was "little scope for economy in the provision of the independent nuclear deterrent, or in Europe". He mused that "there was perhaps room for argument about the need to maintain our military capability in the Middle East and the Far East at present levels". In light of commitments made to Malaysia, however, he acknowledged that "there could be no question of any early or major withdrawal from Singapore". The Defence Minister, Peter Thorneycroft, agreed that "it would not be right in present circumstances to take a major decision of policy of a kind which would lead to the total withdrawal of our military presence from either the Far East or the Middle East".[462]

After a summer of political intrigue and health concerns, Macmillan resigned in October 1963. His successor, Alec Douglas-Home, did not adjust the country's grand strategic priorities and obligations during his short premiership. He and his largely unchanged

[460] PREM 11/4731, Note from B. Trend on 'Aircraft Carrier Replacement' to PM, 24 July 1963.
[461] Mangold, *Success and Failure in British Foreign Policy*, p. 13.
[462] CAB 131/28, 19 June 1963, 8th meeting, Defence Committee.

Cabinet accepted the Confrontation and Britain's continued commitment to the Far East as a *fait accompli*.[463] Even major equipment decisions, which would dictate how and where the UK was able to operate around the world in the future, including the procurement of a new aircraft carrier, were fudged. Thorneycroft was quoted by one MoD official as saying, "you can't really expect…a dying government to take decisions of that nature".[464] Towards the end of Macmillan's tenure and throughout Douglas-Home's, alliance commitments and domestic political considerations effectively constrained the government's ability to alter the thrust of its own grand strategy. This makes for a striking comparison with the previous chapter.

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*

In the general election of October 1964, Labour secured a narrow four seat majority on a mandate to increase social spending. Yet, Wilson had no intention of making drastic changes to his predecessor's commitments. The same was true of his core ministerial team: Defence Secretary Denis Healey, Foreign Secretary Gordon Wilson and Chancellor James Callaghan. These ministers were known as "Bevinites" after the famous post-war Labour Foreign Secretary, Ernie Bevin, who had been a strong supporter of Britain's world role.

The group assembled at Chequers one month after their electoral victory to discuss their grand strategic priorities. They were presented with a report from the Long Term Study Group (a group of senior bureaucrats from the externally focussed departments), which

[463] CAB 129/116, 'Policy towards Indonesia, 6 January 1964.
[464] C.W. Wright's contribution, 'Witness seminar The East of Suez decision', p. 621.

argued that "Europe must ... remain our first priority" at the expense of the Far East.[465] Civil servants warned that "if we continue to shoulder the burden of defence expenditure at the current rate, we may do grave damage to the economy, while, if we try to reduce the burden by renouncing our power and influence in the world as to endanger our political and economic independence".[466]

Ministers agreed on the need to cap defence expenditure to £2000m (at 1964 prices) by 1969-70 – instead of letting it rise to £2,400m. This meant that "we should not seek to maintain in the future our three roles [nuclear deterrent, Europe, East of Suez] on their present scale".[467] There was no question of abandoning the nuclear deterrent, which had become a test of a Labour administration's "fitness to govern".[468] This left Europe and East of Suez as the targets for economies.

The minutes from the meeting recorded "considerable support for the view that our first priority should be the maintenance of our overseas commitments" (meaning East of Suez). With regard to Europe, ministers believed that NATO officials were "unrealistic" in their expectations of troop levels in Europe, considering that the risk of war with the Soviet Union was low. On the other hand, it was argued that "our first concern should be Europe, if only for geographical reasons". Ministers reached an impasse at this point. They conceded that "the small size of our forces east of Suez cast some doubt on the extent of the influence which they could exercise". Any drawdown in the Middle East or the Far East,

[465] CAB 148/40, 'Report of the Long Term Study Group', 23 October 1964.
[466] PREM 13/18, Note for the Prime Minister ahead of Chequers discussions by Burke Trend (Secretary of the Cabinet), 19 November 1964.
[467] CAB 130/213, Minutes of 'Defence Policy' meeting at Chequers, 21 November 1964.
[468] Holland, *The Pursuit of Greatness*, p. 319.

however, would have to wait until after consultations with allies. "On their attitude", ministers concluded, "depended our ability to negotiate modifications in our commitments, which could not be cancelled unilaterally".[469]

Cutting the budget but maintaining commitments left ministers with one choice: reducing capabilities. Over the next few months, ministers approved the cancellation of a number of expensive British aircraft projects. The HS-681, P-1154, and TSR-II planes were all shelved in favour of cheaper, American aircraft. Ministers were prepared to draw the ire of the UK's aircraft industry if it meant preserving the world role. A planned fifth Polaris submarine was also scrapped, as the government judged that a continuous at-sea deterrent would be achievable with four boats.[470]

The following month, Wilson told the House of Commons that the country had been "trying to do too much" and that "there is a general realisation now that reappraisal and retrenchment are necessary". Yet he maintained "that whatever we do in the field of cost-effectiveness, value for money and a stringent review of expenditure, we cannot afford to relinquish our world role, our role which, for shorthand purposes is sometimes called our East of Suez role".[471] In November 1964, Wilson told the Indian Prime Minister of Britain's willingness to "meet any attack from China" amid tensions between the two states.[472] Six months later, he declared that "Britain's frontiers are on the Himalayas".[473]

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[469] CAB 130/213, Minutes of 'Defence Policy' meeting at Chequers, 21 November 1964.
[470] CAB 148/18, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 29 Jan 1965.
[471] Wilson's speech to HoC, 16 December 1964.
[472] Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 110.
[473] Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 291.

By cutting capabilities but maintaining commitments, ministers were culpable of overstretch. On the one hand, there was an explicit recognition of the need to retrench. The DOPC informed the Cabinet in November "that no substantial reduction of defence expenditure is possible without a drastic review both of the commitments which we seek to discharge and the capabilities (i.e. weapons systems) which we intend to maintain. Our existing forces, costly though they are, are stretched to the limit by our commitments".[474] Little was done, however, to reduce alliance obligations.

In their defence, there was little ministers could do with the Confrontation ongoing. This makes the assurances given to India over the China threat all the more surprising though, given how thinly spread British forces were in 1964-65. A junior Labour minister in the Foreign Office reflected years later that "there was an inconsistency between our commitments and our resources to fulfil those commitments".[475] Wilson's government, historian Paul Kennedy concludes, "showed no wish to retreat" at first.[476] To the civil servants expecting a more constrained grand strategy in line with Britain's resources, the early stages of the Wilson administration were "a serious disappointment".[477] To begin with at least, there was a strong degree of continuity in the grand strategic priorities of the Conservative and Labour governments.

By the middle of 1965, it was clear that capability cuts alone would be insufficient. Only £200m had been saved which meant that defence spending was still on course to rise

[474] PREM 13/18, Long Term Study Group, Note by Sir Burke Trend for the Cabinet on Chequers discussions, 25 November 1965.
[475] Lord Thomson contribution, 'Witness seminar The East of Suez decision', p. 625.
[476] Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy*, p. 375.
[477] C.W. Wright contribution, pp. 620-621.

£2,200m by the end of the decade.[478] The "Bevinite" ministers assembled at Chequers again. Once more, they were by no means blind to the overstretch dilemma. Defence Secretary Denis Healey, for example, acknowledged that successive British governments had "accepted many more commitments than we could simultaneously carry out if they were all active at once". Now, however, there were no more expensive aircraft projects to cancel. He suggested a "major revision of our Middle East commitments" and a "substantial change in our Far East posture".[479] These are not the words of a man driven by concerns over status.

Where should the axe fall? Europe was once again spared from cuts for two primary reasons. First, there were concerns over the UK's standing on the continent and in Washington. The European powers were exasperated with successive British governments for whittling away at the size of the BAOR. The Foreign Office noted that the Germans "look on any diversion of British troops from Europe as a weakening of the vital central front for the benefit of what they call the "periphery"" (East of Suez). Moreover, mandarins feared that "Germany would increasingly come to be regarded as the Americans' best ally in Europe, at our expense".[480] Civil servants also suspected that Paris would "probably enjoy exploiting, particularly with German opinion, the fact that French forces in Germany would be much larger than the British" and highlight the move as "another sign that Britain was not European".[481]

[478] CAB 130/213, Defence Expenditure Review, 8 June 1965.
[479] Note by Denis Healey, 11 June 1965, CAB 130/213.
[480] CAB 148/52, 'Reduction of Forces in Europe: Note by the Foreign Office', 28 September 1965.
[481] CAB 148/52, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee: Defence Review Working Party – Memo on Reduction by Half of British Forces in Germany, 3 May 1965.

Second, London was afraid to do anything that might jeopardise the ailing NATO alliance. President De Gaulle, resentful at being excluded from the Anglo-American partnership, was threatening to pull out of NATO, having withdrawn the French Navy from the alliance's Mediterranean command in 1959. Thus, despite there being "general agreement" in Whitehall on the improbability of a Russian attack, it was agreed that "any action which might be held to disturb the delicate structure of the 1954 Treaties would provoke a major crisis of confidence within the Western alliance and in east-west relations".[482] The core was to be prioritised above the periphery.

Instead of reducing the BAOR's size, ministers sought to tinker with the financing of the commitment. Accordingly, they concentrated on alleviating the balance of payments deficit with West Germany, which was running between £55-60m a year.[483] The FRG spent £900m on American military equipment to compensate Washington for its garrison – twenty times the figure spent on British hardware. Indeed, the FRG only offset one third of the cost of stationing UK forces in West Germany.[484]

The Labour government eyed the Middle East, specifically the key base at Aden, as a target for economies. Instead of serving as a springboard for operations in the Gulf and the Far East, the port had become a liability as a result of a nationalist insurgency. With the support of Nasser, the National Liberation Front was undermining British rule through a coordinated campaign of targeted assassinations and bombings. By August 1965, London

[482] Ibid.
[483] Wilson's speech to HoC, 16 December 1964.
[484] Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 37.

had been forced to station five battalions in the port in a futile attempt to maintain order.[485] The "presence of British troops", Denis Healey noted, "was becoming an irritant rather than a stabilising factor".[486]

What of Britain's commitments further east? Unilateral withdrawal was seen as unpalatable while the Confrontation was still raging. That did not, however, stop ministers planning for the aftermath. In April 1965, civil servants informed ministers that it would be possible to draw down forces once the conflict subsided because "the Malaysian Defence Agreement only obliges us to assist in the external defence of Malaysia and does not explicitly commit us to station forces there".[487]

In August 1965, London was blindsided by Singapore's ejection from the Malaysian Federation. This was quickly perceived in Whitehall as an opportunity to extract the country from its burdensome obligations in the region as the breakdown of the Federation technically invalidated the terms of the 1963 Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement. Ministers mulled over peace talks with Indonesia in late 1965 with a view towards "an early end to confrontation".[488] If this could be achieved, the UK would be in a position to withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore altogether, whilst retaining a foothold in the region in northern Australia. East of Suez was to be "shrunk back to emphasise Britain's

[485] CAB 148/18, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 5 August 1965.
[486] Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 280.
[487] CAB 148/52, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee: Defence Review Working Party – Memo on South East Asia by the Foreign Office, 21 April 1965.
[488] CAB 148/22, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 25 August 1965.

commitments to the 'old' Commonwealth, Australia and New Zealand, and its political commitments to its major ally, the United States".[489]

Britain's allies in the region were "firmly opposed" to any drawdown from Singapore in the foreseeable future. At a quadripartite conference in September, Australia, New Zealand and the United States protested with such vehemence as to give British ministers pause for thought.[490] This placed London in a bind, which demonstrates how challenging it is to walk the tightrope between underreach and overstretch in peacetime. There was broad agreement in Whitehall on the need to retrench and have a more proportionate grand strategy but alliance commitments in the region prevented ministers from a unilateral withdrawal.

The United States was escalating its involvement in Vietnam and "the possibility of assuming, even partially, an additional world responsibility [was] not appealing".[491] President Lyndon Johnson sided with the British view that the Indonesian dictator, Sukarno, was "the Asian Hitler".[492] This was a volte-face on his predecessor's ambivalent attitude. Given the precarious state of the British economy, the Americans stepped in to prop up the pound on the "tacit understanding" that the UK would not abandon its world role.[493] A number of scholars believe that Wilson agreed an explicit deal with the White

[489] P.L. Pham, *Ending 'East of Suez': The British Decision to Withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore, 1964-1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 32.
[490] FO 371/181529, 'Singapore/Malaysia Quadpartite Talks', 8 September 1965; CAB 148/22, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 'Repercussions on British Policy in South East Asia of the separation of Singapore from Malaysia', 20 September 1965.
[491] George K. Tanham, 'A United States View', *International Affairs* (42:2, April 1966, pp. 194-206), p. 199.
[492] Louis, 'The Dissolution of the British Empire in the Era of Vietnam', p. 14.
[493] Jones, 'A Decision Delayed', p. 577

House: American support for the pound in exchange for the maintenance of East of Suez.[494] Some ministers who were not privy to the discussions suspected as much. One of those in favour of withdrawing from East of Suez, Richard Crossman, recorded in his diary, "I very much fear that he [Wilson] and James Callaghan between them have committed us more deeply than any of their predecessors to the Americans".[495]

Saki Dockrill argues it is unlikely that Wilson made a formal pact with President Johnson as he "did not think that Britain's East of Suez presence needed to be used as a carrot to extract American financial help".[496] Such a conspiracy does indeed seem rather fanciful. After all, the Americans had a strong interest in the British currency's stability. Washington also wanted London to retain its commitments East of Suez, but supporting the pound had more to do with the health of the dollar, as well as American exporters who would suffer from devaluation.[497]

There was another motive for postponing the withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore: avoiding Vietnam. President Johnson repeatedly pressed Wilson to contribute a small number of troops so as to counter the impression that it was an act of American unilateralism. Wilson, however, used Britain's participation in the Confrontation as an alibi to justify the country's non-involvement in Indochina. The war was not popular in the UK, particularly with large parts of the Labour Party. This made Wilson wary of committing

[494] Clive Ponting, *Breach of Promise: Labour in Power* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989); Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, pp. 227-8
[495] Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Volume II* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), 1 January 1967, p. 181.
[496] Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 220.
[497] Barr, *Lords of the Desert*, p. 385.

even the "platoon of Highlanders with bagpipes" that Johnson was asking for. The 54,000 British troops in Malaysia fighting against communist insurgents effectively became a bargaining chip for Wilson in talks with his American counterpart.[498]

At the beginning of 1966, the Labour government took another axe to the country's defence capabilities that would restrict its ability to operate East of Suez. The UK had four aircraft carriers, which were regarded as "the symbol of British power East of Suez" but two were to be phased out by the early 1970s.[499] The Macmillan and Douglas-Home governments had buckpassed the decision over whether to order a new carrier, the CVA01, as a replacement for the *Ark Royal*. At a meeting of the Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (DOPC), Denis Healey argued that the carriers were "very expensive in terms of cost effectiveness". The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir David Luce, warned that scrapping the capability would turn the Royal Navy into nothing more than a "coastal defence force". Healey countered that the only area where the carriers could be put to good use – the Far East – was the government's first target for reductions (as soon as the Confrontation was over). Moreover:

> "It was difficult to envisage operations which our forces might be required to undertake in the 1970s for which our carriers would be essential. Indonesia seemed likely to be the only one potential enemy Power East of Suez which could pose a maritime threat. It had, however, already been decided that we should no longer engage a medium Power with sophisticated weapons, such as Indonesia, on our own and the implication must be that if we were to undertake operations involving extreme hazards and difficulties we should only do so after securing in advance the cooperation of the United States"

[498] Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government: 1964-1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 48.
[499] Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez*, 298.

The other ministers sided with Healey's view that "there were no acceptable means of continuing a carrier programme within a defence budget of £2000 million".[500] The Defence Secretary later wrote that it was "the most difficult equipment decision" he faced during his tenure.[501] It was so contentious that the First Sea Lord and one of the junior ministers at the MoD, Christopher Mayhew, resigned in protest. The latter was highly critical of the government for slicing capabilities whilst retaining commitments. There was some truth in this, but Mayhew may not have been aware of Wilson and Healey's intent to withdraw from the Far East after the Confrontation, as he was not a regular attendee of the DOPC meetings.[502]

This aircraft carrier episode fed into the wider Defence Review of 1966, which disappointed many who wanted to see a scythe taken to the UK's obligations East of Suez. There was no mention of withdrawing either from the Middle East or the Far East.[503] As one would expect for a public strategy document, it was "couched in vague and generalised phraseology" – with two exceptions.[504] First, the government openly declared that it would not undertake major operations without an ally. This was significant as it indicated for the first time that "the defence of Britain's most vital interests was no longer in the hands of British leaders but rested with the policymakers in Washington".[505] This was a significant grand strategic

[500] CAB 148/25, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, OPD 4th meeting, 19 January 1966.
[501] Healey, *The Time of My Life*, p. 275.
[502] Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, pp. 143-4.
[503] HM Government, 'The Defence Review', February 1966, p. 8.
[504] Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 210.
[505] Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 296.

decision that was to have long-term strategic implications for force planning and foreign policy, which can still be felt today.

Second, ministers agreed to withdraw troops from Aden and South Arabia by 1968.[506] The nationalist fires being stoked by Nasser were out of control. The violence had sucked in more British units and the causality list lengthened accordingly. Yet a drawdown from Aden was not straightforward, as it raised questions about the UK's wider role in the Gulf. Would the UK be able to honour its commitments to Kuwait and the Trucial states without a significant military base in the region?

There was a belief in Whitehall that withdrawing from Aden would spell a broader retreat from the region. As early as October 1962, Macmillan had prophesised: "so much depends on Aden, and if we were to be driven out of Aden or faced with serious revolutionary troubles in Aden which might make the base useless, our whole authority over the Gulf would disappear".[507] This view was shared by Foreign Office mandarins. In June 1964, the Political Resident in the Gulf, Sir William Luce, hypothesised that, "it would not be politically feasible locally, nor I imagine in H.M.G.'s wider interests, to build up a military base in the Gulf area in any way comparable with the present base in Aden".[508] There were also worrying signs for the British that they were no longer as welcome in the region as

[506] HM Government, 'The Defence Review', February 1966, p. 8.
[507] Macmillan quoted in T.W. Fain 'John F. Kennedy and Harold Macmillan: Managing the 'Special Relationship' in the Persian Gulf Region, 1961-63', *Middle Eastern Studies* (38:4, pp. 95-122, 2002), p. 109.
[508] FO371/174488/B 1052/13/G, Letter from William Luce to R.S. Crawford, 17 June 1964.

they once had been. The Kuwait National Assembly, for example, had been highly critical of the British for their role in helping to crush an uprising in Bahrain in 1965.[509]

One month after the defence review was published, the Labour government won the general election, securing a majority of 96 in the House of Commons. This was to prove to be a mixed blessing as the new intake of Labour MPs were "much more outspoken and unruly than the old".[510] Taking stock of Wilson's first term, it is clear that the core group of ministers on the DOPC were not greatly afflicted by status concerns. They were far more realistic than scholars such as Robert Holland and John Darwin have suggested. Europe spending was effectively ring-fenced because of the NATO crisis so they sought to reduce Britain's burdens in the Middle East and Far East. Those outposts that had become strategically or financially unsustainable were to be gradually abandoned. Yet they found that they had little room for manoeuvre in the short-term, being constrained by the Confrontation and alliance pressures. Accordingly, Wilson and others publicly declared the government's intent to remain East of Suez but they privately longed for the conditions which could facilitate a smooth withdrawal.

