

AD-A258 073



2

**A RAND NOTE**

**British NATO Policy:  
The Next Five Years**

**Phil Williams**

**May 1990**

**DTIC**  
**ELECTE**  
**DEC 07 1992**  
**S E D**

92-30884



DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Approved for public release;  
Distribution Unlimited

**RAND**

The research reported here was sponsored by the United States Air Force under Contract F49620-86-C-0008. Further information may be obtained from the Long Range Planning and Doctrine Division, Directorate of Plans, Hq USAF.

The RAND Publication Series: The Report is the principal publication documenting and transmitting RAND's major research findings and final research results. The RAND Note reports other outputs of sponsored research for general distribution. Publications of The RAND Corporation do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the sponsors of RAND research.

**A RAND NOTE**

**N-2954-AF**

**British NATO Policy:  
The Next Five Years**

**Phil Williams**

**May 1990**

**Prepared for the  
United States Air Force**

**RAND**

### PREFACE

This is one of a series of seven RAND Notes written as part of the project on Theater Nuclear Deterrence after the INF Treaty, sponsored by the United States Air Force, Europe (USAFE). The work was undertaken in the National Security Strategies Program within Project AIR FORCE. Since the issues of maintaining NATO deterrence are as political as they are military, it was decided to analyze the potential alternative short-run NATO policies of major member nations. These Notes were written independently; they were then discussed at a meeting that examined the implications of each national policy for the others. The resulting synthesis will be set forth in a future report. The Notes themselves, although refined as a result of both the meeting and the passage of time, are essentially independent; each one makes alternative assumptions about the other NATO partners rather than predicating its analysis on specifics from the other Notes.

Accession For	
NTIS CRA&I	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
DTIC TAB	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unannounced	<input type="checkbox"/>
Justification .....	
By .....	
Distribution /	
Availability Codes	
Dist	Avail and/or Special
A-1	

## SUMMARY

British security policy since the late 1940s has exhibited a consistency of purpose and a continuity of design that has been challenged but not undermined by the perennial need to adjust to straitened economic circumstances, and that has not changed in essentials despite the rise and fall of East-West tensions. This is not surprising: The most important single impulse driving British defense policy over the last 40 years has been the desire to uphold the security framework or structure that was established in the late 1940s and to ensure that the U.S. commitment to Western Europe is maintained. Along with this has gone an emphasis on nuclear weapons as the central element of NATO strategy. The British government has supported the strategy of flexible response and accepted the need for a substantial conventional component in this strategy. Yet it has never accepted the proposition that conventional sustainability could substitute for nuclear weapons, especially American nuclear weapons deployed in Western Europe. Ironically, British policy has also had a more muted theme complementing reliance on the United States with a simultaneous desire to maintain ultimate responsibility for British national security. Structure has been supplemented by an approach to strategy that has emphasized the need to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent. Yet security has not been seen simply in terms of deterrence and defense. A third component in British security policy has been the search for accommodation and ultimately, it is hoped, agreement on arms limitation with the adversary. Although the United Kingdom has accepted the division of Europe into two blocs, not least as a solution to the Germany problem, it has also been anxious to ensure that the military stalemate did not develop into direct confrontation and conflict.

In other words, British defense planning throughout most of the postwar period has been carried out within a consistent and enduring policy framework—a set of judgments, assumptions, and expectations about the threat to security and what has to be done to meet it. As a result, Britain has been able to maintain a balanced security policy in which the three components of security—the structure or basic political arrangements, the strategy based primarily on nuclear deterrence, and the dialogue—have been mutually reinforcing. Crucial elements in the policy environment have begun to change, however, with the result that this equilibrium will be much more difficult to maintain in the future.

This analysis examines the changes in the domestic political context within which security policy is formulated. Although most of the postwar period has seen foreign and defense policy managed by a small policymaking elite operating within a bipartisan consensus and not subject to political challenge, this too altered during the 1980s. The polarization of the defense debate was less pronounced at the end of the 1980s than it was in the middle of the decade, but defense policymaking has become more problematic. Even so, the dominance of the traditional policymaking elite centered in the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, and the upper echelons of the Ministry of Defence is unlikely to be seriously challenged. In the absence of a Labour government, major changes in defense policy will not be driven by domestic politics. Furthermore, even if a Labour government does come to power it is unlikely to bring about the radical changes advocated by the left wing of the party. Unilateralism appeared urgent at a time of East-West tension; it is far less so in a period characterized by East-West accommodation.

The more immediate threats to the three-pronged British policy are external rather than internal and stem from changes in the international environment facing British defense policymakers and planners. These changes include possible shifts in American foreign and defense policy, as a result of which the United States could prove unwilling to underwrite West European security to the same extent as in the past. Such shifts, especially if accompanied by increased strains and tensions in West-West relations, could ultimately challenge the structure of Atlantic security cooperation that has been the basis for the security of Western Europe, including Britain. Such a challenge could be accompanied, or even preceded by, challenges to British strategic preferences at both the alliance and the national levels. This is all the more likely as changes within the Atlantic Alliance interact with changes in East-West relations. Diminished perceptions of the Soviet threat and improvements in East-West relations pose novel challenges for British policy. Britain has always approached East-West dialogue as a means of managing an adversarial relationship: With that relationship increasingly being called into question, Britain's ability to maintain equilibrium among the three components of its policy is far from certain.

