

Britain, NATO, AND Europe

By LAWRENCE FREEDMAN

The British army's
5th Airborne Brigade
during Exercise
Roaring Lion.

U.S. Air Force (Efrain Gonzalez)

Britain's approach to European security is normally taken to reflect its particular geography and history. As an island separated by a channel from mainland Europe, Britain was until recently only occasionally a close participant in continental affairs. As a maritime nation it developed a global empire. Its cultural affinities were with the English-speaking world, especially North America and Australasia. Yet Britain's history has always been intertwined with the rest of Europe's. Britain is by no means the only peripheral part of Europe, nor is it the only country with a colonial past and continuing interests in other regions of the world. However, the natural barrier of the Channel meant that until the air age it enjoyed a degree of security unknown in the rest of the continent and managed to avoid occupation.

If British policy has appeared non-plussed by developments across the whole of Europe it is perhaps because of the degree of

cohesion shown in Western Europe, which began during the Cold War to integrate to quite unprecedented levels while Eastern Europe was cut off by the Iron Curtain. This stability was based on durable alliances and represented a striking and welcome contrast to the past. Europe previously appeared as a collection of disparate and proudly sovereign states, with particular intra- and extra-regional interests, often rivals and occasionally bitter enemies, and this was the quality upon which Britain's traditional security concept had been based. Homogeneity, however welcome in principle, has never seemed quite natural. Perhaps then British policy-makers feel more at home in a heterogenous Europe that is in a state of flux, so long as they sustain a degree of detachment.

The Balance of Power

The idea of a "balance of power" was informed by the basic objective of preventing one power or group of powers from obtaining

effective hegemony over the continent—whether it was Hapsburg Spain, Napoleonic France, Imperial Germany, Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union. The balance of power was never seen as an alternative to war. Armed conflicts were often necessary to preserve a balance. It was about ensuring that the “greatness” of other “great powers” was always kept in check. In its crudest versions all that mattered was the distribution of power itself. However, such a model was based on the most mechanistic views of international politics in which the domestic politics of states were irrelevant. British governments and those on the continent were aware that

Britain contributed to all NATO regions with all types of capabilities

challenges to the international status quo often had an ideological motivation which carried implications for the internal balance of power in their own states. Thus the wars of the past two hundred years have been about the great issues—from egalitarianism and self-determination to Bolshevism and Nazism—as much as about the balance of power itself.

In an idealized version popularized in the 18th century, the method of sustaining the balance was tactical alliance, backed where necessary by an expeditionary force. There was always some reluctance on the part of Britain to get very involved in European land wars. Britain's forte was maritime rather than land warfare, and it thus always preferred to make a point through blockade rather than battle. It even tended to build its empire with ingenuity and improvisation rather than brute force, if for no other reason than that there was never enough brute force to meet the wide range of overseas interests acquired over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The balance of power system collapsed in 1914 and only through extraordinary measures was some sort of equilibrium restored by 1950. The semidetached power plays of earlier years became overwhelmed by the brutal logic of total war. Britain twice deployed expeditionary forces to Europe.

The one sent in 1914 stayed for four years and for the first time experienced casualties on a continental scale. The force dispatched in 1939 was evacuated when France fell and returned only after being reinforced by America and other allies. This experience convinced policymakers in London that European security required constant attention. They also became convinced that the new threat of Soviet hegemony could not be met through an alliance of the European democracies, especially as some seemed vulnerable to a communist takeover. The new challenge of the Soviet Union could not be met by the old method which in fact had not succeeded against Germany and certainly would not suffice. It was necessary to bring the United States into European affairs on a permanent basis, something that British diplomacy in the late 1940s was designed to achieve.

NATO Orthodoxy

Although the new formula required the United States to take on the balancing role, past experience suggested that American enthusiasm for this role would be at best inconstant. It would therefore need to be tied in through formal treaty commitments and a peacetime garrison. London could not ask of Washington more than it was prepared to offer itself, so Britain in its own defense policies undertook—on a much smaller scale—all those tasks which it deemed essential for the United States. In its own break with the past it accepted an overt and open-ended peacetime alliance and a continental commitment for the British army. It even shadowed the American nuclear guarantee to Europe with one of its own, basing key elements of its nuclear capability in West Germany and—notionally at least—assigning its strategic forces to a supreme allied command.