In July 1966, Wilson told President Johnson that the UK would once again apply to join the EEC. In the same month, there was a run on the pound as investors sold Sterling to compensate for the US Treasury buying vast sums of dollars on international markets to

[509] Simon C. Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall in the Gulf: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, 1950–71* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 40.
[510] Pham, *Ending 'East of Suez'*, p. 98.

pay for the escalating conflict in Vietnam.[511] In August, the Confrontation abruptly came to an end following months of domestic turbulence in Indonesia.[512]

These twin developments forced another rethink of Britain's commitments. Devaluation had been avoided but the government had been forced to stabilise the pound, which meant diverting money away from other departments. Thus, in October 1966, the Chancellor called for a tighter cap on defence spending: £1850m by 1970/71 instead of £2000m by 1969/70. At a meeting of the DOPC, Healey said that the government was now "confronted with the final choice between military commitments in Europe or East of Suez".[513] Somewhat surprisingly, he then proposed the maintenance of both roles with capability cuts across the board. This would enable Britain to meet its alliance obligations but at a reduced cost. For East of Suez sceptic and the newest member of the DOPC, Richard Crossman, the Defence Secretary's proposal meant leaving "token forces in the Far East quite unable to fulfil any of the precise obligations we've undertaken in SEATO. And there may well be token forces in the Middle East unable to fulfil the obligations we've undertaken under CENTO". Crossman proposed "a major change in foreign policy" and urged Healey to follow Ernest Bevin's example: "You remember when he totally withdrew from Greece and Turkey and forced the Truman Doctrine on the Americans. Now isn't that the kind of thing we should do now?" The rest of the group sided with Healey, and Crossman was pointedly reminded by Wilson that, as the newest member of the group, he

[511] Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 160.
[512] Sukarno and his fellow communists were ultimately overthrown by Suharto and the Indonesian military.
[513] CAB 130/301, Minutes from Cabinet Defence Committee, 22 October 1966.

should "hold [his] tongue especially because [he] couldn't yet fully understand what was involved".[514]

The debate remained within the DOPC but continued well into December. Healey defended his "strategy based on penny-packages" (the deployment of small numbers of assets such as a frigate or a battalion) to honour an alliance commitment.[515] Crossman saw Healey, Brown, and Callaghan as fantasists who were making "futile attempt to remain Great Britain, one of the three world powers, while slicing away our defences".[516] In reality, the division was not between realists and overly patriotic idealists but over the importance of alliances East of Suez. For the majority of ministers on the DOPC, Britain was duty-bound to Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

The problem, as Crossman rightly pointed out, was that the UK was running out of the requisite assets to underwrite these obligations. In his memoirs, Healey wrote that, "no government should cut a military capability without cutting the political commitment that made that capability necessary".[517] Yet that was exactly what he proposed in December 1966. His plan to reduce capabilities but maintain commitments is an example of wilful overstretch. Sending a token ship or stationing a small garrison of soldiers would be of little use if one of Britain's allies found itself in danger. Indeed, British forces would likely find themselves dragged into a regional conflict in which they would be hopelessly outnumbered. In such circumstances, the imperilled ally might rightly question the value

[514] Crossman diary, 22 October 1966, p. 86.
[515] Crossman diary, 9 December 1966, p. 156.
[516] Ibid.
[517] Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life*, p. 256.

of an alliance with London. This was surely the lesson of May 1940 in France and late 1941/early 1942 in the Far East.

Whilst Crossman's reservations had been overridden by the rest of the DOPC, the wider Labour Party was growing restless at its exclusion from grand strategy. Malcontent backbenchers only saw the government's public commitment to remain East of Suez; they were unaware that senior ministers were quietly preparing for withdrawal. On 1 March 1967, 69 Labour MPs abstained on a defence vote, which "surprised" Wilson.[518] This led the Prime Minister to deliver his famous "dog licence" speech on party discipline; each MP, he decreed, was allowed to bite once but, if they abstained or voted against the government again, there would be trouble.[519] Even though defence and foreign affairs were rarely discussed in Parliament, tensions had been building for some time and this debate served as "the conducting rod through which these tensions could be discharged".[520] The end of the Confrontation had not resulted in the quick drawdown that East of Suez sceptics and pro-Europeans alike envisaged.

On 22 March, Denis Healey proposed halving the number of British forces stationed in Malaysia and Singapore by 1970/71 with complete withdrawal by the mid-1970s. Backed by Foreign Secretary George Brown, Healey argued that Britain should embrace a "peripheral strategy" based "a minimum military presence (consisting of naval and air

[518] Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 377.
[519] Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963-67* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), pp. 489-490.
[520] Pham, Ending 'East of Suez', p. 149.

forces) in the Far East" courtesy of a new base in Australia.[521] Even Healey's own staff found this idea "crazy", given that the Australians had never shown much enthusiasm for it.[522] Canberra wanted the British to stay on the Asian mainland. Wilson, however, agreed with his Defence Secretary that such a plan could mollify the concerns of Australia and New Zealand – countries which had "voluntarily joined with us in resisting aggression" during the Second World War. Then again, he mused, "it was not essential that we should have forces stationed in Australia, any more than Australia and New Zealand had forces stationed in this country in 1914 or 1939".[523]

In May, Britain submitted another application to join the EEC, which was once again rejected by De Gaulle. That same month, the UK finally reached an agreement with West Germany over offsetting the cost of the BAOR.[524] The following month, British ministers reaffirmed that they could not entertain the idea of reducing forces in Germany to supplement the garrisons East of Suez.[525] Ministers continued to prioritise Europe as the core interest, at the expense of the periphery.

In the late spring and early summer of 1967, several British ministers sounded out their counterparts in allied nations over Healey's drawdown plans. The Australians and New Zealanders were unsurprisingly angry that the British were withdrawing from "mainland Asia", which was their first line of defence. Furthermore, they resented Foreign Secretary

[521] CAB 148/30, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 22 March 1967; CAB 148/32, 'Political/Military and Economic Implications of Far East Force Reductions', Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 11 April 1967.
[522] Patrick Nairne contribution, 'Witness seminar The East of Suez decision', p. 626.
[523] CAB 148/30, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 22 March 1967
[524] HM Government, 'Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy', July 1967, p. 2.
[525] CAB 148/30, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 26 June 1967.

George Brown's suggestion that "white faces" were no longer welcome on the Asian mainland.[526] The Americans were particularly frustrated that the British were leaving them alone on the world stage. US Secretary of State Dean Rusk warned George Brown that "American opinion would not stand for picking up the abandoned British position" and that, "if Europe is withdrawing from the world while the US is carrying a major burden in defending Europe, the pressures in the US might also lead to withdrawal from Europe". Speaking on behalf of the other allies, he said that "all of us understand the UK need and desire to reduce forces", but not "to withdraw entirely by the mid-1970s".[527]

The British believed that the Johnson administration was unable to look at the situation without Vietnam distorting their lens. Ministers observed that even the Americans were not committed to the Far East indefinitely; they would likely withdraw once they had honoured their obligations to Saigon. Why should the British be expected to remain now that the Confrontation was over? After a summit with Johnson in Bonn in April 1967, Wilson remarked to an aide that the President was "virtually obsessed with his Vietnam problem". During the meeting, LBJ suggested in a "cheerful tone" that if "the British might have agreed to send two brigades of troops to Vietnam…all his [Wilson's] and Britain's financial worries would be at an end". The Prime Minister, mindful of the Parliamentary Labour Party's views on Vietnam, "retorted equally cheerfully" that "if he attempted it, he would have no financial worries himself, since he would be out of Office and no doubt doing quite nicely on his memoirs!".[528]

[526] PREM 13/1455, Record of the quadripartite ministerial discussion, Washington, 20 April 1967.
[527] PREM 13/1455, Dean Rusk to George Brown, 12 May 1967.
[528] PREM 13/1455, Record of meeting between Harold Wilson and LBJ, Bonn, 28 April 1967.

Britain's allies accepted the 1970/71 drawdown but they were against complete withdrawal later in the decade. They were also concerned over how the redeployment was to be managed. George Brown believed that "the main bone of contention" in Canberra and Wellington "was the proposed public announcement".[529] Meanwhile, Rusk was quoted as saying: "plan as much as you like but for God's sake don't go announcing it all now".[530] US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara told Denis Healey that "it would be disastrous for HMG to say anything in public about plans to withdraw completely from the Far East in the longer term".[531]

In July, the Cabinet officially signed off on Healey's drawdown plans and the peripheral strategy after he toned down the language of "minimum military presence" to "capability for use" – implying that British forces would not have to be physically present in the region.[532] Quite how these assets would have got to the Far East in an emergency without aircraft carriers is another matter. It had been a difficult battle as the East of Suez sceptics like Crossman enjoyed greater sway with the wider cabinet than in the DOPC. Wilson even told Lyndon Johnson in June of his "Cabinet problem".[533]

It should be noted that the government did not include the Gulf in its formal announcement of the withdrawal from East of Suez. Ministers on the DOPC discussed this matter on 3 July, where some were intent on declaring "intentions in respect to our future position in

[529] PREM 13/1455, Record of conversation between US Ambassador and George Brown, London, 5 May 1967.
[530] PREM 13/1455, Palliser note to Murray Macleohose on meeting with Dean Rusk, 3 May 1967.
[531] PREM 13/1455, Record of meeting between Denis Healey and Robert McNamara, 9 May 1967.
[532] CAB 148/30, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 26 June 1967.
[533] Pham, *Ending 'East of Suez'*, p. 175.

the Middle East in terms comparable to those which were envisaged in respect of the Far East". A majority, however, concluded that "present circumstances in the Middle East" meant "it would be imprudent and contrary to our interests to make any statement in this regard at the present time".[534] There was therefore an "implicit and internal understanding" that the remaining British forces in this region would also be withdrawn in the mid-1970s.[535]

This had long been an implicit assumption once British forces had withdrawn from their major military base at Aden. In June 1967, the Defence Review Working Party for the DOPC surmised that "no one really believes that we shall be able (or even wish) to stay indefinitely in the Gulf" after the Aden withdrawal. "By the mid-1970s we must expect a world where almost all colonial and quasi-colonial traces have disappeared, and the overseas deployment of British power has contracted further than at present. If we have not gone from the Gulf, the pressures on us to go are likely to be very severe indeed". The officials concluded that "it will not be in our interests to stay beyond the mid-1970s" but "an announcement now would be politically disastrous".[536]

Over the course of the 1960s, there was a gradual shift in thinking across government as to the effectiveness of troops and military bases in guaranteeing the safe passage of oil from the Middle East. The Six Day War of 1967 confirmed both the futility of hard power and the leverage it supposedly brought with local regimes. Weeks after the conflict, ministers noted that "the recent Middle East crisis had demonstrated the inability of our forces overseas to

[534] CAB 148/30, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 3 July 1967.
[535] Shohei Sato, 'Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf, 1964–68: A Pattern and a Puzzle', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (37:1, 2009, pp. 99-117), p. 105.
[536] CAB 148/80, 'Defence Expenditure Study No. 6: Long-term Policy in the Persian Gulf', Report by the Defence Review Working Party, 7 June 1967.

play any worthwhile role in a critical situation".[537] Even supposed allies like Kuwait had joined the oil blockade of the West. Foreign Secretary George Brown admitted that he was "not happy about the present situation in which the Kuwaitis feel free to discriminate against British interests while we remain committed to their defence".[538] The ends, Peter Mangold surmises, "no longer seemed worthwhile".[539] Darby agrees that there was "considerably more scepticism in Whitehall in the sixties about the relevance of military power to the protection of specific economic interests".[540]

On 18 July, Healey unveiled the government's drawdown plans to the House of Commons. He concluded: "we have been working continuously for almost three years on a major review of defence, revising Britain's overseas policy, formulating the role of military power to support it, and planning the forces required to carry out this role. This Statement marks the end of that process".[541] Unfortunately for Healey and the Labour government, as well as Britain's allies in the Middle East and the Far East, this proved to be overly optimistic.

*Devaluation*

Despite ministers' attempts to bring defence commitments into line with resources, the pound once again came under sustained pressure during the autumn of 1967. The aforementioned oil blockade, uncertainty over Britain's relationship with the EEC, and strikes by dock workers in September left the British economy vulnerable. Furthermore, the US Treasury had its own problems in funding the Vietnam War and was no longer willing

[537] CAB 148/30, Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 26 June 1967.
[538] DEFE 11/548, 'Kuwait Commitment', 14 August 1967.
[539] Mangold, *Success and Failure in British Foreign Policy*, pp. 42-43.
[540] Phillip Darby, 'East of Suez Reassessed', in Baylis, *British Defence Policy in a Changing World*, pp. 59-60.
[541] HM Government, 'Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy', July 1967, p. 2.

to support Sterling. The Bank of England raised interest rates and tried to sustain the pound with little effect. On 18 November, the government devalued Sterling from $2.80 to $2.40. Wilson was acutely aware of the political damage that devaluation would inflict, having been witness to the Attlee government's decision to do so in 1949. He had gone to great lengths to avoid this measure and became "desperately worried about the survival of the government and of his premiership" in its aftermath.[542] Chancellor James Callaghan resigned (having staked his job on avoiding devaluation) and was replaced by the pro-European Roy Jenkins.

Jenkins insisted on a further £1bn reduction in public spending to support the pound at its new level. This would require, first and foremost, "drastic changes in defence policy involving major reductions in overseas commitments".[543] He insisted that the Cabinet agree to defence cuts, before "adequate reductions could [then] be made in the growth of civil expenditure".[544] For scholars such as Pickering, Reynolds and Bennett, this was the decisive moment in Britain's decision to withdraw from East of Suez. The new Chancellor, Bennett writes, "saw Britain's future in Europe and had little patience with those who sought to perpetuate what he considered to be outdated and unaffordable commitments".[545] Most of these scholars quote Richard Crossman who observed that, "the status barrier is as difficult to break through as the sound barrier; it splits your ears and is terribly painful when it happens".[546]

[542] Roy Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 217.
[543] CAB 129/135/5, Memo by the Chancellor, 'Public Expenditure: Post Devaluation Measures', 3 January 1968.
[544] CAB 128/43/1, 'Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet', 4 January 1968.
[545] Bennet, *Six Moments of Crisis*, p. 108.
[546] Crossman diary, 7 January 1968, p. 639.

This was an unfair representation of the views of Healey, Brown, Michael Stewart (George Brown's predecessor at the FO), and James Callaghan (who had remained in Cabinet as Home Secretary), whom Crossman called the "four pygmies".[547] If the status barrier had been crossed, it was in mid-1967 when the DOPC ministers, who were (Crossman excepted) the most inclined towards honouring Britain's alliance obligations for as long as possible, accepted that by the mid-1970s, "we shall have ceased to play a worldwide military role".[548] It could be traced back further to the scrapping of the aircraft carriers during the winter of 1965/66. Indeed, the key decisions from the 1966 Defence Review – cancelling the CVA01 and withdrawing from Aden – laid the groundwork for the wider East of Suez drawdown. The heated Cabinet debates of January 1968 over Jenkins's further cuts to public spending were not over whether to withdraw from East of Suez but rather over the timing of the final drawdown. During the key meeting on 4 January, the Foreign Secretary underscored that "it would be wrong to suppose that any new major change of policy was now in question. That change had been made as a result of the last Defence Review in July 1967 when the decision had been taken to withdraw our forces from East of Suez". Therefore, "the issue was now whether our withdrawal should be accelerated".[549] This evidence undermines the accuracy of the claims made by Pickering and Bennett.

There were four issues at stake during the January meetings: reinstating prescription charges; postponing the raising of the school leaving age; shifting the East of Suez *withdrawal date* from the mid-1970s to March 1971; and cancelling the F-111 aircraft order.[550]

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[547] Crossman diary, 4 January 1968, p. 635.
[548] CAB 148/32, 'Defence Expenditure Studies: Memo by the Official Committee', Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, OPD (67) 46, 21 June 1967.
[549] CAB 128/43/1, Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, 4 January 1968.
[550] 'Public Expenditure: Post Devaluation Measures', CAB 129/135/5.

As Jenkins himself later wrote, "the real cliff-hanger was the cancellation of the F-111", not East of Suez.[551] He added that "the date of withdrawal from East of Suez was hotly contested" but this did not mean that the drawdown was ever in doubt.[552]

The scrapping of the F-111 was controversial as it was regarded by Healey as a means of honouring the commitment to assist Australia and New Zealand in the event of aggression. The Chancellor observed that the aircraft were no longer subject to requirements because "the original justification for purchase…was primarily to support our role in the Far East". The Prime Minister sided with Jenkins's view that "while we should be giving assurances to our allies in the Far East that we would be prepared, if necessary, to use our general capability to assist them, there could be no question of our maintaining a special capability for this purpose".[553]

Healey and Brown were also justifiably concerned over the effect that the changes to the drawdown timetable would have on the UK's relationships around the world – particularly now that there would be no special capability for intervention. Some of Britain's allies had been "displeased" by the decisions taken the previous summer but "none was irremediably offended".[554] Ministers had managed expectations well throughout 1967 but now they were clearly scuttling on their commitments. A reasonably methodical process of retrenchment had morphed into a disorderly retreat. Healey and Brown fought a strong rearguard action

[551] Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre*, p. 227.
[552] Ibid, p. 228.
[553] CAB 128/43/1, Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, 4 January 1968.
[554] Pham, *Ending 'East of Suez'*, pp. 197-98.

to prevent this but were nonetheless outvoted. Wilson, who was now chiefly concerned with political survival, gave his new Chancellor the authority to proceed with his package.

The Defence Secretary correctly suspected that Jenkins was only insisting on defence savings as cover for major social spending cuts. In the final settlement worth over £1bn, only £110m was carved away from the MoD. Jenkins believed "the last remaining symbols of 'East of Suez' had to be sacrificed" to secure the agreement of a Labour Cabinet for such drastic reductions in social spending.[555] Healey was furious that strategic relationships, which were already under significant strain, were being jeopardised just "to make it possible to introduce prescription charges".[556]

Indeed, the cost of stationing assets East of Suez was no longer the central concern. On hearing of Britain's intent to leave, the rulers of Qatar and Abu Dhabi offered to cover the £25m cost of stationing British forces in the region.[557] London was uninterested in these offers though; the rationale of stationing troops in the Gulf had evolved during the 1960s. On 4 January 1968, George Brown told the Cabinet that the garrisons were ineffective as they "could not defend our oil supplies". Furthermore, "the oil producing states needed us as customers for their oil" anyway.[558] In an overly candid interview with the BBC (for which he subsequently had to apologise), Denis Healey explained:

> "Well I don't very much like the idea of being a sort of white slaver for Arab sheikhs. I think we must decide as far as the Gulf's concerned, what it's in our own British

[555] Ibid, p. 240.
[556] Benn, *Office Without Power*, p. 1.
[557] Sato, 'A Pattern and a Puzzle', pp. 108-9.
[558] CAB 128/43/1, 'Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet', 4 January 1968.

> interests in the long run to do consistent with our commitments. And I think it would be a very great mistake if we allowed ourselves to become mercenaries for people who would like to have a few British troops around."[559]

Britain's allies in the Far East were understandably furious with the acceleration of a decision that they had been opposed to in the first place. An exasperated US Secretary of State Dean Rusk urged his counterpart, George Brown: "For God's sake, act like Britain".[560] President Johnson conveyed his "deep dismay" to Wilson and warned of "financial penalties" over the cancellation of the F-111.[561] The Prime Minister, however, shrugged off the White House's criticism. "America", he judged, "was good at looking after number one and would respect us for doing the same".[562] The government pressed ahead with its plans.[563] On 16 January 1968, Wilson told the House of Commons that "our commitments, and the capacities of our forces to undertake them, should match and balance each other". Given the cap on defence spending, Britain would therefore be withdrawing from East of Suez as its "security lies fundamentally in Europe and must be based on the North Atlantic Alliance".[564]

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[559] Extract from BBC TV "Panorama", 22 January 1968, PREM 13/2218; Telegram 133 Foreign Office to Bahrain, 23 January 1968, PREM 13/2218.
[560] PREM 13/2081, Extract from record of meeting between the Foreign Secretary and the U.S. Secretary of State at the State Dept., 11 January 1968.
[561] PREM 13/2081, LBJ to Wilson, 12 & 15 January 1968.
[562] Wilson quoted in Bennett, *Six Moments of Crisis*, p. 120.
[563] The final withdrawal was ultimately pushed back from March to December 1971, after the Prime Minister acceded to an appeal from Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew.
[564] Harold Wilson's speech to the House of Commons, London, 16 January 1968, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1968/jan/16/public-expenditure#S5CV0756P0_19680116_HOC_3.

**The East of Suez withdrawal and the grand strategy ledger**

This case demonstrates that conceptualising and implementing grand strategies in peacetime, and in conjunction with allies, can be a complicated and messy affair. The decision to withdraw from East of Suez was not taken over the course of a few meetings in January 1968, as Bennett and Pickering contend, but as a process over several years. It manifested itself through the physical withdrawal from bases such as Aden, and the downgrading of capabilities that would enable the UK to operate beyond Europe. The cancellation of a new aircraft carrier in February 1966 was a particularly decisive moment as it effectively curtailed the country's ability to intervene in the region beyond the 1970s. The defence budget cap from the first Chequers meeting in November 1964, and the ring-fencing of the sizeable continental commitment to NATO served as the backdrop for such decisions. Britain could have maintained some sort of presence in the Middle East and the Far East for years, possibly decades, after 1971 had it not been for these *choices*. Those scholars who contend that Britain was forced to retreat purely because of its dire economic position drastically understate the agency of the DOPC in the outcome.