Accordingly, in the coming decade, Britain may have to make more fundamental decisions about its security policy than at any time since the late 1940s. The main determinants of the menu for choice in the 1990s are likely to be budgetary stringency, progress in arms control, and moves toward greater West European defense cooperation.

The items on the menu itself range from keeping the status quo in a period of budgetary stringency by maintaining more or less the existing disposition of forces at lower levels (inflicting equal misery on all the services) to establishing a clear hierarchy of priorities in the allocation of resources to the services. The nature of the choices that are made, of course, will depend partly on whether the Conservative Party remains in power after the next general election or is replaced by a Labour government.

## CONTENTS

PREFACE .....	iii
SUMMARY .....	v
Section	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. THE UNDERLYING JUDGMENTS AND ASSUMPTIONS .....	6
Threat Perceptions .....	6
Collective Security and the U.S. Commitment .....	7
Strategy and Force Posture .....	8
The Need for Dialogue .....	11
III. CHALLENGES TO THE POLICY FRAMEWORK .....	13
The Domestic Challenge .....	13
The International Challenge .....	19
IV. ADJUSTING TO CHANGE .....	27

## I. INTRODUCTION

British security policy since the late 1940s has exhibited a consistency of purpose and a continuity of design that has been challenged but not undermined by the perennial need to adjust to straitened economic circumstance, and that has not changed in essentials despite the rise and fall of East-West tensions. Although in the past Britain has clearly not been oblivious to changes in the climate of East-West relations, especially at the superpower level, at most these changes have had a limited effect on the evolution of British defense and security policy.

Perhaps more than any other West European country, Britain can lay claim to being the architect of Europe's postwar security system. The Labour government of the late 1940s concluded that there was a threat from the Soviet Union that could be met only by the commitment of the United States to the defense and security of Western Europe. Indeed, it was Ernest Bevin rather than his predecessor George Canning who really called in the New World to redress the balance of the old. By encouraging Western Europe to help itself and engaging in skillful bilateral diplomacy, the United Kingdom played a major role in entangling the United States in the security affairs of Western Europe. Having been pivotal in the creation of the Atlantic Alliance, Britain has been solicitous of its welfare. Perhaps the most important single impulse driving British policy since the late 1940s has been the desire to uphold the security framework and ensure that the U.S. commitment to Western Europe is maintained. This was evident in the 1950s when the failure of the European allies to establish a European Defence Community provoked American threats to reappraise its commitment. Britain took the lead in promoting Western European Union as the framework for West German rearmament. Furthermore, to ensure that there was no U.S. disengagement, the United Kingdom made an unprecedented commitment to maintain four divisions and a tactical air force in Germany. Similarly, Britain has always attempted to play the role of conciliator or intermediary within the Alliance and has been wary of developments that might prove divisive in Atlantic relations. Consequently, Britain has traditionally had a somewhat cautious, not to say skeptical, attitude toward West European defense cooperation, especially presented as an alternative to the American security guarantee.

Yet British policy has always had a more muted theme that complements reliance on the United States with a simultaneous desire to maintain ultimate responsibility for British national security. Britain, no less than France, has been unwilling to rely exclusively upon another state for its security. The British nuclear deterrent, however, had complex roots. The initial decision that Britain should become a nuclear power was natural, given the prevailing assumptions about Britain's rank and status in the world. In the immediate postwar period, Britain still regarded itself as one of the big three powers. It was only fitting that the government should acquire nuclear weapons. Subsequently, this logic was reversed; and nuclear weapons, from being regarded as a natural accompaniment of great power status, became instead a means of maintaining that status, even though it was becoming evident that Britain was a power in decline. Lacking the economic base to remain a great power, successive British governments, and especially Conservative governments, saw nuclear weapons as a way of ensuring that Britain retained a seat at the top table.

If the British acquisition and maintenance of an independent nuclear deterrent was partly a result of status considerations, it also reflected a continuing desire for independence and a reluctance to rely completely on the United States. In the late 1940s and the early 1950s the British Chiefs of Staff were particularly insistent that British and American interests might diverge and that Britain should therefore be in a position to look after its own security if necessary. Britain has never been as explicit as France about the dangers of excessive reliance on the United States for security; yet its nuclear policies have been based on Gaullist logic if not Gaullist rhetoric. The strategic and political rationale for the British deterrent has been very similar to that for the French independent deterrent. This has been obscured by the fact that the acquisition of British nuclear weapons has been done in cooperation with the United States while American assistance to France has been more limited and less overt. The irony is that the Anglo-American nuclear link has been a reflection of the desire for strategic and political independence, yet has resulted in continuing dependence on the United States.

At one level, this can be understood as the logical result of the limited resources available to Britain. At another level, the willingness to rely on the United States and the desire for independence seem to be contradictory or inconsistent. Yet the tension between these two strands of British policy may be more apparent than real, and not simply because of Anglo-American nuclear collaboration. British policy has implicitly

rested upon a two-tier concept of security involving both structure and strategy. By structure is meant the existing security arrangements in Europe based on the division into two blocs and the U.S. willingness to underwrite the security of Western Europe. At this level, Britain has regarded the U.S. connection as extremely important if potentially fragile; at the level of strategy, however, Britain has attempted to play both a more European and more individualistic role. Not only have successive British governments preferred Alliance strategies that emphasize deterrence through threats of escalation rather than through conventional defense or denial—a preference that reflects the realities of West European geopolitics and conflicts with an American preference (evident since the 1960s) for downgrading the role of nuclear weapons in NATO strategy—but they have been anxious to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent as both a weapon of last resort and a contribution to nuclear deterrence in Europe. In one sense the nuclear component of British strategy fortifies and sustains the security structure; in another it acts as a hedge against the collapse of the structure.