This turned Britain into a paragon of NATO orthodoxy. Its proudest boast was that it contributed to all NATO regions with all types of capabilities. One rarely detected any divergence of view from British government pronouncements and the prevailing view expressed at NATO headquarters. This was hardly surprising as the conceptual framework within which NATO operated was largely an Anglo-American creation. Britain supported flexible response, helping to uphold nuclear deterrence while contributing to forward defense. Its forces were stationed

Lawrence Freedman is professor of war studies at King's College in the University of London and a member of the council of the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

in Germany not only to help keep the Russians at bay but also to reassure Bonn—and initially to reassure Germany’s neighbors that any retrograde tendencies could be monitored and if necessary suppressed. By contributing a strong naval presence in the eastern Atlantic it helped sustain the idea that sufficient American reinforcements and materiel might be ferried across the ocean to turn the course of a prolonged European war.

This had its costs. Per capita defense spending was significantly higher for Britain than its European allies and the burden on gross domestic product greater. As a result, with each post-war decade, there came a crunch point with a major defense review. Gradually the reviews concentrated effort on NATO requirements at the expense of “East of Suez” commitments. Thus the priority attached to the Alliance came at the expense of those aspects of the British defense effort that might have been expected to have the most nationalistic appeal. In the 1960s and 1970s global presence was sacrificed for a regional commitment. In 1981, despite the attachment of an “island people” to its navy, the continental commitment won out, in the form of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR), despite its high absolute and foreign exchange cost.

The national nuclear strike force also became important, though it did not prove to be a self-evident source of comparative national advantage. From wartime cooperation in the Manhattan Program throughout the post-war, British nuclear policy was always essentially about managing Anglo-American relations. Despite some consideration of “stand alone” scenarios the concern has always been with interdependence rather than independence, and in contrast to France with the need to help the rest of Europe draw on American deterrent capabilities.

Over time, the relevance of a British nuclear capacity to Alliance deterrence became more questionable. In part this was because whatever the political weight generated by nuclear status, it was diminished by the increased reliance on the United States to sustain this status. Moreover, because of the rather enigmatic nuclear doctrine adopted by British policymakers, which never admitted of the possibility that the United States

would renege on its nuclear guarantee to Europe, it was difficult to generate popular support for the force that a more Gaullist posture might have allowed. This became problematic when the cost of staying in the nuclear business suddenly appeared substantial with the decision to opt for Trident as a replacement for Polaris.

Cooperation with the United States allowed Britain to pay a lower subscription to the nuclear club than any other declared power and, remarkably for a major defense program, the price in real terms went down rather than up in the period from conception in July 1980 to operational service at the end of 1994. This fact, plus the shift in the calculations from the savings to be made in the investment which might be wasted as time went on, had reproduced a national consensus in favor of maintaining the force by the time of the 1992 election.

With or in Europe

The balance of power model provided no basis for an institutionalized alliance—although to some extent that was what NATO became—and had little relevance for a broader economic, social, and political integration. Nonetheless, this too was what Britain found itself accepting. British policymakers kept apart from the initial formation of the “common market” in the 1950s. The country was judged to be “with Europe, but not of Europe.” After the accession to the Treaty of Rome in 1972, Britain’s behavior appeared to its partners as reflective of a congenital insularity and a failure of political will and imagination. Part of the difficulty was that once Britain attached itself, the European project became too well defined and embodied a series of political, economic, and social understandings which Britain did not share. The problem, therefore, was not so much culture shock as it was joining a game in progress in which the other participants had devised the rules and were experienced players. With NATO, by contrast, Britain was “present at the creation” and so had a hand in developing the relevant institutions with which it was wholly comfortable, including a command structure in which British officers occupied a disproportionate number of top positions (especially after the French absented themselves in the 1960s).