In order to assess the quality of grand strategic thinking during this period, it is necessary to first examine the decisions to impose a defence cap and prioritise NATO above other alliances. With regard to the latter, this is fairly straightforward. The UK had spent a great deal of its blood and treasure in preventing two German attempts to dominate the continent – both of which had very nearly succeeded. Now western Europe was faced with the possibility of Soviet invasion or nuclear annihilation. Europe was the UK's first line of defence and it was therefore logical to place the NATO as first priority over its worldwide

obligations. Britain and its neighbours could not afford another devastating war on European soil.

Even though ministers regarded the continental commitment as more of a political than a military necessity, it is important to recognise the tense state of international relations at the time. The Berlin and Cuban crises in the early 1960s were followed by the French withdrawal from NATO's military command in 1966 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia two years later. Meanwhile, the United States was intent on redeploying troops from Europe to Vietnam. London was anxious to avoid putting the alliance under further strain. Despite the Soviet threat not being seen as imminent, its potential severity required policymakers to concentrate on the core (Europe), at the expense of the periphery (East of Suez).

There was growing enthusiasm in the UK for joining the EEC but this was not the motivation for the East of Suez drawdown. Some ministers, like Commonwealth Secretary George Thomson, were "committed Europeans" as well as being ardent defenders of East of Suez.[565] Moreover, in April 1967, George Brown told his American and Australian counterparts that "there was absolutely no connection whatsoever between the timing of the [withdrawal] proposals he had outlined and the timing of any renewed British approach to Europe".[566] The closest that officials came towards acknowledging the link between the two was in 1964, when Foreign Office mandarins noted that, "as long as Britain wants eventually to join the European Economic Community, she must maintain a posture

[565] Bennett, *Six Moments of Crisis*, p. 110.
[566] PREM 13/1455, Record of the quadripartite ministerial discussion, Washington, 20 April 1967.

of active interest in Europe. To some extent this will be judged by the level of our military commitment on the mainland of Europe".[567] This view was not shared by a number of ministers and a large contingent of the Labour Party. Many of the East of Suez sceptics like Tony Benn and Richard Crossman, who might be expected to be more inclined towards the European project, were also intent on staying out of the EEC.

The decision to impose a ceiling on the defence budget is far less clear-cut. Longinotti rightly concludes that "this self-imposed resource constraint", which resulted in defence spending being 29% lower in 1970 than it would have been without the cap, was a "critical factor that led the Labour government to make a choice between strategic postures".[568] Evaluating whether it was a proportionate decision poses a challenge, however, as it raises wider questions about grand strategic thinking in democracies. The Labour government was elected in 1964 on a mandate to increase social spending (at the expense of defence). In September 1967, Wilson told the Labour conference that his administration had "switched resources from defence to the social services – the right priority for a Socialist Government".[569] Naturally, he was pandering to the party faithful but there was some truth in his remarks. This begs the question: did the Labour government jeopardise Britain's security interests for the sake of better health care?

An argument could be made that the voluntary defence cap was unwise if it impaired the government's ability to pursue strategic imperatives around the globe. John Baylis writes

[567] Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, Long Term Study Group, 'Level of British Forces in Europe (draft by the Foreign Office)', 29 July 1964.
[568] Longinotti, 'From Economic Determinism to Political Choice', p. 322.
[569] Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 434.

that many "strategists would take issue with the suggestion that economic constraints have played an unambiguously constructive role in pushing British defence policy in an 'appropriate' direction". Financial pressures, he continues, can "lead to cuts taken for economic reasons alone rather than strategic ones, with the effect of undermining important security interests".[570] This view was perhaps best summarised at the time by US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, who "could not believe that free aspirins and false teeth were more important than Britain's role in the world".[571] Ignoring for one moment the state of the American healthcare system, this claim was slightly exaggerated. Even though the UK was withdrawing from the Middle East and the Far East, it was hardly pulling up the drawbridge and retreating to 'Fortress Britannia'. The country remained one of only two contributors of conventional and nuclear assets to the NATO alliance.

David Greenwood rightly contests the notion that "financial carts were put before strategic horses" or that "economic tails wagged defence dogs".[572] He argues that resource constraints invariably enter the reckoning in grand strategic debates, and that it is right and proper that they should, because "they define the limits of policy choice and at times illuminate them sharply".[573] The East of Suez drawdown, he writes, was the "price paid that NATO obligations might be fully honoured".[574] In short, NATO and the European deployments were prioritised above the world role in constrained financial circumstances.

[570] John Baylis, 'Greenwoodery' and British Defence Policy, *International Affairs* (62:3, 1986, pp. 443-457), p. 457.
[571] PREM 13/2081, Extract from record of meeting between the Foreign Secretary and the U.S. Secretary of State at the State Dept., 11 January 1968.
[572] David Greenwood, 'Constraints and Choices in the Transformation of Britain's Defence Effort since 1945', *British Journal of International Studies* (2:1, 1976, pp. 5-26), p. 6.
[573] Ibid, pp. 8, 12.
[574] Greenwood, 'Defence and National Priorities since 1945', p. 192.

Furthermore, Britain's interests in the periphery were declining as the 1960s wore on. Once the Confrontation came to an end, the UK was not obliged to maintain assets in the region. Britain's commitments beyond Europe were proving to be an albatross around its neck. The country had been drawn into conflicts to protect interests that were no longer of vital importance. Moreover, a hard power presence was proving counterproductive in some parts of the world. Spruyt observes that, "as the world moved to bipolarity and the Cold War, and as nuclear weapons and advanced weaponry changed the modes of warfare, imperial reserves of troops and resources became less important for the great powers".[575] In the Middle East, for example, the UK's "treaty obligations to defend the tiny sheikhdoms of Bahrain, Qatar, Abu Dhabi or Sharjah, once effortlessly maintained by seapower, came to appear burdensome out of all proportion to its benefits".[576] By the mid-1960s, the British base at Aden had become more of a strategic liability than an asset. Ministers were intent on pursuing a grand strategy that was proportionate to a shrinking economy and a society that yearned for the benefits of peacetime.

Moreover, other European powers were not spending as much on defence as Britain, nor were they providing London with compensation for the costs incurred from protecting public goods. Oil-dependent states in western Europe greatly benefitted from Britain's presence in the Gulf but they did not contribute towards the expenses associated (military bases and naval patrols). As such, when the British public were suffering from the effects of deflationary measures in the mid-to-late 1960s, "it was inevitable that the Labour government should have felt it essential only to spend resources on defence which were

[575] Spruyt, *Ending Empire*, p. 4.
[576] Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 297.

commensurate with the size of [the] British economy, and not to continue burdensome commitments which neither Germany nor France were prepared to support".[577]

There were therefore elements of proportionate grand strategic thinking in the decision to reduce the defence outlay and prioritise NATO and Europe over East of Suez. The Labour government's decision to honour its mandate on prioritising social services reflected a society in peacetime with relatively few threats to its security. Times of war yield very different conditions to those of peace. Governments can be expected to focus more on internal matters when they are not faced with clear and imminent existential threats.

Now that the ends have been evaluated, it is possible to assess whether the Wilson government struck a sustainable balance between underreach and overreach. The record for Harold Wilson's first year in office follows that of his Conservative predecessors': wilful but not blind overstretch. Ministers recognised that they were cutting future capabilities, whilst retaining commitments. They were not motivated by delusions of grandeur as some scholars have suggested. Like most governments, the new Labour administration wanted to be able to have its cake and eat it – to maintain the country's obligations both to NATO and to allies East of Suez.[578] Once it became clear that the two roles were incompatible within a defence budget of £2bn, ministers chose to prioritise the UK's continental commitments.

[577] Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 218.
[578] Longinotti, 'From Economic Determinism to Political Choice', p. 325.

Upon taking office, Labour ministers felt trapped by events in Asia – just as their predecessors had been. The DOPC felt duty-bound to Britain's long-standing alliances in the Far East. To abandon Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States in the mid-1960s, while the Confrontation was still raging, would have been most unwise. London's credibility as a reliable alliance partner would be in doubt across the globe if the British were seen to be abandoning their friends in their hour of need. Even to have withdrawn immediately after the Confrontation – as Crossman proposed on numerous occasions in the DOPC – would have been misguided.

It was logical to announce a phased withdrawal, as Healey did in July 1967 – less than one year after the end of the Confrontation. Perhaps this announcement could have come several months earlier, but it must have been clear to any astute observers that this was the government's intent after the abandonment of the aircraft carrier CVA01 programme in February 1966.

In the Far East, alliance obligations, not economics, dictated the logic of British grand strategy. In the Middle East, however, the cost-benefit analysis was weighted heavily towards the latter, given the region's oil supplies. Britain was obliged to defend Kuwait and the Trucial States but there was little sentimental attachment as there was with Australia and New Zealand. This was made abundantly clear by Denis Healey's inflammatory interview with the *BBC* in January 1968 after the announcement of the drawdown.

Furthermore, there were considerable costs to remaining in the Gulf, given the rise of Arab nationalism fuelled by Nasserist Egypt. British officials feared that the violence from Aden would spread into the Gulf. Even though many of the Sheikhs wanted British protection, it is not clear that their view represented that of the local population. The Political Agent in Bahrain believed that, had it not been for Egypt's defeat in the Six Day War, "we might well have had an Aden situation in the Gulf".[579]

Over the course of the 1960s, British politicians and civil servants came to realise that military bases had little effect on their ability to safeguard the supply of oil. This was crudely demonstrated when Kuwait joined the oil blockade of the West in 1967. In 1969, one Treasury official could have been speaking for the whole government when he observed that: "we do not accept that a military presence is necessary or desirable to protect British commercial interests and investments overseas (the Japanese, Germans, Swedes, Swiss and many other countries manage very well without such burdens)".[580]

It would be wrong to conclude that the drawdown in the Middle East did not have any negative consequences for British interests. After the British withdrew from Aden, the port was absorbed into the People's Republic of South Yemen, which granted the Russian Navy berthing rights – an outcome which the British had long guarded against. Moreover, the UK and the United States later suffered greatly at the hands of the Gulf monarchies during the 1973 oil embargo. It is, however, difficult to envisage how a token British protection force could have made any difference in either outcome. London had already conceded that

[579] Parsons, 'Gulf Withdrawal', p. 43.
[580] Minute by P.S. Mews to Nicholls on FCO memo (OPDO (DR) (69) 4), 10 October 1969, T 225/3404.

it had lost control of South Arabia (Yemen) and Aden. If the British had clung on, they may have delayed the inevitable, but finite resources would have been squandered in the process. As it was, the UK cut its losses in Aden before it was too late. In the Gulf, the 1967 oil crisis exposed the British military presence as redundant. As the era of decolonisation matured, it was clear that hard power was no longer the effective deterrent that it had once been.

Where Healey and Brown can be taken to task is over the former's idea of a "peripheral strategy" based on a "minimum military presence" (which later evolved into the notion of "capability for use"). This proposal, first coined in early 1967, was designed to placate the concerns of allies in the Far East. It is difficult to see how such a force was even conceivable, given the decisions to impose a defence budget gap and honour the continental commitment. The DOPC and Cabinet had already agreed to phase out the country's aircraft carriers, which were the only assets capable of lending such a strategy any credibility. As critic Christopher Mayhew later put it, "you cannot have East of Suez without sea-borne airpower".[581] Furthermore, the only British military port large enough to berth carriers en route to the Pacific, Aden, was due to be abandoned in 1968. This suggests that where grand strategic decisions require the use of military resources, decision-makers are somewhat constricted by their prior judgements and even those of their predecessors. Defence procurement cycles are often lengthy and subject to delay, with the result being that today's grand strategic choices are very much influenced by yesterday's equipment decisions.

[581] Christopher Mayhew contribution, 'Witness seminar The East of Suez decision', p. 626.

With the exception of this strategy, it would be fair to conclude from the evidence examined thus far that the Wilson government did a reasonable job of retrenchment. Grand strategy was not entirely proportionate as there was a need to satisfy alliance obligations for the 1964-66 period (while the Confrontation was ongoing), but it was heading in the right direction towards the end of 1967. David Greenwood agrees that "a consistent and coherent approach to matters of priorities is discernible".[582] Paul Kennedy writes that, "by pulling out of Aden, announcing the future withdrawal from the Persian Gulf and Malaya/Singapore, the British government was for the first time since 1945 trying to ensure that its commitments were reduced in line with cuts in the armed forces".[583] The British record compares remarkably well to that of the French in Algeria, the Dutch in Indonesia or the Portuguese in Angola.

The political results of devaluation, however, turned what was a reasonably well-ordered and carefully managed retreat into a rout. In January 1968, British ministers abandoned promises made to allies in the Far East only six months previously. In the Gulf, the Labour government had disingenuously reassured the sheikhs of Britain's intention to stay as late as early November 1967.[584] Just over one month later, ministers were backtracking on their word. It need not have been so. The remnants of Britain's presence East of Suez were martyred for the sake of domestic politics and the need to cover over the reintroduction of prescription charges. The cost of these obligations was already plummeting as a result of

[582] Greenwood, 'Defence and National Priorities since 1945', p. 201.
[583] Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy*, p. 376.
[584] Smith, 'Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf, p. 339.

the withdrawal from Aden, and the ongoing drawdown from Malaysia and Singapore in the wake of the Confrontation.

**Neoclassical realism and the East of Suez drawdown**

At first glance, the Wilson government's record appears to meet with neorealist expectations. Britain retrenched as a result of its relative decline by withdrawing from regions of lesser importance while protecting its vital interests. In 1965, one in four members of armed services was stationed outside the UK and Western Europe, but that figure dropped to one in ten by 1974.[585] The core was prioritised above the periphery, in accordance with unfavourable shifts in the relative distribution of power.

That analysis alone would ignore several parts of a long and convoluted story. In spite of the economic troubles it faced, the government could have continued with a smaller presence East of Suez but it *chose* to withdraw. Smaller outposts could have been maintained in the Gulf and beyond; the Arab leaders even offered to pay the British to stay.

Counterfactually, it is not clear that Conservative ministers would have withdrawn in the manner of their Labour counterparts. Paul Kennedy believes that Conservative governments have traditionally been more susceptible to an "outward pull".[586] This is certainly true of the Monday Club and the imperialist wing of the party. It is hard to see the Conservatives withdrawing entirely from both the Gulf and the Far East.

[585] French, *The British Way in Warfare*, p. 221.
[586] Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy*, p. 381.

Counterfactuals are, by their very nature, fraught with assumptions and uncertainty. The Conservatives were certainly intent on remaining in the Gulf in the early 1960s, yet it would be wrong to assume that they would have remained there indefinitely. The insurgency in Aden worsened as the 1960s ground on. International opinion was turning against the UK as the Conservatives left office. The government was censured at the UN in 1964 for bombing Egyptian positions in neighbouring South Arabia.[587] Had Douglas-Home won the 1964 election, he too may have decided to withdraw from the port. The violence was such that the base had become a net liability. Macmillan's government had developed the port in the 1950s for two primary reasons. First, it served as a deterrent to other powers in the region. Second, it was seen as a stepping stone to Asia. By the mid-1960s, this thinking seemed outdated. Military bases were no longer seen as effective in guaranteeing British interests in the region. Moreover, policymakers in Whitehall were planning to withdraw from the Far East once the Confrontation had ended.

Macmillan, Sandys and a handful of others deserve recognition for kickstarting the process that led to searching questions over the value of these imperial outposts. The Conservative Prime Minister was the first to advocate a withdrawal from Malaya. Paul Kennedy concedes that the East of Suez drawdown started "under Macmillan's direction".[588] Labour, however, must be credited for implementing these new priorities. Saki Dockrill sagely concludes that "the Conservatives had already started thinking about the ways in which

[587] Barr, *Lords of the Desert*, pp. 373-375.
[588] Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy*, p. 377

Britain could transform its place in the world, but it was Labour that made the transformation a reality".[589]

Recalibrating grand strategic priorities and reallocating resources takes time. The Labour government was also tremendously fortunate that the Confrontation ended when it did. One former MoD official admitted that "there was a stroke of luck in the ending of Confrontation with Indonesia, which was largely unforeseen and unforecast".[590] It was only once this conflict was over that ministers felt able to reduce commitments and resources in the Far East and, by extension, the Middle East. David Greenwood agrees it was "not until after the end of Confrontation could you seriously contemplate a real rundown East of Suez".[591]

A neorealist account of this period would understate the agency of the particular ministers responsible for conceptualising and implementing British grand strategy. If the more extreme elements of either party had been in power, the story would likely have been remarkably different. A Conservative Prime Minister from the imperialist wing of the party would not have tried to wind down Britain's commitments in the Far East during the late 1950s. That said, it is highly unlikely that a politician with such views would have succeeded Eden in the wake of the Suez crisis.

[589] Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 226.
[590] Frank Cooper's contribution, 'Witness seminar The East of Suez decision', p. 620.
[591] David Greenwood's contribution, 'Witness seminar The East of Suez decision', p. 618.

Within the Labour government, there were a number of fissures over the country's priorities, which meant that there was nothing axiomatic about Britain's drawdown. If Richard Crossman or Roy Jenkins had been Prime Minister, the UK would have likely abandoned its allies and obligations in the Far East long before 1971. Navy minister Christopher Mayhew recalled that "there were all sorts of right-left arguments within the party. The Europeans had a funny alliance with the extreme left. The extreme left were against imperialism, of course, and were against East of Suez. The Europeans were in favour of concentrating our efforts on Europe."[592]

The core team of ministers that conceptualised grand strategy on the DOPC just about kept a lid on these pressures between 1964 and mid-1967. Wilson did not want to delegate the process to the wider Cabinet and, by extension, the party. "Foreign policy", he judged, "is made by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary…It can't be made by the Cabinet".[593] It is worth noting that public opinion had little effect on the process. The electorate had little awareness or interest in these matters; East of Suez was not an issue in either the 1964 or 1966 election. The historian William Roger Louis agrees that "the dismantling of the empire took place in Aden, Sarawak, and North Borneo with hardly a flicker of attention from the British public".[594] The principal veto player was the Parliamentary Labour Party.

The ministers on the DOPC quietly guided a path towards withdrawal. This is not to say that Wilson and his colleagues followed a grand plan of retrenchment from the day they

[592] Christopher Mayhew, 'Witness seminar The East of Suez decision', p. 635.
[593] Wilson quoted in Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 49.
[594] Louis, 'The Dissolution of the British Empire in the Era of Vietnam', p. 22.

took office. Rather, there was a continuous process of review. Priorities were regularly assessed and resources allocated accordingly. From 1965 onwards, NATO obligations were placed above the East of Suez commitments. Once the conditions allowed, ministers began to prepare for the drawdown from the latter.

A decisive moment was the decision to scrap the CVA01 programme in early 1966. No one was in any doubt that aircraft carriers and Britain's world role were two sides of the same coin.[595] From this moment, Britain's days East of Suez were numbered. Shohei Sato, by way of contrast, places great emphasis on the role of rebellious Labour MPs from the 1966 intake. He finds that the backbench revolt of March 1967 was particularly important in pressuring the government to withdraw.[596] He is right to highlight the role of powerful veto players in permissive conditions, yet he overstates their importance. The DOPC ministers had already accepted the need to retrench, even if they had not conveyed so to the parliamentary party. Matthew Jones concurs that "the Rubicon of a pullout from the Far East had actually been crossed by key figures such as Brown in the latter part of 1966".[597]

The impact of imperialistic cartels on the conceptualisation process was minimal due to the organisational changes made by Macmillan in 1963. Spruyt agrees that civilian "control over the armed forces was never in doubt".[598] Moreover, there were no powerful American, Gulf or Antipodean lobby groups in London that conspiratorially worked to indefinitely maintain Britain's presence East of Suez. Alliance obligations certainly constrained the UK's

[595] PREM 11/4731, 'Note from B. Trend on 'Aircraft Carrier Replacement to PM', 29 July 1963.
[596] Sato, 'Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf', p. 104.
[597] Jones, *A Decision Delayed*, p. 594.
[598] Spruyt, *Ending Empire*, p. 120.

freedom of manoeuvre, but these were strategic concerns. Wilson, Healey, Brown and Callaghan put great stock in the relationships with Washington, Canberra and Wellington. If Britain had unilaterally withdrawn – as Crossman and others advocated – the UK's credibility as an alliance partner would have been brought into question in the region and globally. London was particularly concerned that NATO allies harboured doubts over the UK's commitment to the continent.