This dual approach has run into problems because of limited resources. As a result, the structural dependence on the United States has been accentuated by a technological and strategic dependence. Nevertheless, the British desire for independence has rested upon concerns, evident in the Chiefs of Staff committee during the late 1940s and early 1950s, that such circumstances as an international crisis could cause British and American interests to diverge. This has been particularly evident at the level of strategic doctrine, where British governments since the 1960s have been reluctant to accept American strategic preferences. More recently British concerns over SDI and former President Reagan's aspirations to move toward a world free of nuclear missiles highlighted once again that even when the relationship between the U.S. President and the British Prime Minister is very close, differences of perspective and interest are unavoidable.

If British security has depended partly upon structure and partly upon the possession of certain military capabilities, security has not been seen simply in terms of deterrence and defense. A third component in British security policy is the search for accommodation and ultimately, it is hoped, agreement on arms limitation with the adversary. While the United Kingdom has accepted the division of Europe into two blocs, not least as a solution to the German problem, it has also been anxious to ensure that the military stalemate did not develop into direct confrontation and conflict. This

was evident in the early 1950s when Winston Churchill, in a series of major speeches, called for an "easement of tensions" between East and West.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one student of British policy during this period has suggested that although "the British government was not alone in pressing for a détente no other Western state matched the British commitment to a normalization of East-West relations during the first half of the 1950s."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, this strand in British policy was deepened under Macmillan. Writing in the early 1980s, Fred Northedge could claim that "British policy towards the Soviet Union since 1945 has followed a consistent course of armed vigilance against aggression, coupled with a search for détente and all manner of agreements to ease international tension, as and when opportunities for making these presented themselves."<sup>3</sup>

The implication of all this is that British defense planning throughout most of the postwar period has been carried out within a consistent and enduring policy framework—i.e., a set of judgments, assumptions, and expectations about the threat to security and what has to be done to meet it. As a result, Britain has been able to maintain a balanced security policy in which the framework of political arrangements in Europe and across the Atlantic, the nuclear strategy, and the dialogue have been mutually reinforcing. Crucial elements in the policy environment have begun to change, however, with the result that this equilibrium will be much more difficult to maintain in the future.

This is all the more pertinent because of changes in the domestic political context within which security policy is formulated. Most of the postwar period has seen foreign and defense policy formulated by a small policymaking elite operating within a bipartisan consensus and not subject to political challenge, but that altered during the 1980s. The Labour Party, as it had done in the late 1950s, moved outside the boundaries of the domestic consensus, stimulated largely by concerns over the effect of Western policies during a period of heightened East-West tension. The easing of tension, however, and especially the progress in arms control have made it possible for the Labour Party to move away from unilateral disarmament and embrace a multilateralism that is more acceptable to the British public. It is still possible, of course, that domestic political change and the election of a Labour government may lead to future challenges

---

<sup>1</sup>This is discussed more fully in B. White, "Britain and the Rise of Detent," in S. Smith and R. Crockatt (eds.), *The Cold War: Past and Present*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1987, pp. 91-109.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted *ibid.*, p. 109.

to the three-pronged British policy. The more immediate threats to this policy, however, are external rather than internal.

It is first necessary to elucidate the judgments and assumptions that have underpinned British defense policy during most of the postwar period. This Note then examines the kinds of changes that have taken place or are taking place, first at the domestic level and then in the international political and strategic arena. Particular attention is given to developments that will not only shape the security environment of the 1990s but will challenge the traditional tenets of British policy. The concluding section suggests that to adjust to the changing circumstances, Britain will have to make more fundamental decisions about its security policy than at any time since the late 1940s. It also identifies the main possibilities that make up the menu for choice in the 1990s.

## II. THE UNDERLYING JUDGMENTS AND ASSUMPTIONS

### THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Almost any analysis of security policy needs to start with an assessment of the threat that the policy is designed to meet. The British assessment of the Soviet threat has been based partly on geopolitics and partly on ideology. At the geopolitical level, the Soviet Union is seen as simply the latest in a series of acquisitive states that have challenged the balance of power in Europe—a balance that Britain has done much to preserve. Concern over the basic geopolitical challenge and the lack of an indigenous power balance in Europe has deep roots in the traditional British approach to foreign policy.