Britain has always been attracted by the notion of Europe regaining some former greatness

All this ensured an instinctive British wariness for the ideas of those in Europe who, inspired by a vision of an integrated, coherent, political entity operating as a separate actor on the world stage, identified as a critical weakness a lack of a European defense competence independent of the United States. British governments had no interest in encouraging Europe to acquire this sort of competence simply as a means of changing its political, and ultimately constitutional, character and resolutely opposed any suggestion that there could or should be an alternative security community to that provided by the Atlantic Alliance.

The idea that a choice had to be made between European and American connections was unacceptable (with the possible exception of Edward Heath's premiership from 1970 to 1974). As they never lost their commitment to the Atlantic Alliance, successive British governments saw themselves as helping to explain the United States to Europe (and vice versa). Britain was thus only prepared to support initiatives on European defense as a means of fortifying NATO rather than creating an alternative.

It should be noted that this did not indicate a lack of interest in a developing European voice in foreign policy generally. One of the most compelling arguments for British membership of what was then known as the Common Market, and which matured into the European Community before most recently adopting the post-Maastricht appellation of European Union (EU), was that this was a means by which Britain could help to regain its declining position in international affairs. With limited resources it seemed to make sense to band together with close neighbors to deal on equal terms with others. Britain has always been attracted by the notion of Europe as a group of former great powers, diplomatically skilled but politically weakened, regaining some former greatness by coordinating foreign policy. In practice, a common foreign policy came easiest when the common interest lay in a defensive, low-profile position rather than in an adventurous, innovative, but risky diplomacy. But disagreements with the United States in certain critical areas, such as

the Arab-Israel dispute, encouraged political cooperation which gradually became more institutionalized.

Thus in contrast to the rather grudging approach to the internal development of the community, Britain's attitude to its external expression was altogether more enthusiastic. Yet as a common foreign policy strayed increasingly into areas of security policy doubts began to creep in. There was an awkward interface between the generally supportive attitude when it came to European foreign policy and the suspicion surrounding any attempt to create a European super-state. After all, control over the instruments of organized violence is the hallmark of a state. In the inter-governmental conference which led to the Maastricht Treaty at the end of 1991, Britain sought to draw a clear distinction between *security* policy and *defense* policy, with the former being a proper consideration of the European Council of Ministers and the latter deemed beyond their competence. It also worked hard and successfully to keep a common foreign and security policy out of the hands of the European Commission and a matter for inter-governmental organization.

The debate in 1991 also involved French determination to insert a strong push towards a European defense identity. The challenge was symbolized through two alternative force structures, both designed to respond to post-Cold War conditions. On the one hand, the British worked to develop the concept of a NATO rapid reaction corps which, it so happened, would come under a British command, on the other, the French proposed with the Germans, and later others, a Euro-Corps which initially appeared to be designed to operate outside the NATO framework. It was suggested that the Germans went along with this since they were cross with Britain for the way it secured the command of the new NATO corps. However, at the time Bonn was very sensitive to French anxieties over German power following unification and thus the consequent need to anchor Germany within a tight European Union. This was the rationale for the whole Maastricht exercise.

At Maastricht the British, working closely with the Italians, resisted all proposals which implied an alternative security system to NATO but instead negotiated a compromise notion based on the Western European Union (WEU) as a sort of mediating institution. Because the Germans, though anxious to placate the French, did not want to harm NATO this compromise was adopted. WEU had served as the framework for German rearmament and reintegration into Western security structures in the 1950s, and then enjoyed a brief revival in the 1980s as the vehicle for a European strategic perspective distinct from that of

the Reagan administration. It had never had a command structure and even the development of a planning cell in Brussels (Britain had encouraged WEU to move its headquarters there from London to be closer to NATO) meant that it was not really a credible alternative to NATO. Its value has always been in the symbolic rather than substantive sphere, as a means of nodding in the direction of a more coherent and focused European effort without subtracting from NATO. In the future it could have another symbolic, halfway house role, as a means of drawing non-NATO European countries into Western security arrangements.

By 1994 the debate over whether there could be a full-blooded move to a European defense entity had been overtaken by events. The Gulf War had demonstrated the sheer military power at America's disposal



Crew aboard NATO
Airborne Early Warning
E-3D aircraft.