Between August 1966 and July 1967, the DOPC successfully negotiated a drawdown from the Far East with Britain's allies in the region. Naturally, these countries did not welcome the news but they could just about accept a phased withdrawal. This careful management of expectations unravelled with the political chain of events that ensued as a result of devaluation in November 1967. With the weakening of the old guard of "Bevinites", the East of Suez sceptics and pro-Europeans commandeered the government's decision-making structure. "After devaluation", Crossman gleefully noted, "we replaced Prime Ministerial by Cabinet government".[599] The conceptualisation process, which had been carefully managed by Healey, Brown and Callaghan, was lost to the whims of parochial interests.

A neoclassical realist framework explains variation in the proportionality of British grand strategy during the late 1950s and 1960s. To begin with, the UK was overstretched, but decision-makers under the Wilson government began to bring commitments into line with resources. This process started under Macmillan's tenure, but the conditions were not right

[599] Crossman diary, 15 January 1968, p. 652.

for withdrawal. Following devaluation in 1967, Britain reverted to a disproportionate grand strategy, but this time it was one of underreach. Parochial interests were prioritised as domestic veto players maximised their leverage in the wake of devaluation. A weakened prime minister ceded ground to the more extreme elements of Labour Party. Crossman and Jenkins effectively hijacked the decision-making process at the expense of those who had been carefully extracting Britain from its global responsibilities. Decision-making was no longer in the hands of the DPOC but the wider cabinet and, by extension, the Labour Party.

The new Chancellor, Roy Jenkins, insisted on defence cuts as cover for the introduction of painful measures on social services. Thus, he placed cheap political points ahead of strategic imperatives. These reductions achieved very little in terms of financial savings, but had negative repercussions with the UK's allies. The Singapore government and the Gulf monarchies were thrown into crisis as "the apparatus of military support was dismantled too quickly".[600] Meanwhile, Washington, Canberra, and Wellington fumed at British changeability. Australia and New Zealand finally put their faith in the United States for their future security (a process which had begun with the fall of Singapore in 1942) as Britain – a nation renowned for its stiff upper lip and resilience – went back on its word. A reasonably well-managed and ordered drawdown turned into an ignominious retreat.

[600] Darby, 'East of Suez Reassessed', p. 64.

## CHAPTER VI

## PAYING "THE BLOOD PRICE": BRITISH GRAND STRATEGY AND THE WAR IN IRAQ

*"The foreigner and Christian is not a popular person in Arabia. However friendly and informal the treatment of yourself may be, remember always that your foundations are very sandy ones"*

- T.E. Lawrence[601]

The UK's strategic environment changed substantially between the withdrawal from East of Suez and 9/11. The end of the Cold War saw the United States emerge triumphant as the global hegemon. With no existential threat to the east, the 1990s were somewhat carefree years for the UK. Even "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland, which absorbed a great deal of blood and treasure in the 1970s and 1980s, subsided over the decade. Debates over European integration and the use of force for humanitarian purposes dominated the foreign policy discourse. These years of relative peace would come to an abrupt end in late 2001. This chapter examines Britain's involvement in America's war in Iraq.

I am not looking to review the wider War on Terror, NATO's mission in Afghanistan, or the Coalition's tactical and operational performance in Iraq. I am interested in the British angle and the key moment of grand strategic significance: the invasion of Iraq. Unlike the campaign in Afghanistan in 2001, the UK played a major part in the toppling of Saddam Hussein. 32,000 troops took part in the invasion, supported by a further 14,000 deployed to

[601] T.E. Lawrence, *27 Articles* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), p. 35.

the region.[602] They were supported by the largest surface fleet assembled since the Falklands War. In addition, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, staked the country's diplomatic relationships with key European allies on the line by aligning himself so closely with the Bush administration.

The UK was of course the junior partner in America's 9/11 wars, which means that decisions cannot be attributed solely to those in Whitehall.[603] This should not, however, serve as an excuse for poor judgements. Hew Strachan rejects the notion that the UK could "excuse its own failings…by saying that it had to follow Washington, that Britain could not have a strategy for Iraq because that was made in America".[604] Nothing compelled the British government to join the US-led coalition and invade Iraq. Moreover, the decision to contribute a land division was made in London, not Washington. This chapter seeks to understand why senior British policymakers decided: (a) that Saddam was a threat that had to be dealt with by military force in 2003 and (b) that it was necessary to make such a sizeable commitment to the US-led campaign.

What should my theory predict for this case? Neoclassical realism stipulates that the foreign policy executive will, first and foremost, try to preserve the state's physical survival and political autonomy. Yet, under permissive conditions, we should expect leaders to try and further all other goals they may possess. I argue that Blair's inner circle subconsciously inflated the threat posed by Saddam, and placed an excessive degree of importance on the

[602] House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 'Ministry of Defence: Operation TELIC – United Kingdom military operations in Iraq' (London: HM Stationery Office Limited, 2004), p. 7.
[603] The phrase "9/11 wars" is taken from Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in the 9/11 Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).
[604] Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 65.

US-UK alliance. My theory predicts that domestic veto players should pose problems for implementation if conditions are *clearly* permissive. Unfortunately, 9/11 created an atmosphere of uncertainty, which resulted in a reduced role for potential blocking agents. Thus, Blair's inner circle had an easier time of implementing their disproportionate grand strategy than they would have under permissive conditions with heightened clarity.

**The road to Basra**

On 11 September 2001, the United States suffered a strategic shock on a scale not seen since Pearl Harbour. Across the Atlantic, Tony Blair declared that the British would stand "shoulder to shoulder" with the Americans.[605] Privately, however, the Prime Minister worried that the relatively inexperienced president, George W. Bush, would cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war. Downing Street feared there would be an "immediate, inappropriate, and indiscriminate response" from the Americans.[606]

The Prime Minister was right to be suspicious. The day after the attacks, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld urged the President to attack Iraq as well as Afghanistan because the latter – where the perpetrators, Al-Qaida, were being sheltered by the Taliban government – lacked military targets.[607] Removing Saddam Hussein had been a public aim of American policy since Congress voted for Iraq Liberation Act in October 1998. The more hawkish members of the administration, such as Dick Cheney, as well as Rumsfeld and his

[605] Tony Blair, 'Blair's statement in full', *BBC News*, 11 September 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/1538551.stm.
[606] Interview with David Blunkett, Con Coughlin, *American Ally: Tony Blair and the War on Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), p. 147.
[607] Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), pp. 50-51; Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), p. 47.

deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, thought that President George H.W. Bush, the incumbent's father, had made a mistake in not marching on Baghdad during the First Gulf War in 1991.[608] In the wake of 9/11, George W. Bush certainly had Iraq in his sights but decided to concentrate on Afghanistan for the moment. Iraq, he told Blair in late September, "we keep for another day".[609]

Once it was clear that Bush was not going to carpet bomb the Middle East, Blair saw an opportunity to reshape the global order. After all, he was no stranger to intervening in distant lands. The British military had been deployed to Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone on his watch. Now, however, there was a man in the Oval Office who was eager to unleash the might of the greatest military force that the world had ever seen. "The kaleidoscope has been shaken", he told the Labour Conference in October. "The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us".[610]

Despite these broad aims, Britain's involvement in the opening salvo of the Afghanistan War was relatively limited. Special Forces and Tomahawk missiles supported what was largely a US Air Force campaign carried out through October and November 2001.[611] The Taliban fled to the mountains and across the border to Pakistan, along with many Al-Qaida militants, including Osama bin Laden, in what must be considered an operational error on the part of the US military. Much to Blair's disappointment, the Bush administration had no desire to engage in nation building or "police work".[612] The British stepped up by

[608] Andrew Rawnsley, *The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 85.
[609] Ibid, p. 32.
[610] Tony Blair's speech to the Labour Party Conference, Brighton, 2 October 2001.
[611] Farrell, *Unwinnable*, pp. 60-61, 65, 114.
[612] Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 310.

volunteering as the lead nation of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). By January 2002, 1,800 British troops were providing security in Kabul.[613]

*Shifting sands*

American attention, meanwhile, was shifting to Baghdad. Downing Street wasn't far behind either. Blair's Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, penned a note to his boss in mid-November, declaring that "our overriding objective is the removal of Saddam not the insertion of arms inspectors". Blair scribbled on the memo: "I agree with this entirely".[614] Thus, almost 18 months before the invasion of Iraq, Blair and his advisers were mulling over regime change (although not necessarily with military force). The British were well aware that Saddam had nothing to do with 9/11. The UK Joint Intelligence Committee assessed that "Iraq had no responsibility for, or foreknowledge of, the attacks in the US on 11 September". Moreover, Saddam is "ideologically poles apart from the Sunni extremist networks linked to UBL and fears their impact on the [Iraqi] population". Most importantly, the report concluded that "the threat of WMD terrorism is slight, because of the risk of US retaliation".[615]

Enthusiasm for dealing with Iraq went beyond the inner sanctum of Number 10. The head of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), Sir Richard Dearlove, assessed that, if the debate in Washington over regime change went "the right way", he believed that it would be:

[613] Farrell, *Unwinnable*, pp. 94, 98.
[614] Minute Powell to Prime Minister, 'The War: What Comes Next?', 15 November 2001.
[615] JIC Assessment, 'Iraq after September 11 – The Terrorist Threat', 28 November 2001.

"…very much in HMG's interest to work with the Americans. We have a contribution to make and the outcome is of enormous significance for our national interest."[616]

Across the Atlantic, Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002 provided a clear window into the administration's thinking. He declared that Iraq, North Korea, and Iran "constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred." Bush warned that the "price of indifference would be catastrophic".[617] Bush thereby framed the Iraq debate in terms of action or passivity – a move that would soon be echoed in London.

The British Cabinet met on 7 March 2002 on what was to be the first and last meeting "at which a large number of ministers spoke up against the war". The Leader of the House, Robin Cook, argued that the UK could not "afford to be the only European government supporting an American military venture". Another minister lamented that they were expected to listen to US worries about Iraq after they had placed higher tariffs on British steel. She warned that "we are in danger of being seen as too close to President Bush, but without any influence over President Bush". Blair responded defiantly: "I tell you that we must steer close to America. If we don't, we will lose our influence to shape what they do".[618] The Cabinet minutes record that no decisions to launch military action were taken and that any future action taken would be in accordance with international law.[619]

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[616] Letter Dearlove to Manning, 'Iraq Policy', 27 December 2001, cited in The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 3.1, p. 378.
[617] George W. Bush, State of the Union Address to Congress, Washington, 29 January 2002.
[618] Robin Cook, *The Point of Departure* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), Thursday 7 March, pp. 115-116.
[619] Cabinet Conclusions, 7 March 2002.

The next day, Blair received a Cabinet Office paper setting out a range of options for Iraq. Officials noted that "the US administration has lost faith in containment".[620] They acknowledged that intelligence over Iraq's WMD programme was "poor". Whilst the report contained no recommendations, civil servants advised that the only way of achieving government's two principle objectives – the removal of Saddam and the return of Iraq to the international community – was by "the use of overriding force in a ground campaign".[621] It is worth noting that the Prime Minister had not sought the advice of his professional military advisers at this stage. In short, regime change backed by military force was being considered without input from the Ministry of Defence. Moreover, the paper was only shared with Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, and Chancellor Gordon Brown.

When Dick Cheney visited London a few days later, Mr Blair told him that the "UK would help" the US "to get rid of Saddam…as long as there was a clever strategy". Yet, publicly, the Prime Minister emphasised that no decisions had been taken.[622] Thus, regime change had effectively replaced containment as the British position – a fact that most of the government was unaware of. The British Ambassador to Washington, Sir Christopher Meyer, was cognisant of this shift. He told the US Deputy Secretary for Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, that London, "backed regime change, but the plan had to be clever and failure was not an option. It would be a tough sell for us domestically and probably tougher

[620] Cabinet Office, 'Iraq: Options Paper', 8 March 2002, p. 1.
[621] Ibid, p. 9.
[622] Cited in the Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 3.2, p. 449.

elsewhere in Europe. The US could go it alone if it wanted to. But if it wanted to act with partners there had to be a strategy for building support for military action against Saddam", chiefly through the UN. Meyer reported that Wolfowitz continued "to make the link between Saddam and 9/11". Moreover, he wanted "Saddam replaced by something like a functioning democracy".[623]

Jack Straw was one of the few members of Blair's inner circle to voice reservations over the direction of travel. He warned that the rewards from the Prime Minister's forthcoming visit to Texas to meet with President Bush would be few, and that there was no majority in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) for military action against Iraq. "Objectively", he stated, "the threat from Iraq has not worsened as a result of 11 September". Moreover, it was unclear what regime change would actually achieve. After all, he wrote, "Iraq has no history of democracy" so "how can there be any certainty that the replacement regime will be better"?[624] By way of contrast, Geoff Hoon advised the Prime Minister that the UK "should support President Bush and be ready for a military contribution" for Iraq.[625] Meanwhile, Blair's foreign policy adviser, David Manning, urged him to use his "real influence" with Bush to push the Americans down the UN route and revive the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP).[626]

The Prime Minister finally consulted with his military advisers at the beginning of April, ahead of his trip to Texas. There is no official record of the meeting at Chequers but Blair's

[623] Letter Meyer to Manning, 'Iraq and Afghanistan: Conversation with Wolfowitz', 18 March 2002.
[624] Minute Straw to Prime Minister, 'Crawford/Iraq', 25 March 2002.
[625] Letter Hoon to Prime Minister, 'Iraq', 22 March 2002.
[626] Minute Manning to Prime Minister, 'Your Trip to the US', 14 March 2002.

Communications Director, Alastair Campbell, noted in his diary that "TB [Tony Blair] wanted to be in a position to give GWB [President Bush] a strategy and influence it". Campbell observed that the "CDS [Chief of Defence Staff, Admiral Boyce] appeared to be trying to shape the meeting towards inaction". The debate moved onto to defining British objectives:

> "TB said it was the usual conundrum – do I support totally in public and help deliver our strategy, or do I put distance between us and lose influence? We discussed whether the central aim was WMD or regime change. [Lieutenant General] Piggott's view was that it was WMD. TB felt it was regime change in part because of WMD but more broadly because of the threat to the region and the world"[627]

*The blank cheque*

On the eve of Blair's visit to the President's ranch in Crawford, Texas, Bush told a reporter: "I have made up my mind that Saddam needs to go".[628] The discussions in Texas were off-the-record, but a Cabinet Office paper from July 2002 states that "when the Prime Minister discussed Iraq with President Bush at Crawford in April he said that the UK would support military action to bring about regime change, provided certain conditions were met".[629] The Prime Minister wanted a campaign to shape domestic and international public opinion in favour of regime change. He also thought they had to fully exhaust the UN route (WMD inspections) for added legitimacy. Finally, Blair hoped to energise the administration on the MEPP.

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[627] Alistair Campbell and Bill Hagerty, *The Alastair Campbell Diaries: Vol. 4* (London: Hutchinson, 2012), 2 April 2002, pp. 197-199.
[628] Coughlin, *American Ally*, p. 219
[629] Cabinet Office Paper, 'Iraq: Conditions for Military Action', 19 July 2002,.

In June, Blair told the US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, that "the UK would be with the US in any military action".[630] The Prime Minister did not consult Cabinet or his military advisers before making this pledge. Given that joint military planning was authorised in late June, many within the Ministry of Defence correctly suspected where Blair's thinking was heading. Officially, however, they were not apprised of the Prime Minister's commitment. The CDS, Admiral Boyce, told his American counterpart, General Richard Myers, in early July that "no political decisions have been taken in the UK on our participation in an operation against Iraq".[631]

Many within the Ministry of Defence harboured grave doubts over military action. Ahead of a crunch meeting on 23 July 2002, Geoff Hoon was presented with a note from his Private Office, which distilled the views of the Chiefs of Staff, as well as the Permanent Undersecretary of State, Sir Kevin Tebbit. They questioned whether military intervention was necessary, given that Saddam had no link to 9/11 and that his WMD programme was less advanced than Iran's and Libya's. They acknowledged that "significant UK engagement (ie ground forces) could conceivably allow us to influence US plans and would earn us huge kudos in Washington with potential paybacks elsewhere". Conversely, "refusal to provide <u>any</u> support would… severely damage relationship". Officials concluded that "the case for attacking Iraq now or in the immediate future is deeply flawed" and that if Washington persisted, "the UK should offer that level of support which

[630] Blair cited in the Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 3.3, p. 24.
[631] Letter CDS to CJCS, 4 July 2002.

the US might reasonably expect of a good Ally (i.e. basing in DG [Diego Garcia] and Cyprus; niche capabilities [like Special Forces]). There is no objective case for offering more."[632]

It is not clear whether Mr Hoon shared the note with anyone. It is unlikely he agreed with it, as he does not seem to have raised any of the salient points during a meeting with the Prime Minister and other key figures on 23 July.[633] Richard Dearlove reported that "military action was now seen as inevitable" in Washington but there was "little discussion of the aftermath".[634] Jack Straw questioned the focus on Iraq when Iran, Korea, and Libya were greater WMD threats. The Prime Minister "saw regime change as the route to dealing with WMD". This excerpt from Campbell's diary gives us a clear insight into Blair's thinking:

> "TB was pretty clear that we had to be with the Americans. He said at one point, 'It's worse than you think, I actually believe in doing this'. He was acutely conscious of how difficult it would be both with the PLP and the public, but when Jack raised the prospect of not going in with the US, TB said that would be the biggest shift in foreign policy for fifty years and I'm not sure it's very wise. On the tactical level, he felt maximum closeness publicly was the way to maximise influence privately"[635]

The rest of the meeting was centred on implementation – as opposed to debating whether Britain *should* be going to war. Those present agreed to "work on the assumption that the UK would take part in any military action". For Blair, it was now a matter of securing public support. "It would make a big difference politically and legally", he said, "if Saddam

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[632] Watkins to SofS, 'Iraq Summary', 22 July 2002, cited in The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 3.3, pp. 56-57.
[633] Attendees included: Tony Blair, Geoff Hoon, Jack Straw, Attorney General Lord Goldsmith, Cabinet Secretary Richard Wilson, Admiral Boyce, David Manning, Jonathan Powell, Sally Morgan, Alistair Campbell, Richard Dearlove, John Scarlett (JIC) and Francis Richards (GCHQ).
[634] Minute Rycroft to Manning, 23 July 2002, 'Iraq: Prime Minister's Meeting'.
[635] Campbell diary, 23 July 2002, pp. 278-279.

refused to allow in the UN inspectors…If the political context were right, people would support regime change".[636]

On 28 July, Blair wrote to Bush to remind him of the conditions of British support. Unfortunately, he undermined his own bargaining leverage in the opening sentence of the letter. "I will be with you, whatever", he told the President.[637] This pledge, which effectively handed Bush carte blanche, was sent against the advice of Manning and Campbell and without input from either Geoff Hoon or Jack Straw.[638] The July meeting and the letter were decisive moments in the conceptualisation of British grand strategy. It is worth reiterating that Cabinet was not privy to these discussions, nor were the judgements subject to thorough review. The priorities were set; Britain was with the United States, no matter what. From then on, it was a matter of determining how large the British contribution should be in the event of military action. The second task, which would be pursued concurrently, was to shape domestic and international opinion in favour of intervention.