These concerns relate primarily to Soviet power. They have been intensified, however, by ideological considerations. The values that infuse the Soviet economic, social, and political system and that it is generally believed the Soviet Union is ideologically committed to propagate are regarded as antithetical to those of Western democracies. Moreover, the Soviet Union and its allies possess formidable military capabilities that are regarded as a direct military threat to Western Europe. This is not to imply that British policymakers expect a Soviet military invasion of Western Europe. It is simply that given the antipathies between Soviet and Western systems, it is important not to provide opportunities either for direct military action or for coercion based upon military superiority. As the Statement on the Defence Estimates in 1986 expressed it:

The Soviet Union presents us with the paradox of a country obsessed with its own security but unwilling to acknowledge the implications of its massive military forces for the security of others. There is, moreover, sufficient evidence of Soviet ruthlessness, both against internal dissent and against what are seen as external threats, to justify a permanent degree of Western caution . . . whether Soviet actions are interpreted as . . . a communist crusade or as a search for security, it is essential that we and our allies continue to provide an adequate political and military counter-weight to Soviet nuclear and conventional strength. Only in this way can we be certain of protecting the freedom and lifestyle that we have chosen.<sup>1</sup>

Since then there has been a recognition that under Gorbachev the Soviet threat may be diminishing. The 1989 White Paper, for example, acknowledged that recent

---

<sup>1</sup>*Statement on the Defence Estimates 1986*, Volume 1, Cmnd.9763-I, HMSO, London, 1986, p. 2.

Soviet foreign policy had displayed "new flexibility, pragmatism and sensitivity to the security concerns of others."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, there is continuing concern over the imbalance of military capabilities in Europe and a reluctance to rely completely on Soviet pronouncements. In the official view, it is necessary to be sure that the changes in the Soviet Union are fundamental and irreversible. Even then, there is still the problem that the Soviet Union remains the preponderant power on the European continent.

### **COLLECTIVE SECURITY AND THE U.S. COMMITMENT**

If perceptions of threat have provided an enduring strand in British security policy, closely related has been the assumption that this threat can be contained and security in Europe achieved only through concerted effort on the part of Western Europe and the United States. To provide a sufficiently acceptable degree of security, therefore, the United Kingdom has placed considerable importance on the continued health and vitality of the Atlantic Alliance. There has also been a continuing belief in Britain that Western Europe lacks the resources to maintain the balance of power with regard to the Soviet Union, and that for the collective security organization to be effective, sustained and substantial American involvement is crucial. Consequently, successive British policymakers have conceived of their role largely in terms of being a reliable and effective ally of the United States and a loyal member of NATO. This has sometimes required that Britain, in effect, act as an intermediary between the United States and Western Europe. It has also required that Britain take the lead in fulfilling its Alliance obligations and attempt, as far as possible within financial constraints, to meet the agreed NATO targets for defense spending. Britain has been willing to accept more than a "fair" share of the defense burden partly in the hope that this will help to contain the pressures for a reduction in the American military presence in Western Europe. Those pressures are fueled in large part by frustration and resentment over the lack of burden-sharing by the European allies. This willingness was perhaps most evident in the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, when NATO agreed to a 3 percent per year real increase in defense budgets. The British performance in meeting this target was better than most of the other European allies, and as the 1986 White Paper noted, "The defence budget in 1985-86 was some 3 billion pounds higher in real terms than it had been in

---

<sup>2</sup>See *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1989*, Volume 1, Cmnd.675-I, HMSO, London, 1989, p. 1.

1978-79; this was the longest period of sustained growth in defence expenditure in more than 30 years."<sup>3</sup>

Acceptance of the need to reassure the United States about the seriousness of the European contribution to Atlantic security has also been evident in British activities beyond the NATO area. "Out of area" issues became a key issue on the NATO agenda in the early 1980s with the United States demanding "compensation, facilitation and where possible participation" from the Europeans in contingencies arising outside the formal responsibilities of the Western Alliance. Britain recognized that the European response to these demands was a highly symbolic political issue in the United States. Consequently, the United Kingdom was occasionally prepared to go along with American preferences in an attempt to shore up American domestic support for the commitment to Europe. This has sometimes placed Britain at odds with the European allies, especially France, which contends that the United States is in Europe out of self-interest and that there is no reason why the Europeans should accord with American preferences elsewhere. Perhaps the most obvious example of this difference between Britain and its European allies was the Thatcher government's willingness to permit the bombing of Libya by U.S. aircraft using bases in Britain. This willingness contrasted with the French government's decision to deny the U.S. aircraft overflight rights. Although the raid and the British government's support for it proved highly controversial in the United Kingdom, it helped to dampen the criticism that was directed at Western Europe by members of the U.S. congress and by other commentators. To that extent, at least, the Thatcher government felt that its position had helped to defuse what could otherwise have become a stark and somewhat bitter dispute in NATO.

## **STRATEGY AND FORCE POSTURE**

As well as its assumptions about the overall security arrangements, the United Kingdom has operated on the basis of certain judgments about strategy and force posture. The first and most important of these is that nuclear weapons have played and continue to play a central role in deterrence in Europe. During the mid and late 1960s Britain under a Labour government made an important contribution to the change in NATO strategy from massive retaliation to flexible response. The British Minister of Defence, Denis Healey, however, was reluctant to downgrade the nuclear component of NATO strategy

---

<sup>3</sup>*Statement on the Defence Estimates 1986*, Volume 1, Cmnd.9763-I, HMSO, London, 1986, p. 6.