Combat Camera Imagery (H.H. Deffner)

and had also increased confidence in its ability to wield this power effectively. Meanwhile Europe's efforts to develop a distinctive input into Persian Gulf policymaking were paltry. When it did take a lead in managing a major crisis in the case of Yugoslavia, the limits on coherent and effective action became painfully apparent. The newly liberated democracies of Central and Eastern Europe might have been interested in membership in the European Union, but they were aware of the lengthy timetables envisaged before this would be possible and sensitive to the resurgence of Russian nationalism. They therefore concentrated their efforts on requests to join NATO. This served to enhance the Alliance's reputation if not its actual membership.



British artillery moving into position during NATO exercise.

The French Connection

The combination of the Persian Gulf and Balkan experiences convinced France, despite its own national efforts, that Europe lacked

Britain and France were natural military partners

the basic wherewithal—especially in terms of logistics and intelligence but also firepower—to match American capabilities. Many key tasks could simply not be performed without the United States. Meanwhile its German partner lacked a constitutional and political basis for intervention in crises such as Bosnia. Without understating the significance of the ties between the two countries, it is important to note that they were based as much on French fears of a German eastward drift and German fears of French unilateralism, as well as the painful memories of past antagonisms, as on any positive commonality of outlook. The symbolism here as elsewhere has played an important role in the development of modern Europe, but it has not been enough to ensure an effective input into the management of some messier crises in the 1990s.

Events in the 1990s have confirmed a tendency which had been evident for some time, though ironic in view of the fact that the two countries involved appeared as the chief protagonists in the debate over European defense. Britain and France were natural military partners. Given their respective histories this judgment might not seem so surprising: former great powers, former imperial powers, current nuclear powers, and permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. Despite arguments over European institutions, the two had been moving towards closer cooperation for some time. There were a number of reasons for this. During the 1980s both countries had a common interest in the preservation of their national nuclear forces and thus a shared suspicion of the American “wobbles” over nuclear deterrence—attitudes displayed by President Reagan through his Strategic Defense Initiative and Reykjavik summit with Gorbachev.

A shift towards France was also evident on the British left. The left tended to the view that many of the continent’s ills could be traced to America, and that U.S. foreign policy was generally unacceptable, whether engaged in an arms race with the Soviet Union

or opposing communism in Central America. During the Wilson and Callaghan governments of the 1970s the Labor Party was generally assumed to be more pro-American than the Conservative Party and notorious for its strong anti-European Community (EC) faction. With the growth of concern over U.S. security policies, many on the left in Labor saw a danger in appearing to be opposed to connections with both the United States and Europe, and instead opted for Europe.

A third factor was the need for collaboration in procurement. Britain tended to view such cooperation as a useful means of getting better value for money at a time of increasing budgetary pressure, ahead of demonstrating greater “Europeanness.” This issue came up in 1986, when two cabinet ministers resigned over the future of Westland PLC, a small helicopter manufacturer. The then Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Heseltine, was seeking to collaborate with European companies rather than with the American firm, Sikorsky. The Ministry of Defence was prepared to accept a degree of subsidy in order to preserve a defense firm and to give it a more European dimension, while the Department of Trade and Industry was prepared to support European collaboration, all things being equal, but not as an overriding objective.

It is dangerous to invest grand political ambitions in the tedious processes of weapons collaboration and military reorganization. There is always the risk that they may turn sour, which can reflect on the political ambitions. This was the consequence of some projects in the 1960s, such as the Anglo-French Variable-Geometry Aircraft and even Concorde. There is greater cooperation now, although less because these various processes are infused with unnatural and unsustainable political enthusiasm than because external pressures and rationalization of defense industries are creating a formidable logic of cooperation.

Experience in the Persian Gulf and Yugoslavia led France to acknowledge that, if it could be made to work, NATO was the most natural forum in which to forge robust policies. In the Gulf, Britain and France both made substantial contributions to the coalition effort, but the French then went out of their way to maintain their separateness. In the former Yugoslavia, the two countries found themselves cooperating closely as the



Combat Camera Imagery (Andy Dunaway)

Inspecting RAF E-3D Sentry during Deny Flight.