*Framing the debate and scaling the commitment*

On 24 September 2002, the government published a dossier on the threat posed by Iraq, in which Blair declared the "assessed intelligence has established beyond doubt" that "Saddam has continued to produce chemical and biological weapons".[639] The now infamous document, which was officially prepared by the Joint Intelligence Committee, but

[636] Minute Rycroft to Manning, 23 July 2002, 'Iraq: Prime Minister's Meeting'.
[637] Note Blair to Bush, 'Note on Iraq', 28 July 2002.
[638] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 3.3, pp. 76-77.
[639] Foreword by Tony Blair, HM Government, 'Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government', 24 September 2002, p. 3.

had a great deal of input from Number 10, asserted that "the Iraqi military are able to deploy these [chemical and biological] weapons within 45 minutes of a decision to do so".[640]

That same month, President Bush agreed to explore the UN route – a move that both Colin Powell and Tony Blair had been calling for. The latter judged that "while an American audience would probably go along with regime change as the reason for war, he would not be able to get that past the Labour Party and the British public". Thus, "they had to go through the UN and to be seen going through the UN".[641]

As Iraq opened its doors to weapons inspectors in late 2002, the British and American militaries stepped up their preparations for war. On 11 September, Britain offered to contribute air and naval forces for planning purposes. The MoD, however, pressed Number 10 for a greater commitment and warned the Prime Minister that not contributing land forces would "reduce the influence we have over planning". Moreover, "it may also change the US' perceptions of the UK as a partner longer-term, fostering a tendency to see us as a specialist in Peace Support Operations rather than a warfighting ally with possible knock-on effects on other areas of close bilateral cooperation (intelligence, nuclear, missile defence, equipment, and network-centric capability, etc.)." Geoff Hoon also highlighted "the negative reaction of many of our own military personnel – particularly in the Army – if we do not provide a land contribution".[642]

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[640] 'Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government', p. 17.
[641] John Kampfner, *Blair's Wars* (London: The Free Press, 2003), p. 197.
[642] Minute Hoon to Prime Minister, 15 October 2002, 'Iraq: UK Military Options' attaching Paper Ministry of Defence, 'Iraq: UK Contingency Planning', 14 October 2002,.

Two weeks later, Blair agreed to offer the Americans a substantial land contribution for planning purposes.[643] This decision was not discussed by either a Cabinet Committee nor the wider Cabinet.[644] The only dissent came from within Number 10. The Prime Minister's foreign policy adviser, David Manning, was convinced of the need for regime change but not the scale of British involvement. He surmised that the Americans had come to expect a land commitment because the British military had "been pretty forward leaning in their contacts with their US opposite numbers". He doubted whether the UK "would have much say in the management of the military campaign" and advised that "the argument about US gratitude…should not be a key factor in our decision". If the UK only offered air and maritime assets, "Army morale would have to be managed: we needn't fight every war". He concluded that the scale of the UK contribution was ultimately a "political call" as there was no strong military case for a land contribution.[645]

President Bush lost patience with the inspections process in mid-December, after Baghdad issued a declaration to the UN, denying that it had an active WMD programme. The Prime Minister was informed that Washington was "intent on military action in February/March".[646] In mid-January, Blair agreed to deploy a UK division with three combat brigades for possible operations in southern Iraq. Geoff Hoon, Jack Straw and Gordon Brown were the only ministers to be apprised of this substantial commitment, which would effectively bind the UK to a post-conflict stabilisation mission in Basra.[647]

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[643] Letter Wechsberg to Watkins, 'Iraq: Military Options', 31 October 2002.
[644] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 6.1, p. 175.
[645] Minute Manning to Blair, 'Iraq: UK Military Options', 16 October 2002.
[646] Minute Manning to Prime Minister, 'Iraq', 11 December 2002.
[647] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 6.2, pp. 416-420.

The Prime Minister, however, was not finished with the UN route. He implored Bush to seek a second resolution authorising military intervention. The President's advisers, including Colin Powell, were against the idea but the British Prime Minister insisted that it would be necessary for him politically.[648] In mid-February 2003, one million people took to the streets of London to protest against military action. Whilst the executive was not constitutionally obliged to secure legislative backing for war, Blair decided that parliamentary approval would be essential for legitimacy in the absence of a final UN resolution.[649] The Prime Minister strived to carry the majority of the PLP with him and not be reliant on Conservative votes.

By early March, it was clear that France and Russia would block any second resolution in the UN Security Council. President Bush, who was "hell-bent on war" irrespective of the developments in New York, offered Blair a way out.[650] Aware of his problems with the PLP, he told the Prime Minister that the British could drop out of the coalition and join at a later stage. Blair thanked him but rejected the offer: "I absolutely believe in this too…I'm there to the very end".[651]

The Cabinet was asked to approve military intervention on 17 March 2003. Yet, this was not a proper debate over the merits and drawbacks of Britain's grand strategic choices. Blair had made the forthcoming vote in parliament a matter of confidence in his leadership.

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[648] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, pp. 296-297.
[649] Patrick Porter, *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 65; James Strong, 'Why Parliament Now Decides on War: Tracing the Growth of the Parliamentary Prerogative through Syria, Libya and Iraq', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (17, 2015, pp. 604-622), pp. 608-609.
[650] Telegram 131 Washington to FCO London, 'Iraq: PM's Visit', 29 January 2003.
[651] George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010), p. 246; Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 338;

Thus, ministers were left with very little choice. Andrew Rawnsley explains that "the demise of Blair would mean the succession of [Gordon] Brown, an outcome more terrifying than war to Blunkett, [Patricia] Hewitt, Hoon, [John] Reid, and several others in the Cabinet". Accordingly, "they went around the table expressing support for the Prime Minister, a loyalty ritual designed to bind them to the decision, to dip their hands in the blood".[652] The following day, the House of Commons approved military action with a majority of 412 to 149 votes. Britain was going to war.

*Policing Basra*

A chapter on grand strategy should not delve into the operational and tactical aspects of the military campaign, but it must critique the assumptions about the scale of the commitment that was deemed necessary to win the peace. This is a matter of priorities and resource allocation, which goes to the heart of grand strategic thinking. 46,000 British troops were involved in the invasion, which was an operational success. By mid-April, Baghdad had fallen to the Americans, while the British were in control of Basra, Iraq's second largest city. Speaking aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln on 1 May, underneath the banner "Mission Accomplished", President Bush declared "in the battle of Iraq, the United States and her allies have prevailed". Factually accurate perhaps, given Saddam's demise, but the battle *for* Iraq was just beginning.

[652] Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, pp. 166-167

London was also unperturbed about the potential for further violence. By the end of May, UK force levels were reduced to 18,000 troops.[653] From early June 2003 and throughout the summer, however, there were signs that security in both Baghdad and the South was deteriorating.[654] Following a visit to Iraq in June 2003, Blair told ministers that "Whitehall should go back to a war footing for the next 2-3 months to avoid losing the peace in Iraq".[655] The Iraq Inquiry found "no indications that Mr Blair's direction led to any substantive changes in the UK's reconstruction effort".[656] Revenge killings and looting became commonplace as Basra became a "law-free zone".[657] Yet the British government continued to withdraw troops, which meant fewer patrols. By May 2004, the UK presence had fallen to 8,600 and Basra was effectively ceded to Shi'a militias.[658]

**Iraq and the grand strategy ledger[659]**

Was the British decision to become so heavily invested in America's war in Iraq a case of proportionate grand strategic thinking? I shall argue that it fails my test on three counts. First, war was not a proportionate response to the threat posed by Saddam. The Iraqi leader was undoubtedly a murderous tyrant, but he did not pose a clear and present threat to vital British interests or those of its key allies. Second, the resources committed did not match the scale of Anglo-American ambitions for post-Saddam Iraq. Toppling the regime was the

[653] Ministry of Defence, 'Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures', https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121203223314tf_/http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/FactSheets/OperationsFactsheets/OperationsInIraqFactsandFigures.htm.
[654] Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Executive Summary, pp. 86-93.
[655] Letter Cannon to McDonald, 3 June 2003, 'Iraq: Prime Minister's Meeting', 3 June'.
[656] Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 10.4, p. 535.
[657] Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars*, p. 31.
[658] Ministry of Defence, 'Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures'.
[659] This critique does not assess the legality of the invasion.

easy part; the British and American militaries were neither trained nor equipped to play midwife to Iraqi democracy.

The third reason relates to the "price" paid in alliance management. The British government evidently believed not only that regime change was the right thing to do, but also that it was important to stand alongside the Bush administration. London hoped to exact some measure of influence out of Washington, given the scale of its diplomatic and military commitment. I contend that the British fundamentally misinterpreted the degree to which they could influence American decision-making. Thus, the land contribution was disproportionately large compared to the relative gains that could be achieved through influence. Moreover, by leaning so heavily towards Washington, Tony Blair detonated the bridge that he had so carefully constructed between Europe and the United States during his first term.

*Overbalancing*

The shadow of 9/11 looms large over the Iraq debate. Any assessment of British and American grand strategy during this period must be mindful of the uncertainty and fear that policymakers must have felt at the time. The images of the Twin Towers burning, or of people choosing to jump to their deaths rather than perish in the inferno, remain as shocking as they were on that September day. Blair has acknowledged that 9/11 changed his "perception of risk". Within the context of invading Iraq, he explained:

> "The point about this act in New York was that, had they been able to kill even more people than those 3,000, they would have, and so, after that time, my view was you

> could not take risks with this issue at all, and one dimension of it, because we were advised, obviously, that these people would use chemical or biological weapons or a nuclear device, if they could get hold of them – that completely changed our assessment of where the risks for security lay"[660]

Supporting the United States in its war against Al-Qaida and the Taliban was and is completely understandable, but Iraq is a different matter. Both Blair and Bush believed that Iraq was a clear threat to their security interests that needed to be dealt with. Some inside the Pentagon also suspected that Saddam was involved in 9/11 – a judgement that British intelligence refuted time and again.

While Blair did not believe in the 9/11 link, he thought that Baghdad had become a "current and serious threat to the UK national interest". When making the case publicly, Blair stated that the "assessed intelligence has established beyond doubt" that Saddam "continues in his efforts to develop nuclear weapons", as well as his ballistic missile programme.[661] He told the House of Commons that the intelligence on which these assessments were based was "extensive, detailed and authoritative".[662]

This was not an accurate reading of the reports he had received.[663] The Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) conceded that intelligence on Iraq's WMD and ballistic missile programmes was "sporadic and patchy" at best.[664] They were confident, however, that

[660] Tony Blair's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 29 January 2010, pp. 10-11.
[661] Foreword by Tony Blair, 'Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government', 24 September 2002, p. 3.
[662] Tony Blair's statement to the House of Commons, 24 September 2001, *Hansard*, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmhansrd/vo020924/debtext/20924-01.htm
[663] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 4.2, p. 282.
[664] JIC Current Intelligence Group Assessment, 'The Status of Iraqi WMD Programmes', 15 March 2002.

Saddam lacked the offensive capabilities to pose a threat to western interests in the region. The JIC judged that any "military offensive outside Iraq's borders would be limited by shortfalls in equipment and logistics".[665]

Blair remained convinced that Iraq would "leech WMD material or provide help to terrorists" in future.[666] He told the House of Commons that there was "a real and present danger" posed by the convergence of "tyrannical regimes with WMD and extreme terrorist groups".[667] This was what London and Washington expected of 'rogue states' like Iraq, Iran, North Korea and Libya. This label was repeatedly used to portray Saddam as an irrational actor.[668] His repressive behaviour at home was regularly cited as evidence of his recklessness.

London and Washington both hoped that military action against Iraq would serve as a warning to other 'rogue states' on their radar. One of Geoff Hoon's more hawkish advisers, Simon Webb, wrote that, "by demonstrating our capacity for high intensity warfare at large scale the UK would also send a powerful deterrence message to other potential WMD proliferators and adversaries".[669]

It is peculiar that states like Iran and Libya were judged as irrational actors and yet expected to behave in accordance with deterrence logic. The Iraq War, incidentally, had the reverse effect for proliferation. It incentivised these 'rogue states' to invest in their nuclear weapons

[665] JIC Assessment, 'Iraq's Military Capabilities', 1 December 2000.
[666] Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), p. 411.
[667] Tony Blair's speech to the House of Commons, London, 18 March 2003.
[668] Porter, *Blunder*, pp. 94-95.
[669] Minute Webb to PS/Secretary of State [MOD], 'Bush and the War on Terrorism', 12 April 2002.

programmes as a means of guaranteeing regime survival. Moreover, the notion that a state's repressive behaviour at home translates into reckless foreign policy behaviour is not supported by the historical record.[670] Stalin and Mao's repressive measures at home did not automatically translate into aggressive foreign policies.

Furthermore, the judgement of Blair's inner circle – that Saddam was an irrational actor – was not shared by many within the British intelligence community. The Defence Intelligence Staff and SIS assessed that Saddam was a "judicious political calculator" who would only use WMDs "if he believes he is about to fall".[671] Blair was undoubtedly right to be worried about the unholy marriage of WMDs and terrorism, but there was little in the intelligence reports to suggest that Iraq was a likely venue for such a union. The Joint Intelligence Committee stated in late 2001 that there was no "credible evidence of covert transfers of WMD-related technology and expertise to terrorist groups".[672] In late 2002, analysts concluded that "Iraq's terrorist capability is limited and unlikely to be significantly boosted by the use of proxies". They warned that "the greatest terrorist threat in the event of military action against Iraq will come from Al Qaida and other Islamic extremists".[673] Time and again, it is clear that Blair's personal threat assessment went further than that of the professional intelligence services.

Blair heightened the urgency of the situation by framing the options in binary terms. In September 2002, for example, he told the Trades Union Congress that, "I do not want it on

[670] Porter, *Blunder*, p. 191.
[671] Letter PS/C to Scarlett, 'Iraq: Psychological Profile of Saddam', 14 November 2002.
[672] JIC Assessment, 'Iraq after September 11 – The Terrorist Threat', 28 November 2001,
[673] JIC Assessment, 'International Terrorism: The Threat from Iraq', 10 October 2002.

my conscience that we knew the threat, saw it coming and did nothing".[674] This presupposes that the only courses open to the coalition were military action or passivity. Moreover, it downplays the effectiveness of the pre-existing policy of containment. Indeed, the stated position of the British government in February 2001 was that containment had been broadly successful.[675] There was concern that the sanctions programme was eroding but this could have been strengthened. In short, both London and Washington ignored the middle option: reinforced containment.

Patrick Porter convincingly argues that the coalition could have pursued a range of intermediate choices, including aerial and on-the-ground monitoring, shipping patrols and punitive air strikes, as well as additional sanctions on imports of materials for military use and the illicit export of oil.[676] Blair would probably respond that the UK never had the luxury of such an option. The Americans were intent on regime change, which meant the choice for London was over whether and how far to support them. As I go on to argue, the UK could have limited the extent of its involvement.

*Positive illusions*

The coalition assigned itself a Sisyphean task in Iraq and, more broadly, in the "War on Terror". With regard to the latter, Hew Strachan rightly notes that the allies "lacked a clear geographical focus: specific wars in particular parts of the world were subsumed in an overarching but amorphous and ill-defined bigger war".[677] Terrorism is a method used by

[674] Tony Blair's speech to the Trades Union Congress, Blackpool, 10 September 2002.
[675] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary, p. 9.
[676] Porter, *Blunder*, p. 188.
[677] Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 11.

extremist groups to achieve a political goal. Waging a war on a method of fighting is strategically illiterate.

Bush and Blair both had high hopes for what could be accomplished through Iraq. The latter believed the whole region "was urgently in need of modernisation".[678] A democratic Iraq could inspire a "benign domino effect" across the Middle East.[679] There was an assumption held by senior policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic that ordinary Iraqis yearned for democracy. This caused many in Washington and even some in London to believe that British and American troops "would be welcomed as liberators".[680]

A cursory glance at the historical record of regime change might have given greater pause for thought. Consider, for example, Washington's failed efforts in Central America and the Caribbean at the beginning of the twentieth Century.[681] It does not take long for the liberator to be perceived as the conqueror. Moreover, democratic transitions have generally been violent. From the French Revolution to the breakup of Yugoslavia, democracies are rarely civil from birth. There have been some notable successes of foreign-imposed regime change, but these have been few and far between.

[678] Blair, *A Journey*, p. 386.
[679] Porter, *Blunder*, p. 74.
[680] General Peter Wall's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 14 December 2009, p. 38. This expectation was much more common in Washington. US Vice President Dick Cheney told NBC that: "My belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators". 16 March 2003.
[681] Alexander B. Downes & Jonathan Monten, 'Forced to Be Free? Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization', *International Security* (37:4, 2013, pp. 90–131), p. 123.

Like his reading of the intelligence reports, Blair "cherry-picked" historical cases to justify the cause.[682] His go-to examples were West Germany and Japan but the conditions that allowed for these democratic transitions in the late 1940s were wholly different to those in Iraq in 2003. Ultimately, domestic context matters and Anglo-American objectives were wildly ambitious, given the cleavages in Iraqi society.[683] Blair downplayed the significance of these ethnic and sectarian divisions. After being warned by Dr Michael Williams, one of the Foreign Office's Middle East experts, that coalition troops would not be welcome, the Prime Minister flippantly replied, "that's all history, Mike. This is about the future."[684]

The British force deployed to Basra was insufficient even to meet the city's basic security requirements – let alone succour democracy. The ratio of British troops to Iraqi civilians in Basra was approximately 1:370, in sharp contrast to the 1:65 ratio in Belfast during the Troubles.[685] This comparison becomes even more stark when one considers that the British Army was operating in a more benign and familiar environment in Northern Ireland, alongside a functioning police force. Furthermore, the total number of troops stationed in southern Iraq did not equate to "boots on the ground". When force levels fell to 8,000 in 2004, the number of soldiers able to patrol outside their fortified bases rarely exceeded 200.[686] It is unsurprising that Basra, Iraq's second biggest city, quickly succumbed to lawlessness with only a few hundred riflemen on duty.

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[682] Porter, *Blunder*, p. 130.
[683] Downes & Monten, 'Forced to Be Free?', pp. 94, 131.
[684] Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, p. 185.
[685] Michael Knights and Ed Williams, 'The Calm before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq' (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 66, 2007, pp. 1-37), p. 7
[686] Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars*, p. 143.

As well as underestimating divisions within Iraqi society, policymakers in London and Washington failed to appreciate the potential for malign interference from neighbouring powers. Iran had a strong interest in seeing a weakened Iraq. The two countries waged a brutal and bloody war during the 1980s. It is therefore quite astonishing that London expected Iranian acquiescence. The JIC assessed in February 2003 that "Iranian reactions to a Coalition presence in Southern Iraq remain unclear but are unlikely to be aggressive".[687] To their credit, the Defence Intelligence Staff expected "political groupings with a religious (Shia) agenda and Iranian backing to emerge very quickly within Basra (and across southern Iraq)". Just over a week before the invasion, they warned "it would be highly destabilising for such groups to base their political influence on their control of armed elements".[688] It is unclear if this paper reached Number 10, although it probably would not have made much difference by that stage.

Blair and his advisers subsequently told the Iraq Inquiry that the violence in Iraq could not have been foreseen. The task was undoubtedly made harder by the US decision to disband the Iraqi Army and ban members of Saddam's Ba'ath Party from holding office. Yet, maintaining control – let alone facilitating the birth of a democracy – was always going to be extraordinarily difficult, given the religious and ethnic divisions in Iraqi society. Indeed, the Iraq Inquiry does not agree that hindsight is required: "The risks of internal strife in Iraq, active Iranian pursuit of its interests, regional instability, and Al Qaida activity in Iraq, were each explicitly identified before the invasion".[689] Even if the de-Baathification error

[687] JIC Assessment, 'Southern Iraq: What's in Store?', 19 February 2003.
[688] DIS, 'Basra: Post Saddam Governance', 11 March 2003.
[689] Sir John Chilcot's public statement, The Iraq Inquiry, 6 July 2016.

had not been made, Washington and London would still have had to commit tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of additional troops were they to properly enforce the peace.

This was never going to be a realistic option for the UK, given its resource base. A deployment of 8,000 troops on six-month cycles was taxing enough on the British Army. That figure masks the thousands of troops at home preparing for their deployment in six, twelve or eighteen months' time. Moreover, the Iraq deployment took place while the British Army was also engaged in the Balkans, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. Closer to home, troops were on alert to cover for a possible fire-fighters' strike. The UK simply could not have maintained the invasion force of 32,000 troops in southern Iraq to ensure law and order. As such, the mission was disproportionate for a state of Britain's means.

Blair therefore broke one of the tests for intervention he had set in the 1990s. In his famous Chicago speech, the Prime Minister wisely set out six preconditions for military action in an attempt to temper the "interventionist impulse".[690] Blair argued that the intervening force must be "prepared for the long term" because, "having made a commitment, we cannot simply walk away once the fight is over".[691] These words would ring hollow for the citizens of Basra five years later.