too far. This was partly because he believed that NATO strategy had to be based on the forces actually available rather than what U.S. Secretary of Defense McNamara hoped would be made available, and partly because he believed that nuclear weapons had a deterrent effect unmatched by larger conventional capabilities. In his view the key to deterrence in Europe was to confront the Soviet Union not with force it was physically unable to overcome but with costs it was psychologically unwilling to run.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of the nuclear component in British defense policy has also been underlined by the independent deterrent, which is seen very much as a contribution to West European security. The public rationale for the deterrent is that although Britain has complete confidence in the American nuclear guarantee, in certain circumstances, the Soviet Union might believe that it could engage in aggression against Western Europe without risking American involvement. By providing a second center of decision, the United Kingdom complicates Soviet planning and makes it less likely that the Soviet leadership would make any move liable to challenge deterrence in Europe. The British deterrent retains a role as weapon of last resort against a Soviet attack on the homeland, and it also makes a substantial contribution to extended deterrence in Europe. Indeed, in addition to its SSBN force, the United Kingdom deploys other nuclear capabilities, including nuclear depth charges and depth bombs, as well as nuclear warheads deployed in Germany. British forces in Germany are equipped with systems having American nuclear warheads such as the Lance missile, and with British owned free fall nuclear bombs under exclusive British control. The Tornado is nuclear-capable and could become a major element in intra-European extended deterrence in the 1990s. In view of this, it is hardly surprising that the government has announced its determination to ensure the efficacy of the Tornado strike capability through the provision of standoff missile capabilities.

While Britain has placed considerable emphasis on the nuclear contribution to NATO strategy, it has certainly not been oblivious to the conventional component of that strategy. Britain has supported the strategy of flexible response and has a firm commitment to forward defense in Germany. There has been a recognition that the security frontier of the United Kingdom lies on the intra-German border rather than at the English Channel or, as one official publication put it, that "the forward defence of the

---

<sup>4</sup>See J. Stromseth, *The Origins of Flexible Response*, Macmillan, London, 1988, especially Ch. 8.

Federal Republic of Germany is in effect the forward defence of Britain itself."<sup>5</sup> This is evident in the contribution that Britain makes to NATO's conventional force posture. The British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) consists of three armored divisions and an artillery brigade as well as a Corps headquarters. It is a key element in the Northern Army Group and is responsible for defending 65 km. of the Central Front. In the event of hostilities, British forces on the continent would be augmented by reinforcements of almost 100,000 men, including two Territorial Army infantry brigades, from the UK. Britain also maintains specially equipped forces to reinforce NATO's Northern Flank in a period of crisis or hostility.

The British contribution, of course, is not confined to ground forces. RAF Germany makes a major contribution to NATO air power on the Central Front, contributing 15 squadrons of aircraft. The main task would be to carry out long range attacks against Warsaw Pact airfields and choke points, a task for which Britain has seven squadrons recently equipped with the Tornado GR1. Britain also deploys two squadrons of Harriers for close air support of ground forces and two squadrons of Phantoms for air defense. In short, the contribution made by Britain to the defense of Germany is second only to that of the United States and the FRG itself.

In fact, the BAOR has occasionally failed to maintain its nominal strength of 55,000 men and has proved costly in foreign exchange. Yet no major reduction has been made in either the ground or air forces in the Central Region. Such a reduction has been contemplated on several occasions, but political and immediate financial constraints have militated against it—the cost of new barracks makes bringing troops home more expensive unless they are disbanded. Indeed, political and, to a lesser extent, military judgments make the peacetime force level sacrosanct. Maintaining the force level of the BAOR and the front-line strength of RAF Germany is both a sign that the United Kingdom rates its continental commitment highly and a reassurance to her partners that this commitment would be fulfilled if challenged.

Perhaps most important of all, for the past several years it has been assumed that any unilateral cut in forces deployed on the European continent would be particularly ill-advised given the pressures that are building in Washington for a reappraisal of American troop levels in Western Europe. Such a cut would be seen as further evidence that the Europeans do not take their defense as seriously as they should and lead many in the Congress to question whether the United States should take the defense of Europe

---

<sup>5</sup>British Defence Policy 1988-89, Ministry of Defence, London, 1988, p. 21.

more seriously than the Europeans do. Given the initial British role in involving the United States in an "entangling alliance" and its continued self-image as an intermediary between Europe and the United States, successive governments have been reluctant to take any action that might have such an effect and thereby contribute to a weakening of the American commitment and a loosening of the security structure in Europe.

Such calculations have given the Army and the Royal Air Force considerable advantage over the Navy in interservice battles over budgetary shares. The Falklands War provided a reprieve for the Navy and forestalled the reductions in maritime power outlined by Sir John Nott in *The Way Forward* in 1981. The Navy currently has three antisubmarine warfare carriers, two amphibious assault ships, 30 submarines, and 40 mine countermeasures vessels. In the 1989 Defence White Paper the government reaffirmed its commitment to maintain a 50 frigate and destroyer Navy. Although it occasionally engages in out-of-area activities, the Navy's main role centers on Europe. In hostilities, the Navy would contribute to forward defense in the Norwegian Sea and contribute to reinforcement and resupply across the Atlantic by intercepting Soviet submarines. In addition to these major roles, the United Kingdom also provides a brigade of marines to the UK/Netherlands amphibious force, which would reinforce NATO's northern flank in a crisis. It also contributes a national contingent of 2,300 men to the Allied Command Europe Mobile Force and one Harrier and two Tornado squadrons to SACEUR's Strategic Reserve (Air), as well as Canberras equipped for electronic warfare. This underlines once again just how comprehensive the British contribution to the Alliance order of battle actually is.