U.S. Air Force (Efrain Gonzalez)

British Hercules departing Kevill Air Field.

leading contributors to the U.N. force, regularly commanding each other's troops. Moreover, American policy over Bosnia, especially from 1993 on, alarmed and exasperated Britain, since it felt that President Clinton was prepared to see British and French soldiers sacrificed for his own high moral stance. British policymakers began to wonder after 18 months of the Clinton administration whether it was sensible to continue relying on the level of U.S. commitment to European security which they had come to expect.

The Special Relationship

So while British security policy has always been firmly Atlanticist, this has not prevented it from acquiring a greater European gloss over the years, just so long as the objective was to hold NATO together rather than pull it apart or dwell unduly on a day when the United States might withdraw. This reflects a consistent strategic philosophy for Europe, but it also reflects a concept that a "special relationship" with Washington serves as an "influence multiplier" for London. It has been assumed that an occasional British word in the American ear might spare the Western Alliance all sorts of nonsense.

The special relationship had three features: first and most enduring, a common language; second, a wartime alliance carried over into the post-war era with intense cooperation on all defense matters, including intelligence and nuclear forces; and third, for over two decades after the war Britain retained substantial interests outside of Europe and was the ally with frequently the most to contribute on the range of foreign policy issues faced by Washington. The quality of this special relationship is a subject of continual fascination for the British press, as it is assumed to depend on personalities. Thus when George Bush first visited Europe as President in 1989 the main preoccupation in Britain appeared to be whether Margaret Thatcher could achieve the same rapport she had with Ronald Reagan in the case of his successor.

More significantly, there was an awareness of a shift in American attentions towards Germany, which was now the most powerful European country. There was, of course, nothing new in Germany playing a critical role in NATO deliberations, for it was the key front-line state. Its influence has

the Gulf crisis illustrated the contribution Britain could make when the security stakes were high

grown with its armed forces. But this caused few problems for Britain because there were no great differences between Bonn and London. From the mid-1980s on, however, there was a steady divergence of views between the two allies. Mrs. Thatcher has never wavered in her opinion that any new accommodation with the East could and should be

largely on the West's terms, based on continuity in NATO policy and strategy. For their part the West Germans argued that a need existed to modify NATO's posture—especially regarding nuclear issues—so as to appear more

conciliatory to the East. Though the position of the Bush administration, like that of the Reagan, was more intellectually disposed towards the British view, it also prided itself on a pragmatism and ability to knit together ingenious compromises.

This came to a head in 1989 with an argument over short-range nuclear weapons. The issue died with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. It was then superseded by a sense that Europe was moving beyond the old questions of the Cold War. In terms of the Anglo-German-American triangle this had important implications. First, it put German unification on the agenda and, at least in 1990 before the full economic implications of unification were appreciated, created the prospect of the sudden emergence of German economic domination of the continent. To German irritation, Prime Minister Thatcher was more vocal in her worries than other European leaders, though it should be stressed that her concern was economic rather than military (and quite widely shared). Her memoirs reveal her exasperation with President Bush's reluctance to recognize that there was a need to respond to a shift in the balance of power. President Mitterrand did understand this, but after toying with Mrs. Thatcher's ideas for a new Anglo-French entente he decided to persevere with the established policy of close cooperation with Germany. Paris wanted to ensure that Bonn remained tied down to European institutions, which in turn meant encouraging the process of deepening these institutions, thereby adding to Mrs. Thatcher's fears of a corporatist European super-state, driven in Brussels and powered by France and Germany.

This created a crisis over British influence in Europe which has yet to be resolved. It was not helped by the recurrence of the country's familiar economic troubles. Other countries could put up with a lot from a conservative government when it enjoyed the backing of a strong currency, a healthy trade surplus, a booming economy, and low inflation. Its authority diminished with its country's economic performance in the early 1990s. For the United States, a Britain out of step with its European partners was of slight value as a vehicle for the articulation of its own perspectives. Better to work with Germany, which was at the heart of everything. Now that there is a more realistic appreciation of the new vulnerabilities that Germany accepted through unification as well as the new strengths, British policy too has moved in this direction.