[690] Lawrence Freedman, 'Force and the international community: Blair's Chicago speech and the criteria for intervention', *International Relations* (31:2, 2017, pp. 107–124), p. 115.
[691] Tony Blair's speech, 'Doctrine of the International Community', Chicago, 24 April 1999.

*Paying the "blood price" for influence*

American and British policymakers were both guilty of overestimating the threat and pursuing wildly ambitious objectives. The final charge is made solely against decision-makers in London. I contend that the British misjudged the benefits that could be derived from Washington in exchange for their diplomatic and military backing. Blair hoped that by closely aligning his government with the Bush administration, he could encourage the Americans to go down the UN route and reopen the MEPP negotiations.

The Prime Minister believed it was important to stand alongside the Bush administration, whatever happened. He told the *BBC* that Britain would pay the "blood price" for the alliance if necessary.[692] Blair's perception of Bush was that he had a very binary worldview: "You're either with him or you're against him. It's very black and white with Bush."[693] Thus, he judged that the best way to secure influence was by tightly embracing the administration. He made this clear to his Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs in June 2002: "We should say we'll be with you. Here's how to make it happen successfully; not: here are our conditions for being with you."[694] To be clear though, Blair was no poodle. He believed that Saddam needed to be dealt with and that the prize of a reformed Middle East was worth the risk.

The quest for influence extended beyond Blair's inner circle. The military hoped that a sizeable British contribution would give them influence over invasion planning. Not

[692] 'Britain will pay 'blood price' – Blair', *BBC News*, 6 September 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/2239887.stm
[693] Blair quoted in Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, p. 95.
[694] Blair cited in the Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 3.3, p. 23.

content with a naval and air package, the MoD lobbied Blair into adding a land component. Asked by the Iraq Inquiry why the armed forces were "so keen to send a division", the CDS replied, "I think it was only by having something of that particular size that we thought we would have a reasonable influence on how the Americans were going to conduct the campaign".[695] They were pushing against an open door with Blair, who was not a military expert and signed off on the plan within two weeks of the request being made. Geoff Hoon told the Iraq Inquiry that "the Prime Minister wanted us to be involved to the maximum extent that was possible".[696] Blair reflected that the military "preferred to be right at the centre of things…that was my view too".[697] Policymakers effectively used the army as a "stake" to remain in Washington's poker game.[698]

Was the scale of Britain's commitment worth it? The degree of British influence must be weighed against other American interests. Did London convince Washington to do something that it would not otherwise have done? On the MEPP, Blair could perhaps claim some success after the Crawford meeting in early 2002. Bush subsequently sent Colin Powell to Israel and Palestine to restart the negotiations in what Marina Henke considers a "major victory" for Blair.[699] Any influence that he may have had must be judged against developments in the region that would have incentivised the administration to intervene. Throughout March, Palestinian militants carried out a wave of suicide bombings, while Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield, its largest military operation in the West Bank

[695] Admiral Boyce's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 3 December 2009, p. 38.
[696] Geoff Hoon's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 19 January 2010, p. 56.
[697] Tony Blair's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 29 January 2010, pp. 60-61.
[698] David Betz and Anthony Cormack, 'Iraq, Afghanistan and British Strategy', *Orbis* (53:2, 2009, pp. 319-336), p. 336.
[699] Marina E. Henke, 'Tony Blair's gamble: The Middle East Peace Process and British participation in the Iraq 2003 campaign', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (20:4, 2018, pp. 1-17), p. 8.

since the 1967 Six-Day War. Irrespective of Blair's advocacy, it would have been surprising if Bush had not sent his chief diplomat to the region to try and calm the situation.

In any case, Powell's mission failed as he was undermined in Washington by the Israel lobby, which had extensive links to Congress and the administration. Christopher Meyer judged that "hell was more likely to freeze than Bush threaten [Israeli Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon with a big stick".[700] Given these barriers, many inside the Bush White House regarded Blair as "hopelessly optimistic" on the peace process.[701]

It is also difficult to assess the degree of influence the Prime Minister had over Bush's decision to go to the UN in September 2002. The President noted that Colin Powell was particularly "passionate" about going through the Security Council.[702] Blair did though have an impact in early 2003 when Bush agreed to reopen the UN route against the advice of his advisers, including Powell. This could be seen as a victory for Blair's strategy. The extent of his influence should not be overstated though. Bush granted Blair a political favour, but this "did not signal a seismic shift in the President's thinking about the UN".[703] The invasion was going to happen regardless of developments in New York. Bush would not even countenance a delay to the military timetable.[704] Why then did he consent to Blair's request? In short, the costs were minimal while the potential payoffs were appealing. It was preferable for the Americans to invade at the head of a coalition. Bush was worried about

[700] Christopher Meyer, *DC Confidential* (London: Phoenix, 2006), p. 245.
[701] Coughlin, *American Ally*, p. 329.
[702] Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 238.
[703] Kelly McHugh, 'Bush, Blair, and the War in Iraq: Alliance Politics and the Limits of Influence', Political Science Quarterly (125:3, 2010, pp. 465-491), p. 482.
[704] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 3.8, p. 417.

the connotations of unilateralism, dubbed "the imperial option" by Deputy National Security Adviser Steve Hadley.[705] One last gambit at the UN was hardly a steep price to pay if it smoothed the ride for his foremost ally.

The benefits derived from diplomatic alignment do not seem to have borne much fruit for Blair. The same goes for the military commitment. The contribution of a land division did not result in any significant influence over the planning of the military campaign or in post-conflict governance. British influence over the Coalition Provisional Authority was limited, which meant that diplomats were unable to voice their misgivings over the de-Baathification order in 2003.[706] Blair's concerns over the siege of Fallujah in 2004 were also largely ignored.[707]

This meagre level of influence was not proportionate to the substantial costs of British involvement. Diplomatically, Blair irreversibly weakened his relationships on the continent. Upon taking office, the Prime Minister declared that Britain could serve as "the bridge between the US and Europe".[708] Blair spent a great deal of time cultivating relationships with Chancellor Schroder of Germany and President Chirac of France. The bilateral defence relationship with Paris received a major boost in 1998 with the signing of the St Malo declaration. Yet, five years later, the British and French were at loggerheads. Blair's bridge collapsed with the Iraq War.[709]

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[705] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 297.
[706] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary, p. 125.
[707] Porter, *Blunder*, p. 147.
[708] Tony Blair's speech to Lord Mayor's Banquet, London, 10 November 1997.
[709] William Wallace, 'The collapse of British foreign policy', *International Affairs* (82:1, 2005, pp. 53-68), p. 55; Steven Philip Kramer, 'Blair's Britain after Iraq', *Foreign Affairs* (82:4, 2003, pp. 90-104).

In addition to these diplomatic setbacks, the contribution of a land division came at an excessively heavy price. 179 British service personnel lost their lives in the conflict. Moreover, the taxpayer was burdened with a £9.2bn bill.[710] These financial sums are hardly crippling and do not equal the major cases of imperial overstretch, but it would be wrong to ignore the significant opportunity costs that arose.[711] While the war did not break the Treasury, finite resources were undoubtedly squandered, which could have been spent elsewhere. At the very least, the country's national debt would be significantly lower than it is today. The UK is not a superpower that can afford to waste billions on military deployments around the globe. A power in relative decline must use its diplomatic weight and military assets prudently.

What if the UK had pulled back from military action in March 2003? Blair warned that would signal "the biggest shift in foreign policy for fifty years".[712] Such thinking pervaded Whitehall. Cabinet Secretary Andrew Turnbull thought that "the Special Relationship would have been dead for a hundred years" if Britain had withdrawn from the coalition.[713] Yet, as the previous chapter demonstrated, the US-UK relationship survived Harold Wilson's refusal to participate in the Vietnam War. Moreover, those countries that publicly opposed the war were not in Washington's bad books for long. France rebuilt its bridges to the US through a series of initiatives on NATO and Afghanistan.[714] It is often assumed that

[710] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary, p. 126.
[711] Porter, *Blunder*, pp. 152-153, 177.
[712] Campbell diary, 23 July 2002, pp. 278-279.
[713] Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, p. 156.
[714] Guillaume Parmentier, 'French-American Relations after the Iraq War: How to Redefine the Relationship' in *France on the World Stage*, edited by Mairi Maclean and Joseph Szarka (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 20-36), pp. 22, 27.

it took Nicolas Sarkozy to undo the damage caused by Iraq, but relations were on the mend before his election victory in 2007. In 2005-06, the Chirac and Bush administrations cooperated at the UN over Syrian interference in Lebanon, as well as Iran's nuclear programme.[715] Political leaders often have short memories, particularly when shared interests encourage rapprochement.

Blair would not have publicly broken from Bush in any case, because, unlike Chirac, he was convinced that Saddam was a threat that had to be dealt with. Yet, there were other options for the UK, between neutrality and a land division. London could have taken an approach akin to limited liability by maintaining diplomatic support for the Bush administration, but tempering the extent of its military involvement. The US "had the capability and the numbers" to invade Iraq without UK ground forces. The White House wanted "another flag", but the UK could have restricted its participation to air and naval assets.[716] David Manning, who visited Washington on a number of occasions in the build-up to war, judged that the Americans were principally interested in British airpower and Special Forces, as well as access to the Cyprus and Diego Garcia military bases.[717] This option would still have cost the UK diplomatically in Europe, but the effect would have been less pronounced. More importantly, the British could have kept their relationship with the Americans intact, while avoiding a grand strategic error in the form of a major land commitment to southern Iraq.

[715] David Ignatius, 'Bush's New Ally: France?', *The Washington Post*, 1 February 2006.
[716] Admiral Boyce's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 3 December 2009, p. 37.
[717] David Manning's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 24 June 2010, p. 99.

Are there any lessons to be learnt here? Why were the British unable to shape thinking in Washington? Blair's influencing strategy is partly to blame. The Prime Minister set out conditions at Crawford but the Americans took his support for granted. This was not particularly surprising, given his personal assurances to Rumsfeld and Bush throughout the summer of 2002. Even before the Texas trip, Colin Powell advised his boss that: "Blair will be with us should military operations be necessary. He is convinced on two points: the threat is real; and success against Saddam will yield more regional success."[718] By May 2002, Blair's conditions had already been forgotten in Washington.[719] Indeed, the White House Chief of Staff, Andrew Card, subsequently could not "remember any quote conditions that were outlined at that [Crawford] meeting".[720]

More importantly though, the British government failed to appreciate how the policymaking process works in Washington. Consider the Israel-Palestine issue. Restarting the peace process was bound to be met with fierce resistance from the pro-Israel neoconservatives in the administration. Blair urged Bush to engage with Yasser Arafat but his appeals fell on deaf ears because Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz regarded the Palestinian leader as a terrorist.[721] The British government was hopelessly outgunned by the Israel Lobby.

Failure to achieve real progress on MEPP points to a wider problem when it comes to British hopes of influencing American foreign policy. Blair was not the first, nor will he be the last

[718] Memorandum Powell to Bush, 28 March 2002, 'Your Meeting with United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair, April 5-7, 2002 at Crawford' cited in The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 3.2, p. 487.
[719] Letter Meyer to Manning, 'Your Visit to Washington', 15 May 2002.
[720] Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, p. 96.
[721] Coughlin, American Ally, pp. 219, 228; Kampfner, *Blair's Wars*, p. 184.

British leader to believe in the value of the "Special Relationship". Many prime ministers and foreign secretaries have been convinced that their views hold genuine sway in the White House and on Capitol Hill. Harold Macmillan spoke of Britain as Greece to America's Rome, with London civilising and guiding the fledgling and uncouth colossus through the choppy waters of international politics – a role that the patrician statesman tried to enact with President Kennedy.[722] Leaving aside the fact that Rome conquered and plundered Greece, the implication of Macmillan's analogy was that the British were somehow wiser and could manage their country's relative decline by shaping policy and strategy in Washington. "Specialness", Alex Danchev concludes, "is, and always was, self-deception".[723] Macmillan's rather patronising view is at the extreme end of the scale, but there is an entrenched belief among senior policymakers in London that their views hold real sway in Washington. The sad reality for the British is that the US-UK alliance is just one of many special relationships for Washington.

Consider, for example, the US alliances with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Poland and Ireland. The Israel and Gulf lobbies are particularly well funded and organised but even they do not always curry favour. The US-Israel alliance endured a rocky patch during President Obama's tenure as he pushed for a deal with Iran against Binyamin Netanyahu's wishes. More recently, the US-Saudi relationship has come under strain, following the murder of regime critic Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

[722] David Reynolds, 'A 'Special Relationship'? America, Britain and the International Order Since the Second World War', *International Affairs* (62:1, 1985, pp. 1-20), p. 2.
[723] Alex Danchev, 'On Specialness', *International Affairs* (72: 4, 1996, pp. 737-750), p. 740.

If these countries struggle to maintain influence in Washington with their substantial lobbying efforts, it is unsurprising that the British have also faced difficulties in getting their way. The Americans have been better at separating affection for the British from hardnosed national interests. The Thatcher-Reagan partnership is often touted as one of the high points in US-UK relations, but that did stop the American administration from remaining publicly neutral during the Falklands War in 1982.[724] The following year, the Americans invaded Grenada – where Queen Elizabeth remains head of state – without giving London prior notice. Much to John Major's chagrin, the Clinton administration granted former Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams a visa to speak in New York in 1994. As British Special Forces deployed alongside their American counterparts in Afghanistan after 9/11, the Bush administration was preparing tariffs on British steel. More recently, British influence did not stop the Trump administration from withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord, nor the Iran deal. To this day, the Americans remain fastidiously neutral over Spanish claims on Gibraltar.

Ultimately, it is not possible for Britain or any external power to exert a special long-term influence in Washington.[725] Securing a degree of influence with the world's only superpower is a worthy goal but at what cost? The tragedy of Iraq was that furthering the US alliance became a goal in its own right, rather than as a means of achieving greater security. As the Iraq Inquiry concluded: "influence should not be set as an objective in itself. The exercise of influence is a means to an end".[726] London made a grand strategic "blunder"

[724] It is worth noting that the US Navy did provide the British Task Force with covert assistance, courtesy of the Anglophile Defense Secretary Cap Weinberger and Navy Secretary John Lehman.
[725] Patrick Porter, 'Last charge of the knights? Iraq, Afghanistan and the special relationship', *International Affairs* (86:2, 2010, pp. 355–375), pp. 373-374.
[726] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 7, p. 631.

in committing so heavily to America's war.[727] The UK's Ambassador in Washington warned Number 10 that "the Americans are very good at compartmentalising their sentimental and sincere affection for Britain from the single minded pursuit of national interest. It is a gap we have to close."[728] It is a great pity that this advice fell on deaf ears.

**Neoclassical realism and the Iraq War**

The Iraq debate unfolded under the shadow of 9/11, but the threat to the UK's vital interests was objectively low. I have argued that the danger posed by Saddam did not warrant military intervention. The prudent course of action would have been one of reinforced containment. Moreover, the extent to which the UK balanced against the threat was excessive and the mission given to British forces was too ambitious. If the UK remained intent on balancing against an imagined threat for the sake of preserving the alliance with Washington, it could have done so with a substantially reduced contribution. This would have prevented the subsequent overstretch. Thus, Iraq must be considered a case of disproportionate grand strategic thinking, in that there was an unsustainable balancing of means and ends, based on an imprudent calculation of the state's interests and the threats to those interests.

How did this come to pass? The role of biases is unsurprising. With no existential threat, policymakers have greater room for manoeuvre. It was not pre-determined that the UK had to take military action against Iraq, nor contribute a land division. In assigning causality,

[727] Michael Clarke, 'Chilcot – The Judgement of History', RUSI Commentary, 7 July 2016; Porter, *Blunder*, p. 152.
[728] Letter Meyer to Straw, 5 November 2001, 'America after 11 September', cited in The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 3.1, p. 344.

the weight falls heavily on the worldviews of the Prime Minister and his inner circle. This included Blair's: Director of Communications, Alastair Campbell; foreign policy adviser, David Manning; Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell; Director of Government Relations, Sally Morgan; Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, Sir John Scarlett; and head of SIS, Sir Richard Dearlove.[729] Chancellor Gordon Brown, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Defence Minister Geoff Hoon were also privy to many, but not all, of Blair's private commitments to the Americans. The inner circle's calculus remained the same throughout: Saddam was a threat that had to be dealt with, but any military action first needed to be "framed and sold". Regime change would spark "the positive transformation of the Middle East, and taking part would create influence over their senior ally".[730] Patrick Porter is right that "the failure over Iraq is not just that the war-initiators were dogmatic, but that they held bad ideas dogmatically".[731]

The Prime Minister had long believed in the threat radiating from Baghdad. Sir Christopher Meyer recalls that "Blair was a true believer about the wickedness of Saddam Hussein and his realisation of that pre-dates by a very long time the arrival of George Bush in the White House".[732] Indeed, the Prime Minister and President Clinton authorised a short bombing campaign to degrade Iraq's military capabilities in 1998. As I have argued, most of the intelligence reports stated that the danger posed by Saddam was not objectively worse than before 9/11. Despite the JIC's assessment that Iraq's offensive capabilities were limited and the DIS/SIS judgement that Saddam would only use chemical and biological weapons in

[729] Alistair Campbell's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 12 January 2010, p. 8.
[730] Porter, *Blunder*, p. 42.
[731] Ibid, p. 73.
[732] Sir Christopher Meyer's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 26 November 2009, pp. 42-43.

the event of invasion, Blair was convinced that Saddam was developing WMDs and intended to use them, either directly or through a terrorist proxy.[733] Stephen Dyson categorises the Prime Minister as having "a lower complexity information processing style". Thus, he used intelligence reports "in a manner which did not recognize the caveats and uncertainties involved".[734]

The same could be said of his views towards Washington. Dyson finds that his "absolutist framing of the alliance with the United States is also consistent with a lower complexity information processing style".[735] Blair was indeed convinced that Britain had to stand alongside the Americans, whatever happened at the UN. There were to be no half-measures either. In the event of war, Britain would play its full part in any military operation. According to Robin Cook, it was "a fixed pole of Tony Blair's view of Britain's place in the world that we must be the No. 1 ally of the US".[736]

It would be a mistake to pin all of the blame on Tony Blair though. There was an "ingrained belief" among his inner circle and among many senior policymakers in Whitehall that Saddam had retained WMD capabilities.[737] Take, for example, the intelligence report from SIS on 11 September 2002, which stated that Iraq had "accelerated" the production of chemical and biological agents. This was based on a single "new source on trial", who was providing intelligence to SIS through an intermediary. Normally, such intelligence would

[733] JIC Current Intelligence Group Assessment, 'The Status of Iraqi WMD Programmes', 15 March 2002.
[734] Stephen Benedict Dyson, 'Personality and Foreign Policy: Tony Blair's Iraq Decisions', *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2, 2006, pp. 289–306), p. 299.
[735] Ibid, p. 300.
[736] Cook, *Point of Departure*, p. 102.
[737] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Executive Summary, p. 12.

be assessed by the JIC before being forwarded to the Prime Minister, but Sir Richard Dearlove was invited to present the raw intelligence to Blair, Powell, Campbell and Manning on 12 September 2002.[738] A former senior SIS officer recalls that "the Prime Minister was interested in a silver bullet. If there was a gleam of a silver bullet anywhere, he would want to know about it, and he would want to see the product."[739] Dearlove cautioned that the lead was "developmental and…remained unproven".[740] Yet, the report was "influential" on Sir John Scarlett, who had responsibility for the government's September dossier.[741] Indeed, the document's key claims – that Saddam has "continued to produce chemical and biological agents", as well as "military plans" for their use – were based on SIS's source.[742] Moreover, the SIS report "became the baseline for subsequent advice to Ministers and public statements on the threat posed by Iraq".[743] It is remarkable that it was not sent to the MoD's intelligence unit, the Defence Intelligence Staff, which could have commented on the validity of the source's claims.[744]

The fact that the source was later "discredited" and withdrawn by SIS is certainly problematic but not the primary issue.[745] The world is murky and intelligence analysts do not have access to perfect information. The real concern is that SIS was being pressured into finding a 'smoking gun' to fit political objectives, which had already been shaped by individual and collective biases. In theory at least, intelligence should inform judgements

[738] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 4.2, pp. 190-193.
[739] SS4's private evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, p. 59.
[740] The Butler Report, formally termed the 'Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction' (London: HM Stationery Office, 2004), p. 239.
[741] Sir John Scarlett's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 5 May 2010, p. 20.
[742] 'Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government', p. 5.
[743] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 4.2, p. 194.
[744] 'Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction', p. 111.
[745] Ibid, p. 101.

over grand strategic priorities and subsequent policies. In the rush to find evidence to bolster the government's case, it seems that a few of the usual procedures for corroborating sources were bypassed.