### **THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE**

As well as making a contribution to deterrence and defense in Europe, the United Kingdom has acknowledged that although the bloc structure and strategy based on a comprehensive range of capabilities are necessary conditions for West European security, they are not sufficient conditions. This is not to imply that British governments have had an uncritical approach to East-West détente or have seen détente and arms control as a substitute for deterrence. On the contrary, the approach has been pragmatic and the appraisal hard-headed. Nevertheless, the UK has long recognized that the unilateral measures on which security primarily depends need to be buttressed by arms control or confidence building measures. East-West competition has not been regarded

as a purely zero-sum situation in which the losses of one side translate automatically into the gains of the other. In addition, it has been accepted that it is possible to introduce measures that enhance the security of both blocs in Europe. This has sometimes put the British government more in line with its European allies than with the United States, which at times has approached security much more in zero-sum terms. At other times, the United States has appeared to place its common interests with the Soviet Union above its obligations to allies, and that too has been a source of concern for West European governments, including Britain.

The British approach to arms control is perhaps best regarded as cautious but positive. Arms control is an important supplement to (but not a substitute for) national and Alliance defense efforts. Indeed, the United Kingdom has adopted what might be described as a managerial concept of arms control, seeing it primarily as a means of stabilizing the strategic environment and not as a step on the road to total disarmament. This has led the United Kingdom to participate in negotiations, sporadic and desultory as they have sometimes appeared, and, on occasion, to take important initiatives in them. Britain clearly shares the objective, held by its NATO allies, of encouraging greater military transparency in the Soviet Union, thereby helping to reduce fears over a possible surprise attack by Warsaw Pact forces. Britain has also laid great stress on conventional force negotiations, emphasizing the urgency of asymmetrical force reductions that would lead to stability at lower levels. Although Gorbachev's December 1988 announcement at the United Nations that he was initiating substantial unilateral cuts in Soviet forces deployed forward in Eastern Europe eased concerns, the Soviet willingness to make concessions in these negotiations and to move further away from a force configuration geared up for offensive operations is still regarded as a litmus test of whether there has been a shift in Soviet strategic objectives. It is also seen as a precondition that has to be met before NATO should contemplate any further reductions in nuclear forces.

Indeed, the recent accord eliminating NATO's Intermediate Nuclear Forces has been unsettling for the Thatcher government even though it formally endorsed the INF agreement. Yet this is only one of the trends that in recent years has begun to challenge the three-pronged approach to security traditionally pursued by British governments of both major political parties.

### III. CHALLENGES TO THE POLICY FRAMEWORK

The traditional policy framework has been subjected to a series of challenges that have made it more difficult to sustain and threaten to undermine the equilibrium among the three components. Although the policy framework has survived the challenges of the 1980s it is not clear that it will prove equally robust during the 1990s.

#### THE DOMESTIC CHALLENGE

One of the challenges has come from domestic factors. Apart from a brief period in the latter part of the 1950s and the early years of the 1960s when the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was very active, British defense policy has been a matter of public indifference. It was also the prerogative of a narrow elite. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s a populist revolt challenged both the British acquisition of Trident and the decision to deploy American cruise missiles in Britain. The public controversy has subsequently diminished, but the bipartisan consensus on defense has been replaced by a continued divergence between the main political parties.

The Conservative Party has always had a robust attitude toward security and strongly supports the independent deterrent. Arms control is regarded as something that can supplement but not supplant the traditional route to security through strength. The Labour Party, when in government, has had an equally robust attitude toward security issues. After all, in the late 1940s it was the Atlee government that not only played a major role in the formation of the Atlantic Alliance but also made the crucial decisions that led Britain to acquire nuclear weapons. The Labour Party, however, has always had another, more radical strand that is impatient of current approaches and sympathetic toward ideas for change and reform in the international system. It is not surprising, therefore, that the left wing of the Labour Party has become the institutional home of the peace movement. Its effect should not be exaggerated, however. The Labour Party, having fought and lost two elections on a unilateralist plank, has moved back to the center on defense issues. It has been widely acknowledged in the party that the commitment to unilateralism cost Labour as much as 3 to 4 percent of the votes in the last two general elections, and the party has modified its stance by dropping unilateralism

and embracing multilateral disarmament. This move has not been easy and was made in the face of determined opposition from the left-wing of the party and from such trade union leaders as Ron Todd. The attempt to change ran into considerable difficulties at the 1988 Party Conference; at the 1989 Conference, though, there was a much clearer endorsement of the leadership's position.

The Labour Party's move back to a more pragmatic stance on nuclear weapons has been eased by the decline of East-West tension. This trend, along with the progress that has been made in arms control, has given defense a lower salience than it had in the early 1980s. Furthermore, the effect of dissent from government policy should not be exaggerated. So long as the government has a substantial majority in the House of Commons, the lack of consensus need not be inhibiting. The British government has considerable discretion in determining the main features of its security policy.