For America, the 1990 Gulf crisis illustrated the contribution Britain could make when the security stakes were high—and also the limits to German power—and helped restore Britain's status with the Bush administration. The debates in 1991 over Maastricht alarmed many officials in Washington, and the British role in stressing the importance of NATO was appreciated. Americans still found it easier to talk to the British than anyone else. Close cooperation on nuclear and intelligence matters was entrenched.

Things then seemed to move into reverse again with the Clinton administration, dogged by the perceived weakness of Prime Minister John Major and allegations that Britain's Conservative Party helped the Republicans in the 1992 campaign. However, it has become apparent that this analysis is too superficial. Of far more importance is an awareness that economic issues and Asia are priorities in U.S. foreign policy, and that foreign policy itself ranks below domestic issues on Clinton's agenda. American leadership in NATO has been fitful and not always well focused. When the power is turned on it can still shape events and set agendas, as with the Partnership for Peace scheme. As often as not the power appears turned off or on a weak charge. Thus British policy has become confused by the possibility of a gradual American disengagement from its European

commitments. The basis of the special relationship becomes of far less importance than before if the United States is not so vital in keeping the European balance of power.

Britain played a critical role in putting the Western Alliance together and then sustaining it. This was based on the fear of a hegemonic power in Europe. With the Soviet Union gone and Russia withdrawn and the victim of inner collapse, this risk has subsided as a dominant factor in British policy. The old Soviet threat has been replaced by alarm over the consequences of chaos within the old communist bloc. There is an

“arc of crisis” stretching from the Baltic to the Balkans that encompasses much of the Mediterranean where current anxieties are focused on Islamic fundamentalism in North Africa.

Those within this arc are at risk. Britain, however, is as far from most points along the arc as any

of its neighbors. This does not mean that Britain should be disengaged from developments in that region—only that there is no cause for extraordinary measures that go beyond those of an ally if a response to this crisis is deemed necessary. The move away from a world where security concerns for the highest level of British policy arose at every turn has almost been concluded.

This has not led to the development of a strong isolationist faction in Britain, but pressures at work on American foreign policy are also evident on the other side of the Atlantic. Why should Britain accept disproportionate defense burdens and military risks on behalf of its partners who are both more prosperous and have more direct interests at stake? The fact that it still accepts those burdens and risks reveals that British forces not only tend to be professional and reliable, but also that there are important shifts in relations with the rest of the continent. Previously, the country’s vital interests were bound up with preventing hegemony by another power. The favored security instrument was alliance. This meant that events within Europe, which in themselves

might be quite localized in their origins, could soon spread if they impacted on the wider alliance system. Now Britain’s vital interests are bound up with the economic health of its partners in the European Union, and upheavals on the continent have to be judged in terms of their economic impact.

This leads to a concern for stability and reform in post-communist Europe which makes it extremely difficult to ignore all those factors which might upset political and economic progress in this part of the world, including a nasty turn of events in Russian politics. The management of an interdependent Europe puts the greatest demands on political and economic instruments of foreign policy, but the military instrument cannot be excluded. If conflicts get out of hand the equilibrium of the whole continent might be threatened.

This requires a quite different approach than the traditional balance of power concept. Britain has been no more successful than others in working out what this approach requires. The choice between NATO and the European Union has thus been hampered by the fact that neither organization has coped well with the post-Cold War world, and that the new contenders, especially the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), have fared even worse. If military issues continue to loom large, then NATO is acknowledged to be the more efficient for directing Western power. This coincides with Britain’s view but it depends on the readiness of the United States to commit itself to European military exertions which may appear quite marginal to its immediate security interests. On the other hand, the inhibitions at the heart of German policy limit the changes for development of a possibly exclusive European defense entity. Britain once took advantage of its semidetached position in Europe to orchestrate a balance of power. It may now use this same position to wait in relative security until its principal allies from Cold War days have sorted out the relevance of their power to the new challenges of European security. **JFQ**



U.S. Marine Corps (Paul Backes)

RAF BK-Mark 2 Victor tanker in Saudi Arabia.