Meanwhile, the UK military must share some culpability for not warning Blair's inner circle about the limits of what could be achieved. They are not guilty for providing a flawed threat assessment, but they did overpromise and underdeliver. The substantial size of the British contribution was "strongly influenced by the military's keenness to be involved on a large scale". Like Blair, the military hoped to exert some measure of influence over US planning. Yet, "it was also due to a strong desire to demonstrate the utility and value of the armed forces and justify the substantial resources invested in them. Moreover, within the armed forces, and for the same reason, each service was seeking to maximise its role."[746] Thus, the military not only demonstrated a collective bias towards action, so as to influence the Americans, but each service also saw Iraq as a means of advancing their organisation's particular interests in Whitehall.

James de Waal contends that "Britain decided to make a ground force contribution…primarily because politicians feared they would have problems with the British army if it was left out, and that these problems would find their way into the media".[747] This argument overcooks the British Army's influence on Blair's inner circle and downplays the Prime Minister's own commitment to the US alliance. The Americans, he

[746] John Kiszely, 'The political-military dynamic in the conduct of strategy', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (July 2018, pp. 1-24), p. 14.
[747] James de Waal, 'Depending on the Right People: British Political-Military Relations, 2001–10', (London: Chatham House, November 2013, pp. 1-36), p. vi.

told the *BBC* in September 2002, judge allies on whether they are prepared to commit "when the shooting starts".[748]

De Waal is, however, right to say that civil-military relations were not in good health in 2002-03. The relationship between a state's political and military elites does not require equality but it does depend on a robust dialogue between the two. Consider, for example, Churchill and Alan Brooke's heated but productive debates during the Second World War, as discussed in chapter four. In the case of Iraq, the military signed up to the job without fully considering what might be required of them in post-Saddam Iraq. General Wall told the Iraq Inquiry that he could not "recall having done any calculus about the sort of force densities we were going to need".[749] Yet, as Frank Ledwidge notes, "it is the task of the commander to apply the right level of force".[750] Questions over post-conflict strategy were raised in some quarters but not pressed. What were the military's responsibilities after the Iraqi Army had been defeated? Who would keep law and order after Saddam? Were the Iraqi police up to the job?

A failure to ask such pointed questions during the conceptualisation stage is one of the main reasons for Basra's descent into chaos after the invasion. Ledwidge is highly critical of senior commanders for not speaking truth to power.[751] Constructive challenge is especially important in the twenty-first century, as many politicians have little to no grasp of military affairs. Throughout much of the Cold War, successive cabinets were stocked

[748] 'Britain will pay 'blood price' – Blair', *BBC*, 6 September 2002.
[749] General Peter Wall's evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, 14 December 2009, p. 38.
[750] Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars*, p. 141.
[751] Ibid, pp. 134, 227.

with veterans of the First and Second World Wars. The era of the soldier-statesmen is now over. At the same time, the armed forces have contracted, giving them fewer connections to society and, by extension, to political elites. It is therefore imperative that senior military officers are prepared to advise and challenge their political masters.

Despite having the backing of the intelligence and military chiefs, Blair's ability to *implement* his disproportionate grand strategy should not have been as straightforward as it was. In a permissive environment, with an objectively low threat, we should have expected societal veto players to cause problems in implementation. In such circumstances, Britain might not have gone to war at all, or it may have still joined the coalition but contributed less noticeable assets like Special Forces. How did Blair's inner circle successfully circumvent potential veto players so that they could go 'all in'?

Much of the explanation stems from the uncertainty created by 9/11. Information over potential threats was kept on a tight leash, which diluted the potential for resistance within government because so few were privy to the direction of travel. The Cabinet, for example, was kept out of the loop until the weeks before the invasion. Blair never fulfilled his promise to ministers for a proper debate on the merits of invasion and the extent of any UK contribution. After a few ministers raised concerns during a meeting in March 2002, Blair pledged that no decisions would be taken over military involvement without their knowledge. The Prime Minister then went on to make a series of pledges to the Americans over the summer of 2002. In March 2003, the Cabinet was merely asked to rubber stamp a decision that had already been taken.

There were some within the bureaucracy who were concerned that the UK was snowballing into an unjustified and excessive military commitment. A number of senior policymakers at the MoD were not only sceptical about the severity and imminence of the threat, but also questioned the magnitude of the UK's likely contribution. The Watkins memo of 22 July 2002 brought these views together. While the case for military action was thin, officials believed it was worth standing alongside the Americans for the sake of the alliance. They cautioned, however, that such a commitment should be limited to the "level of support which the US might reasonably expect of a good Ally (i.e. basing in DG [Diego Garcia] and Cyprus; niche capabilities [like Special Forces]). There is no objective case for offering more."[752]

The Defence Intelligence Staff also deserve credit for accurately forecasting potential issues. In the run-up to war, a small Red Team was established inside DIS to provide policymakers with an independent view of intelligence assumptions and key judgements. Their first report described Whitehall's knowledge of Iraq's social cleavages as "shallow". Analysts also warned that Al Qaida would "take the opportunity presented by the US/UK operation to re-establish credibility and encourage widespread anti-Western activity in the region".[753] A few weeks before the invasion, they predicted that "after a 'honeymoon period', Iraqi support [for the coalition] is likely to become fragile".[754] Sadly, their counsel was not

[752] Watkins to SofS, 'Iraq Summary', 22 July 2002, cited in The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 3.3, pp. 56-57.
[753] DIS Red Team, 'Regional responses to conflict in Iraq and the Aftermath', 28 February 2003, cited in the Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 6.5, p. 422.
[754] DIS Red Team, 'Obtaining and retaining the support of the Iraqi people in the aftermath of conflict', 7 March 2003, cited in The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 6.5, p. 466.

heeded. The Iraq Inquiry "found no indication of any response to either of the red team's pre-conflict reports".[755]

Policymakers at the top of government did not want to hear about the potential difficulties. The Head of the Civil Service reflected that Blair was "less and less interested in hearing contrary opinions" in the build-up to war.[756] Those in favour of intervention were motivated by "positive illusions" about what could be achieved in Iraq.[757] The belief in the global attractiveness of liberal governance is the most blatant example. Blair was convinced that, "any time ordinary people are given the chance to choose, the choice is the same: freedom, not tyranny; democracy, not dictatorship; the rule of law, not the rule of the secret police".[758] Unfortunately, the concerns of a few analysts in the MoD were not going to change Blair's dogmatic assumptions.

What about other veto players like political parties or the public? In theory, "the marketplace of ideas [in democracies] helps to weed out unfounded, mendacious, or self-serving foreign policy arguments because their proponents cannot avoid wide-ranging debate in which their reasoning and evidence are subject to public scrutiny". Unfortunately, this "can often be bypassed by elite manipulation of how issues are framed in debate". The government first exaggerated the threat posed by Saddam, before presenting military

[755] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 6.5, p. 468.
[756] Andrew Turnbull cited in Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, p. 114.
[757] Johnson, *Overconfidence and War*, p. 8.
[758] Tony Blair's speech to the US Congress, Washington, 17 July 2003.

action in binary terms: action or passivity. 9/11 created a crisis atmosphere that "reduced public scepticism about both diagnoses of threats and proposed solutions".[759]

Consider the September dossier, which overstated the extent of the intelligence about Saddam's WMD programme. Although the Joint Intelligence Committee was responsible for its content, two members of Blair's inner circle, David Manning and Alastair Campbell, played a decisive role in framing the threat. Indeed, the latter even chaired two of the key September meetings.[760] This constituted a substantial break in the executive's use of intelligence. Previous generations of intelligence chiefs would likely have been "utterly contemptuous and incredulous if it were suggested that they should have been at the beck and call of a spin doctor".[761]

On 4 September 2002, officials were told rewrite sections of the document to ramp up the danger posed by the Iraqi leader. "Readers of the paper needed to be reminded of Saddam's unpredictability, and of the fact that his thought processes did not work in a recognisably Western rational and logical way".[762] Patrick Porter attributes this intervention to David Manning.[763] This is a logical inference, considering that the intelligence community had previously assessed that Saddam was behaving in a rational manner.

[759] Chaim Kaufmann, 'Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War', *International Security* (29:1, Summer 2004, pp. 5–48), pp. 5-8.
[760] Eric Herring & Piers Robinson, 'Report X Marks the Spot: The British Government's Deceptive Dossier on Iraq and WMD', *Political Science Quarterly* (129:4, 2014, pp. 551-583), pp. 565-566.
[761] Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, p. 109.
[762] JIC Minutes, 4 September 2002.
[763] Porter, *Blunder*, p. 98.

In the foreword, Blair stated his *belief* that Saddam represented a "current and serious threat to the UK national interest". He *believed* it was "beyond doubt" that Iraq had continued its WMD programme.[764] As I have shown, neither of these assessments were supported by the JIC. Much of the hysteria concerning Iraq today centres on whether Blair lied to the public. Andrew Rawnsley offers a balanced view. He contends that the Prime Minister was a "sincere deceiver" in that he told the truth about what he believed but lied about the strength of the evidence for that belief".[765] Blair was convinced that Saddam posed a grave danger to the UK and its allies, but lacked solid proof. The invasion would yield the evidence he needed. Blair therefore hoped that history would absolve his deceit. Eric Herring and Piers Robinson agree that the inner circle were guilty of:

> "deception through distortion in that those involved knew that the strength of the claims regarding continued production exceeded the strength of the intelligence. It was also deception through omission, in that no attempt was made to admit to the remarkable weakness of the intelligence that had come to underpin the leading dossier claims. There might have been self-deception about the likelihood that the intelligence would come good, but the individuals involved were deceptive about the strength of the intelligence that they possessed at the time. They gambled that deception would become vindication."[766]

The dossier was uncritically examined and regurgitated by the more hawkish elements of the media. Indeed, the 45-minute claim was treated with the tabloids' characteristic composure. The *London Evening Standard* led with "45 minutes from attack", while *The Sun* ran with "Brits 45 mins from doom", in reference to troops based in Cyprus. They had misread the document though, as the 45 minute claim (which turned out to be fallacious)

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[764] Foreword by Tony Blair, 'Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government', 24 September 2002, p. 3.
[765] Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, p. 121.
[766] Herring & Robinson, 'Report X Marks the Spot', p. 578.

related to Iraq's battlefield capability. Baghdad did not have the requisite ballistic missiles to strike British bases in the Mediterranean. It suited the government not to correct Fleet Street's flawed interpretation though.

Pro-war outlets sold a daily average of 1.88m copies per day, as opposed to anti-war publications, which managed an average of 1.24m.[767] Britain's most popular paper, *The Sun*, deserves special mention for fuelling the post-9/11 climate of fear and framing the debate around the Munich analogy from the 1930s. Robin Cook was likened to an appeaser after speaking out against military action during the March 2002 Cabinet meeting on Iraq.[768] One only needs a surface level knowledge of the New Labour machine to surmise which member of Blair's inner circle might have leaked this story to the press.

Despite all of these factors, the public still took some convincing. It was only in March 2003 that opinion polls swung in favour of intervention.[769] Yet, the public's concerns over the war did not translate into real influence over the conceptualisation or implementation of grand strategy. Blair's inner circle were fortunate that there were no domestic focal or rallying point around which his opponents could unite. The anti-war movement lacked a recognisable and respected leader. Moreover, the government had a substantial majority in parliament and most MPs backed their leader. The Conservative opposition also favoured war, which meant there was little risk of being punished for Iraq at the next election. Thus, despite conditions being objectively permissive, domestic veto players abdicated their

[767] James Strong, *Public Opinion, Legitimacy and Tony Blair's War in Iraq* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 41.
[768] Cook, *Point of Departure*, p. 121.
[769] Strong, *Public Opinion, Legitimacy and Tony Blair's War in Iraq*, p. 36.

potential role in shaping or blocking grand strategy. The 9/11 attacks created a crisis atmosphere, which Blair's inner circle made full use of to implement their overly ambitious and dogmatically-held views.

**Conclusion**

Iraq was a tragic case of disproportionate grand strategic thinking. During the conceptualisation stage, the threat posed by Saddam was inflated because of biases and worldviews of Blair's inner circle, which were shared by neoconservatives in Washington. To begin with, Downing Street and the White House agreed on regime change, but not necessarily the use of military action. Yet, once it was clear that the United States was intent on the latter, it became a matter of framing the *casus belli*. It was a fixed pillar of Blair's worldview that the UK would stand alongside the US. "He always said that you couldn't let America do something as major as this on its own", one minister recalled.[770]

Parts of the British intelligence community succumbed to groupthink, as they scrambled to find evidence to fit around Blair's objectives. Moreover, the inner circle's focus on justifying a decision that had already been made led it to miss other things. Post-conflict planning, for example, slipped on the list of priorities.

An imagined threat and a collective bias towards the US alliance led to, but did not automatically cause, a disproportionate allocation of resources. The UK could still have provided the US with diplomatic and limited military backing. Bush himself offered Blair

[770] Tessa Jowell quoted in Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, p. 91.

the chance to drop out of the coalition at the last minute. Blair, however, was intent that Britain would play its full part in the war to come.

The armed forces were also eager to fight alongside their closest partners. The British Army lobbied hard for a land contribution, demonstrating their collective service bias. The desire of the Army to be involved in a major military operation is perhaps understandable. Soldiers are trained to fight to defend their state's national interests. That said, generals have a responsibility to advise and challenge political leaders on the art of the possible. Their failure to ask pointed questions about their mission in Basra is therefore concerning.

Blair and his inner circle were wildly optimistic about what could be achieved in Iraq. By ignoring warnings from experts within government, they behaved in a procedurally irrational way. Their dogmatic belief that democracy would take root, in spite of Iraq's social cleavages, was idealistic at best and grossly negligent at worst. Their ambitions stemmed from what John Bew terms an "anti-realpolitik tradition", associated with misguided adventurism.[771]

Similarly, the emphasis placed on the "Special Relationship" stems from an emotional bias of sorts. In supporting the Americans, the British would help their "cousins across the pond" to stave off the imperialist tag. In return, policymakers in London naively expected their efforts to result in some form of payback from Washington. The pursuit of influence is a worthy objective and the British have derived tangible benefits from their alliance with

[771] John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 292, 307-308.

the Americans over time. Yet, it is painfully clear that the benefits of influence must be in some way proportionate to the costs of alignment.

Finally, the Iraq case has implications for my neoclassical realist theory. I argue that a permissive security environment *should* result in a greater number of veto players. It is evident that there must be societal clarity about the nature of the threat that the state faces. This is often difficult to achieve as the threat assessment is vulnerable to manipulation. Blair's inner circle "enjoyed a considerable information advantage" over their critics.[772] The government was able to exploit the post-9/11 crisis atmosphere to frame the debate and prevent potential veto players from gathering momentum.

[772] Strong, *Public Opinion, Legitimacy and Tony Blair's War in Iraq*, p. 82.

# CHAPTER VII

# CONCLUSION

This thesis started with two goals: first, to place grand strategy on more conceptually stable ground; and second, to assess why states fail to adjust efficiently to changes in their security environment. The three case studies of British grand strategy have served as the means to accomplish these ends.

## Reviewing the arguments and evidence

I defined grand strategy as the *process* by which states prioritise their interests and direct finite resources in such a manner that brings about long-term security. I divided this process into two stages: conceptualisation and implementation. The former involves practitioners ascertaining threats, as well as prioritising their state's goals and interests, before deciding upon which of the state's finite assets are needed to protect or further the objectives. The second stage, implementation, involves the practical execution of these deliberations.

Resetting expectations was necessary, given the issues with the contemporary literature on grand strategy. All too often, this concept is seen either as an overarching plan for navigating the complexities of international affairs, or as a prescriptive tool for scholars to demark their ideological vision of their country's place in the world. There are other scholars who agree that grand strategy should be seen as a process, but they are yet to settle on defensible positions for the positive and negative ends of the conceptual spectrum. This has left the term vulnerable to further misuse and critique.

I have proposed a framework, based on the idea of proportionality, that goes some way to resolving extant issues and provides a basis for more rigorous academic and policy analyses. A *proportionate* grand strategy involves the sustainable balancing of means and ends, based on a prudent calculation of the state's interests and the threats to those interests. Understretch or overstretch are the likely results of a *disproportionate* grand strategy, which involves the unsustainable balancing of means and ends, based on an imprudent calculation of the state's interests and the threats to those interests.

Moving from concept to theory, I have explained why states often pursue grand strategies that are either disproportionate to their means, or to the level of threat they face. Neorealists contend that states are incentivised to follow systemic shifts, relating to their own power, as well as that of their rivals. Yet, these signals are not always clear, and practitioners, who are responsible for conceptualising and implementing grand strategies, may be vulnerable to individual or collective biases. As a result, states are often not *willing* to respond to what rational observers might perceive as systemic incentives. Moreover, it is far from certain that states are always *able* to respond efficiently to structural changes, even if policymakers are aware of growing threats. Domestic veto players like interest groups or political parties can block or dilute grand strategies.

How and when do these domestic factors matter? My expectation was that the relative importance of these unit-level, intervening variables would depend on the imminence and proximity of external threats. A proportionate grand strategy is more likely when the state faces an existential challenge. In contrast, decision-makers in benign security environments

are more likely to become distracted and focus on parochial interests. They may try and further all other second or third tier goals (i.e. those that do not relate to survival and security). They will, however, also have to contend with domestic veto players, who are likely to exert greater influence under permissive conditions. This, however, is dependent on the level of societal clarity about the nature of the threat.

The case studies largely support my expectations that perceptions over the permissiveness of the external security environment shape the process of grand strategy and, by extension, grand strategic behaviour. In chapter four, I examined British grand strategy during the Second World War – a case where the threat was clearly imminent and proximate. One can observe evidence of proportionate grand strategic thinking in the decisions: to fight on in May 1940; to prioritise the Middle East over the Far East in 1941; to place the defeat of Germany over that of Japan; to delay the Second Front until the opportune moment; and to pursue the Mediterranean campaign in order to disperse German strength. Yet this case also shows that no grand strategy is perfect. The British record is slightly tainted by Churchill's unhealthy fixation with marching through the Ljubljana Gap to capture Vienna towards the end of the war.

In May 1940, Churchill and the majority of his colleagues on the War Cabinet agreed that the UK should fight on, despite the imminent collapse of France. Revisionists consider this an example of a disproportionate grand strategy, but they misconstrue Churchill's war aims. The Prime Minister's goal in May 1940 was not victory, but getting through the year in the hope that new opportunities would spring up in early 1941. Churchill's judgement was based on the professional assessment of the military chiefs, who evaluated that the UK

had sufficient resources to defend itself in the event of invasion. In such a crisis atmosphere, it was reasonable to expect that veto players would be of negligible importance. With regard to the role of biases, it is clear that Lord Halifax and Churchill both perceived the situation in contrasting ways. The former was prepared to sacrifice what he regarded as peripheral interests in the Mediterranean, as well as major interests on the continent, for the continued guarantee of British independence. In contrast, Nazi hegemony over Europe was strategically untenable for Churchill, as it would inevitably reduce Britain to some kind of German protectorate. A restrictive security environment does not automatically reduce individual or collective biases. We must therefore be comfortable with the fact that some practitioners have better grand strategic judgement. In his study of British foreign policy, the historian Peter Mangold observes that "some prime ministers, foreign secretaries and senior officials were quite simply more competent than others".[773]

The same could be said of the debate between Churchill and his military advisers over whether to prioritise Egypt or Singapore in early 1941. The Prime Minister was procedurally rational in that he updated his priorities in the months after the fall of France. Without the French Navy's help in the Mediterranean, the Royal Navy would no longer be able to pivot to Asia in the event of Japanese belligerence. This danger would have to be buckpassed to the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour. The British Chiefs of Staff stubbornly clung on to their pre-war plans, which prioritised Singapore over Cairo. If the military had succeeded in getting their way, British forces would have been perilously stretched across three theatres. It was fortunate for the UK that Churchill had taken steps

[773] Mangold, *Success and Failure in British Foreign Policy*, p. 20.

to ensure civil-military relations were balanced in favour of the politicians. This limited the danger of the military becoming a pernicious interest group with the power to block grand strategy. As one would expect, other potential veto players were excluded from the process, owing to the need for secrecy.