The making of Britain's nuclear policy, in particular, has been characterized by small group decisionmaking, high levels of secrecy, the influence of specialist advice from the scientific and technological experts involved in defense policymaking, and limited parliamentary and public scrutiny. Although the level of parliamentary oversight has been improved as a result of the work of the House of Commons Defence Committee, it is still rather startling to recall that the full Commons debate on nuclear weapons held on January 24, 1980, was the first of its kind for 15 years.<sup>1</sup> And even though the revival of partisanship on defense issues in the early 1980s led to increased activity in Parliament, debates on defense remained infrequent and desultory. All things considered, therefore, it is hard to disagree with McInnes that, although Parliament is able to embarrass governments, its effect on the decisionmaking process is minimal.<sup>2</sup>

Other areas of defense policymaking are less exclusive than the nuclear dimension. Even so, the decisionmaking process is effectively a closed one. To some extent this is a feature of British political life in general. Defense policymakers and planners may object to this by pointing out that, almost alone among government departments in Britain, the Ministry of Defence provides an annual statement for parliamentary and public scrutiny and debate. Yet the annual white paper on defense leaves a great deal to be desired. It is effectively an attempt by government to set the

---

<sup>1</sup>This paragraph rests heavily on C. McInnes, *Trident: The Only Option?* Brassey's, London, 1986, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31.

parameters within which debate is to occur and, although revealing of the judgments and assumptions underlying British defense policy, is sometimes designed to hide "at least as much as it reveals."<sup>3</sup> As one observer has noted, it is a "summary of all the news of the defence community's discourse that is fit to print; though it is the government that defines what is 'fit.'"<sup>4</sup>

Even so, the publication of the annual statement on defense does provide an opportunity for parliamentary and public debate. The fact that this debate is rarely very satisfying is not simply the responsibility of the government and the Ministry of Defence. The level of interest and expertise in the British House of Commons on defense is limited. A Gallup survey carried out in June 1988 covering 171 Members of Parliament and representing 28 percent of the total number of Conservative and Labour MPs in the House of Commons reveals that there is a dearth of knowledge and understanding of defense issues among MPs. Nearly one-quarter of MPs questioned had no idea of the proportion of GNP allocated to defense and 42 percent of those surveyed exaggerated the figure. Similarly, only 30 percent realized that the British nuclear force accounts for only a small proportion of the defense budget. As striking as the errors was the high percentage of "don't knows." One analyst has commented that "the most unfortunate finding of the survey is that there are so many widespread misconceptions particularly in such vital and controversial areas."<sup>5</sup>

The lack of detailed knowledge about defense issues is widespread at the public level too. Indeed, there is very limited public interest in defense, a point that is sometimes obscured by the intensity with which political activists express their opinions and pursue their objectives. The activities of the peace groups in the first half of the 1980s, however, led to an increased awareness of defense issues among the electorate. It also reflected and accentuated a polarization of the public debate.

This polarization has deep roots in British traditions of thinking about foreign policy and security issues. There is a long history of dissent from British foreign policy that can be traced back to Cobden and Bright in the nineteenth century, through the

---

<sup>3</sup>M. Dillon, *Britain*, in M. Dillon (ed.), *Defence Policymaking: A Comparative Analysis*, Leicester University Press, 1988, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup>P. Towle, *MPs and Defence: A Survey of Parliamentary Knowledge and Opinion*, Occasional Paper 36, Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies, London, August 1988, p. 18.

Union of Democratic Control in the early twentieth century. It has found expression in the postwar period in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The dissenters not only refuse to accept establishment thinking but offer alternatives of their own.

For much of the postwar period, dissent was suppressed largely by a bipartisan consensus about foreign policy and defense. The first challenge to this consensus in the late 1950s was short-lived. The second challenge occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s partly in response to the increase in Soviet American tensions. The decline of détente and the U.S. reversion to Cold War policies seemed to challenge one of the three pillars of British security policy—the need for accommodation and dialogue with the Soviet Union. It was not surprising, therefore, that although the Thatcher government was sympathetic to the hard line approach of the Reagan administration, the other political parties were much more critical. Furthermore, the belligerent rhetoric of the first Reagan administration fueled fears in Britain and other European nations that Western Europe might be dragged into a superpower confrontation that started elsewhere. It encouraged what one observer has described as the "institutionalization of British anxiety about a Third World War."<sup>6</sup> Once cruise missiles were actually deployed in the UK, however, the peace movement began to lose much of its momentum. This was further diminished by changes in the climate of Soviet-American relations and by the INF Agreement, which gave the protesters what they had long demanded. As the superpowers moved toward a new détente so the urgency of protest diminished.

Yet the protest movement may have a more substantial legacy than it did in the late 1950s. It has left a divided public opinion considerably more sympathetic to the Soviet Union than might have been expected. Throughout the 1980s opinion poll results reflected what is sometimes described as the growth of "equilateralism" in British thinking about the superpowers. One question that Gallup has consistently asked is, "How much confidence do you have in the ability of the United States to deal wisely with present world problems?" In 1977, 48 percent of those who responded answered "very great" or "considerable," while 36 percent had "little" or "very little" confidence. The percentage of positive answers fell below 30 percent in 1982 and did not go above it again until late 1987. During the same period the negative answers rose considerably

---

<sup>6</sup>P. Sabin, *The Third World War Scare in Britain*, Macmillan, London, 1986, p. 47.

and from 1982 onward rarely fell below 50 percent.<sup>7</sup> A Gallup poll conducted June 9-13, 1988, in the aftermath of the Moscow Summit, resulted in 39 percent providing positive answers and 46 percent claiming to have little or very little confidence in the United States. In this last poll, the same question was asked about the Soviet Union, with 47 percent providing positive answers and 38 percent expressing little or very little confidence. The Gorbachev effect was even more apparent in an additional question about whether confidence in the superpowers had gone up or down. Only 16 percent answered that their confidence in the United States had gone up, and the corresponding figure for the Soviet Union was 53 percent. The same poll recorded a 32 percent approval rating for the acquisition of Trident with a 57 percent disapproval, although when asked whether Britain should "give up relying on nuclear weapons whatever other countries decide," 53 percent thought that was a bad idea and only 38 percent thought it was a good idea.