With regard to the Second Front, the British were undoubtedly right to resist the premature calls from the American military to launch the cross-channel assault in 1942 and 1943. The Germans were superior at the operational and tactical levels of war and would have made light work of raw American divisions. The invasion force would have been hopelessly outnumbered and could not be sure of sufficient air support. In mid-1943, the Wehrmacht was yet to suffer the horrific casualties that it would on the Eastern Front that year. The Mediterranean strategy devised by Churchill and Brooke was necessary to disperse German forces across Europe.

The divergence in the beliefs of British and American planners over when to invade France can be partly explained by contrasting levels of latent power. The Americans could afford to advocate the concentration of force at the decisive point, even if it meant higher casualties. In contrast, the British preferred to weaken the enemy before attempting the pivotal cross-channel assault. The cost of victory would be *proportionately* higher for the British than the Americans if the casualties were anything like the First World War. With such differences in potential strength, a proportionate grand strategy meant different things in London and in Washington.

In chapter five, I assessed the degree of proportionality in the decisions to withdraw from East of Suez. Britain was no longer at war, which meant the guns versus butter debate was tilted towards the latter. That said, the security environment in the 1960s was not wholly benign. The threat posed by the Soviet Union incentivised policymakers to concentrate on Europe. The danger, however, was not perceived as imminent, so policymakers did not feel compelled to withdraw from the periphery at speed. A further structural factor that came into the reckoning was the UK's economic frailty. The system encouraged Britain to retrench and increase the relative focus it placed on Europe. Yet, under permissive conditions, decision-makers have greater room for manoeuvre. Ministers therefore chose the timing and extent of withdrawal.

In the late 1950s, Britain had onerous commitments around the globe and was spending a disproportionate amount on its military for a country at peace. Harold Macmillan recognised the need to cut overseas obligations and reduce the defence burden on the economy. Defence spending steadily fell from 7.1% of GDP to 6.1% over the course of his premiership, while vast swathes of the Empire were granted independence. The commitments in Europe and the Middle East were maintained, but the Far East was marked as an area where savings could be made. The Conservative leader deserves credit for starting the process; he had to be mindful of imperialist interest groups within his own party that would have opposed any talk of withdrawal. Nevertheless, despite Macmillan's best efforts, Britain was unable to retrench in the Far East because it was sucked into the Confrontation with Indonesia.

Harold Wilson's Labour government felt similarly beholden to Britain's allies in the Far East. Ministers had to wait until the Confrontation concluded in 1966 before they could announce a drawdown. By that stage, it was also apparent that Britain's military bases in the Middle East were no longer effective in protecting the country's oil interests in the region. Instead of serving as a deterrent, British troops were increasingly becoming a target for Nasserist insurgents. Accordingly, the rationale of maintaining a physical presence in Aden and Kuwait seeped away over the course of the decade. Through 1966 and 1967, the ministers on the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee quietly guided a path towards withdrawal, while managing the expectations of their allies and domestic pressures. This is a significant finding, as it demonstrates that proportionate grand strategies are at least possible in peacetime.

This grouping of Wilson, Denis Healey, George Brown, James Callaghan and Michael Stewart did not have a firm hold over the process. Under permissive conditions, domestic veto players are more likely to exert influence. Wilson faced the reverse problem to Macmillan in that the extremists in his party wanted to withdraw from imperial commitments and abandon allies without delay. Devaluation of the pound weakened Wilson and the 'Bevinites' on the DOPC; the Prime Minister allowed Europeanist Roy Jenkins to exert greater control over grand strategy. The wider Cabinet shelved the DOPC's commitments by rapidly accelerating the drawdown date. An early withdrawal achieved little in savings, but greatly damaged Britain's credibility as a reliable alliance partner. Neoclassical realism therefore explains Britain's journey from overstretch to underreach during the 1960s.

Chapter six, which examined the Blair government's decision to become heavily involved in America's war in Iraq in 2003, demonstrated that an objectively low threat environment can lead to disproportionate grand strategic outcomes. Policymakers in Washington and London overestimated the threat that Saddam Hussein posed to their interests. The Iraqi leader was undoubtedly a murderous despot, but British intelligence judged that he was a rational actor. Analysts could not even be certain that Iraq had a WMD capability, but they assessed that Saddam would only use such weapons as a last resort. George W. Bush and Tony Blair maintained that the choice was between passivity and military action, yet they could have reinforced their containment policies.

Leaders are more likely to focus on priorities that are of peripheral importance under permissive conditions. Blair hoped that regime change in Iraq would result in a democratising wave across the region. Despite warnings, leading policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic downplayed the importance of Iraq's political and religious cleavages, which would impede the establishment of a functioning democracy. Relying on inaccurate historical analogies, they assumed that the Iraqi people yearned for liberal government. They also underestimated the potential for malign interference from regional powers. Given that such positive illusions were pervasive in London and Washington, it is perhaps unsurprising that so few troops were deployed to keep the peace in Basra after Saddam had been toppled.

Even if Downing Street believed that Saddam was an imminent threat which had to be dealt with, and that it was important to align with the White House, there was nothing that compelled London into making a major land commitment. A package of air, naval and

Special Forces assets would have kept the relationship with the United States intact, while ensuring that British forces were not overstretched. Instead, 46,000 troops were deployed to the region in March 2003. British policymakers expected that this sizeable contribution would result in greater influence with the Bush administration. Despite warnings, they failed to appreciate the mechanics of the policymaking process in Washington. Ultimately, the meagre level of influence they secured was not proportionate to the substantial costs of their involvement.

Iraq fits well within my neoclassical realist model of grand strategy. Under objectively permissive conditions, we should expect decision-makers to focus on second and third order goals. Regime change in Iraq and democratisation in the Middle East can certainly be considered within the latter category. My theory predicts that domestic veto players should create problems for implementation if conditions are *clearly* permissive. Unfortunately, 9/11 created an atmosphere of uncertainty, which caused most of these agents to remain relatively dormant.

**Scholarly contribution and avenues for future research**

This thesis has implications for the literature on grand strategy and international relations theory, as well as the history of the three case studies.

My distinction between proportionate and disproportionate grand strategies could serve as the basis for future scholarly research on a wider range of cases. Much of the grand strategy research programme is concerned with the United States, along with a small club of great powers, such as China and Russia. According to Hew Strachan, many Americans

take the view that "only a great power has need of a grand strategy".[774] The concept, however, could equally apply to small and medium sized states. It is arguably more important for weaker states to strike a sustainable balance between ends and means as their resource base is smaller. Overstretch could be fatal for a weak state, whereas superpowers and great powers can absorb higher costs. The proportionate/disproportionate distinction therefore opens up a new avenue of research on the grand strategies of small-to-medium sized states.

Turning to the empirical contribution, the majority of analyses on grand strategy during the Second World War centres on the Second Front debate. Until now, the concept has rarely been associated with the period when Britain was targeting survival in 1940-41. The withdrawal from East of Suez, meanwhile, has been the subject of debate among historians for decades. Remarkably few scholars of international relations have examined this particular case. I have contributed to the historiography of the East of Suez drawdown in two ways. First, the findings from chapter five strengthen the argument that the withdrawal had its roots in the Macmillan government. Thus, David Reynolds, Gill Bennett and Jeffrey Pickering are wrong to centre their analysis on the January 1968 Cabinet deliberations. I contend that the key decisions were made in 1966 – over Aden and the aircraft carrier. With regard to the final case, the history of the 2003 Iraq War is still being written. My thesis therefore contributes to an ongoing debate and takes advantage of the plethora of primary documents that have been made public, courtesy of the 2016 Iraq Inquiry.

[774] Hew Strachan, 'Strategy in theory; strategy in practice', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (42:2, 2019, pp. 171-190), p. 184.

The theoretical and empirical chapters contribute to the IR literature by reinforcing neoclassical realism, which is often criticised for being indeterminate. I have shown not only *how* intervening variables affect the process of grand strategy, but also *when* they can be expected to do so. My argument would likely apply to other democracies, although the exact composition and power of veto players will vary between parliamentary and presidential systems.

There are, however, limits to the generalisability of my findings. It is unlikely that my claims would travel effortlessly to autocracies. The importance of individual biases would likely increase while domestic veto players may lessen in stature. Similarly, future research should focus on cases where there is greater variation in civil-military relations. As discussed in chapter three, the military is an important interest group with the potential to modify or even control the grand strategy process. Civil-military relations were fairly constant in all three of my cases, in that there was "political dominance".[775] There were of course differences; the dialogue between Churchill and Alan Brooke was much richer than it was between Blair and Boyce. The point remains that, in all three empirical chapters, the politicians were undoubtedly the masters. Future research should examine cases where the generals held greater sway over the conceptualisation of grand strategy. An interesting comparison could be made with Wilhelmine Germany in the build-up to the First World War.

[775] Brooks, *Shaping Strategy*, p. 33.

**Policy recommendations**

Scholars of grand strategy have a role to play in reminding policymakers of the need to think about the big picture. It is therefore fitting that this thesis concludes with a brace of recommendations. They are primarily geared towards those in the UK, but could be applicable to any practitioner.

1. *Alliances are not friendships; they are a means to achieving greater security*

It is perfectly natural for senior policymakers to develop personal relationships with their counterparts in allied nations, yet they must remember to keep their own national interests at the forefront of their minds. British practitioners have been particularly susceptible to sentimentality when it comes to the US alliance. The "Special Relationship" was a core pillar of Churchill's worldview. The Prime Minister believed that the Anglo-American world should be united in its struggle against fascism. Churchill and FDR established a strong personal relationship, particularly after the Prime Minister ensconced himself in the White House for three weeks in December 1941. The following month, FDR joked, "it is fun to be in the same decade as you".[776] Yet, the American leader was able to separate the rapport he enjoyed with his counterpart from the US national interest. The territorial integrity of the UK was of vital importance to Roosevelt, particularly as it was a stepping stone to the invasion of Europe and the defeat of Germany. That did not, however, require the maintenance of the British Empire. FDR's persistent calls for self-determination and free trade ran counter to Churchill's imperialist views. The Prime Minister resented his

[776] Warren F. Kimball, *Churchill & Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence, Volume I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 337.

counterpart's advocacy of Indian independence as "unwarranted American interference in British Empire matters".[777] With regard to the Second Front debate, Churchill became so upset that the President was ignoring his missives on the Italian campaign that he issued a formal protest to the White House in July 1944.

In 1970, Richard Neustadt, who had served as an adviser to President Kennedy, urged future leaders to remember that alliances are a "friendship between government machines", not individuals.[778] Tony Blair would have done well to read Neustadt's classic text. Like Churchill, the Labour leader saw the UK and US as brothers in arms against a common threat. He believed that the best way to influence American thinking was by developing a close bond with the president. Like FDR, George W. Bush was capable of separating his personal affection for his British counterpart from hardnosed US interests. Blair was unable to influence invasion planning or extract concessions to make progress on the Middle East Peace Process. There were too many competing interests in Washington for the British to have any leverage over the latter. Contrast Blair with Harold Wilson, who secured Washington's backing on a range of issues East of Suez, whilst maintaining his distance from the Johnson administration.

Maintaining a strong relationship with the world's only superpower is perfectly logical, but the benefits of influence must be in some way proportionate to the costs of alignment. There must be a threshold at which the sacrifices necessary to secure the *possibility* of influence become greater than any benefits that could arise from said influence. It is concerning that

[777] Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, p. 726.
[778] Richard E. Neustadt, *Alliance Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 138.

the British government continues to place "influence" as a grand strategic objective, alongside security and prosperity.[779]

2. *Subject assumptions to constructive challenge*

I have argued that the relative importance of pernicious intervening variables depends on systemic constraints, as measured by the distribution of relative power and the salience of external threats. Practitioners of course have little control over the imminence or proximity of threats. There are, however, steps that policymakers can take to mitigate the effects of harmful biases in permissive and restrictive security environments.

Could the mistakes of Iraq, which were motivated by individual and collective biases, have been avoided? Much of the analysis since the conflict has centred on procedural errors. Soldier-scholar Christopher Elliott concludes that Blair should have established a "proper War Cabinet" in the build-up to the invasion.[780] The Iraq Inquiry calls for the creation of a Cabinet Committee whenever matters of grand strategy are discussed. There is an institutional legacy for this; the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee fulfilled this function during the Cold War and the 1990s. As discussed in chapter five, the DOPC was the main forum for the debates on East of Suez until late 1967.

[779] HM Government, National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (London: HM Stationery Office, 2015), pp. 11-12.
[780] Christopher L. Elliott, *High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (London: Hurst, 2015), p. 222.

The Iraq Inquiry recommends that such a committee should include policymakers from relevant departments, as well as a minister without portfolio so as to "provide some external challenge from experienced members of the government and mitigate any tendency towards group-think".[781] This could have been useful in 2002 when Blair made a series of commitments to Bush without input from others. For example, the letter on 28 July, in which he told the President, "I will be with you, whatever", was sent without any ministerial input.

The notion that groupthink can be countered by selecting one person to provide dissent on an ad hoc basis is flawed. The person selected might not have the freethinking ability to challenge the underlying assumptions supporting the opinions of everyone else. The minister without portfolio may still be blinded by loyalty towards the government. They might refrain from criticising their leader out of fear that doing so could damage their career prospects. Moreover, leaders may be inclined to dismiss their advice by claiming that the dissenter was acting like a devil's advocate out of stubbornness, rather than principle. Senior policymakers may use the contrarian in their midst to claim that they have considered alternative viewpoints, without actually giving them a proper hearing. During the 1960s, US Under Secretary of State, George Ball's genuine concerns over Vietnam were used as political cover by President Johnson. The White House felt that including Ball meant they had at least considered wider thinking, and were therefore licensed to proceed as they originally planned.[782]

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[781] The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary, pp. 57-58.
[782] Micah Zenko, *Red Team: How to Succeed By Thinking Like the Enemy* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), pp. 218-219.

Selecting one minister to provide challenge is also heavily dependent on that individual's fluency with the subject matter. Unfortunately, most ministers are appointed with little understanding or experience of grand strategy. In democracies, political leaders have limited knowledge of the military, inter-service rivalries or single-service agendas.[783] The former British Ambassador to Kabul, Sherard Cowper-Coles, recalls one minister telling him: "I don't know the difference between a Tornado [fighter jet] and a torpedo. I can't possibly question the Chief of Defence Staff on this".[784] Constructive challenge requires a strong understanding of the context and substance of grand strategic debates.

The UK government has made a series of organisational changes to improve decision-making in recent years. A National Security Council (NSC) was established in 2010, which brings together the Prime Minister, a National Security Adviser (NSA), ministers from those departments associated with internal and external security, as well as the CDS and intelligence chiefs (when required). The NSA, who is supported by a National Security Secretariat, is responsible for coordinating Whitehall on security matters.[785] John Kizszely considers the NSC to be "a major step forward in the coordination of the response to national security threats and the formulation of national strategy".[786]

[783] Kiszely, 'The political-military dynamic in the conduct of strategy', pp. 4-5.
[784] Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign* (London: Harper Press, 2011), p. 282.
[785] Joe Devanny, 'Co-ordinating UK Foreign and Security Policy: The National Security Council', *RUSI Journal* (160:6, 2015, pp. 20-26), pp. 20-21.
[786] Kiszely, 'The political-military dynamic in the conduct of strategy', p. 17.

While this undoubtedly true, the body does not, unfortunately, seem to have fulfilled its potential as a forum for grand strategic debate. The former Chief of Defence Staff, Lord Richards, told the House of Commons Defence Committee in 2015 that tactics were far more likely to be discussed than grand strategy during his time on the Council.[787] This may be due to the fact that the group meets so often. During the Libya intervention in 2011, for example, the NSC met 62 times on that issue alone.[788] Former Defence Secretary Liam Fox believes the Council must step out of the weeds of the latest crisis and do more "blue-sky thinking…to anticipate the sort of threats that might become apparent" in the future.[789] This echoes the concerns of MPs and Lords on the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.[790]

The recent procedural changes are to be welcomed, but it is more important that the right sort of questions are being asked. Military and intelligence officials have a responsibility to provide their political masters with objective advice that has already been fully scrutinised. Even then, it may have been watered down or comprised by the need to get bureaucratic support.[791] Politicians must therefore be able to ask penetrating questions. The reverse is also true. The goals of political leaders should be subject to interrogation from their civil servants, who can advise on what is practically achievable. A healthy relationship between these two ultimately depends on a robust dialogue.

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[787] House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Decision-making in Defence Policy' (London: The Stationery Office, 2015), pp. 42-43.
[788] Joe Devanny and Josh Harris, 'The National Security Council: National Security at the Centre of Government' (London: Institute for Government and King's College London, 2014), p. 25.
[789] Interview with Liam Fox, 'Ministers Reflect', Institute for Government, 27 October 2015, https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/person/liam-fox/
[790] House of Lords & House of Commons Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, 'First Review of the National Security Strategy 2010' (London: The Stationery Office, 2012), p. 28.
[791] Lawrence Freedman, 'On Military Advice', *RUSI Journal* (162:3, 2017, pp. 12-18), p. 17.

A degree of mutual constructive challenge is key to preventing groupthink. How can this be accomplished? In 2014, MPs urged the government to start "red teaming" its national security strategy.[792] Over the past decade, several military organisations have been pioneering these techniques, which range from simulations to alternative analyses.[793] The NATO definition of red teaming is "the deliberate application of independent, critical thought and alternative perspectives to improve decision making".[794]

Red teaming methods could be applied to grand strategic debates. It would of course be impractical to call upon an independent or semi-independent group of security experts for every decision, but the establishment of a discreet forum, tasked with probing practitioners' assumptions, should be strongly encouraged. With the exception of May 1940, most grand strategic decisions are taken over the course of weeks, months or years, which means there is scope for alternative perspectives. A red team could have been employed in 2002 or early 2003 in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq.

Churchill and Alan Brooke effectively red teamed each other during the Second World War. The Prime Minister, armed with a lifetime's study of civil-military relations, regularly questioned the analysis of his military chiefs. For his part, Alan Brooke brought realism to the grand strategic debate by taming the Prime Minister's more impulsive suggestions. This friction improved grand strategic thinking as it mitigated the effects of pernicious biases.

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[792] House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part One' (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2014), p. 33.
[793] The Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre leads on red teaming for the UK military.
[794] The NATO Alternative Analysis Handbook (Second edition, 2017), p. 3, https://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/media/doclibrary/alta-handbook.pdf.

The UK cannot rely on consistently producing grand strategists of Churchill and Alan Brooke's calibre. Instead, groups of former officials, academics and other experts (with security clearance) on specific issues should be assembled.[795] In the event of a major decision of grand strategic significance, they could be granted access to the latest intelligence and asked to evaluate the government's proposed approach. Red teaming is no panacea, but it can help to challenge policymakers' assumptions.

The UK is currently in urgent need of proportionate grand strategic thinking. With rising threats to the east, a complicated divorce from the European Union and an American president who believes that international politics is a zero-sum game and that alliances are transactional, it is deeply troubling that grand strategy is rarely discussed on this side of the Atlantic. The government has made an "unconditional commitment" to the security of Europe, yet ministers also talk of "Global Britain".[796] Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson wants the UK to have a "global presence" after Brexit by re-establishing its military bases East of Suez.[797] Ignoring the inherent trade-offs here is perilous, particularly for a state of Britain's size. After all, "not even the Royal Navy of 1900 claimed to be everywhere all of the time".[798] Without significant investment in the defence and diplomatic budgets, pursuing European and East of Suez roles concurrently will lead to dangerous levels of overstretch. Restraint and prioritisation should be the watchwords for policymakers in the years ahead. Salvaging and reinvigorating the concept of grand strategy is the first step.

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[795] Zenko, *Red Team*, p. 229.
[796] Theresa May's speech to the Munich Security Conference, Munich, 17 February 2018.
[797] Williamson's speech to RUSI, London, 11 February 2019.
[798] Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 160.

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