In April 1989, on the eve of Gorbachev's visit to London, a survey conducted for *The Times* and the Council for Defence Information confirmed most of these findings. When asked which of the two superpowers wished "to extend its power over other countries" 35 percent chose the Soviet Union and 33 percent the United States. This is a remarkable shift from 1981 when 70 percent chose the Soviet Union and 31 percent chose the United States, or even from 1983 when the figures were 59 and 26 percent respectively. The much less negative image of the Soviet Union in British public opinion was also reflected in the fact that only 17 percent thought Soviet policies were harmful to Britain, a figure that had declined from 42 percent in 1981. Rather strangely, only 14 percent believe that Mr. Gorbachev's judgment is sound, although even this reflects a marked increase from 1982 when only 3 percent thought Andropov's judgment was sound.

If there is a feeling that Gorbachev has improved East-West relations, however, there is also considerable caution and not a little conservatism in British public opinion on defense issues. Even if the superpowers agree to cut strategic forces, for example, only 21 percent believed that Britain should get rid of its deterrent. Although 36 percent thought that in these circumstances Britain should also reduce its strategic nuclear forces, 33 percent believed there should be no change in British capabilities. There was also a

---

<sup>7</sup>I have drawn heavily here on M. Clarke, *British Perspectives on the Soviet Union*, Chatham House, forthcoming. It contains an excellent analysis of British opinion about the Soviet Union.

strong feeling expressed by nearly half of those interviewed that it would be in British interests if the existing level of U.S. troops remained in Europe. At the same time, the vision of a nuclear-free world has some appeal: 37 percent of those asked thought Britain would be safer and 39 percent thought that it would be as safe as it is at the moment if all nuclear weapons were abolished by the year 2000.

Several conclusions can be drawn about these polls. The first is that on British nuclear weapons, the results are fairly permissive, although the past two elections provide telling evidence that there is only limited popular support for unilateralism. The second is that British public confidence in the United States has been in a long-term decline. To a large extent this was a response to the Reagan presidency, although the trend downward really began in the last half of the Carter era. It is possible President Bush could go some way toward restoring a favorable image. The third observation is that Gorbachev has very clearly had a considerable influence on British popular attitudes and has created a far more favorable image of the Soviet Union than ever before. The implications of all this are uncertain. However, the traditional assessment of the Soviet Union as a threat to British security may not go unchallenged in the future. A study of media coverage of the Soviet Union indicates that in traditional coverage of Soviet relations with Britain, the "USSR generally appears as a protagonist, as threat or an enemy" but that appears to be diminishing, partly as a result of Gorbachev's personal image, the domestic reforms he has initiated, and a much more conscious and effective effort at news management by the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup>

If Gorbachev seems to have had considerable public effect, at the level of Parliament and the parties his main influence seems to have been to confirm images rather than to change them. Although the poll of MPs referred to above revealed great support for the INF Treaty from members of the two main political parties, it also highlighted an important difference among the parties. Compared with Labour MPs, "conservatives are more likely to regard the Soviet Union as a threat, and nuclear deterrence as an appropriate response. They are more worried about the conventional balance in Europe and more skeptical about Gorbachev's disarmament proposals".<sup>9</sup>

Whereas 93 percent of Labour MPs support Gorbachev's proposal to abolish nuclear weapons, over half the Conservatives are skeptical. As well as a divergence

---

<sup>8</sup>See B. McNair, *Images of the Enemy*, Routledge, London, 1988, pp. 47 and 196-198.

<sup>9</sup>Towle, *MPs and Defence*, pp. 17-18.

about the nature of the threat there is considerable difference over how best to meet it, especially in relation to nuclear weapons, with 114 out of 116 Conservatives supporting Trident and only nine out of 54 Labour MPs.

There is a sense in which much of this is irrelevant. The party differences are hardly surprising and reinforce the basic point that the government has considerable discretion so long as it has a clear majority in the House of Commons. There does seem to be a long-term trend away from the traditional perception of the Soviet Union as a threat. That could make it more difficult for the government to justify increases in defense spending, especially when it is attempting both to restrict public spending and to meet demands for increased resources on such domestic programs as health and education. Indeed, insofar as public opinion has any effect on British security policy, it is likely to be felt indirectly, with the government response most evident at the level of resource allocation.

In the absence of a Labour government, the internal political dimension of British security policy is unlikely to be decisive in bringing about change. Nevertheless, the lack of consensus and the resource constraints complicate matters and add to the uncertainties about whether British policy can adapt to the external changes that are already apparent and seem likely to become much more salient during the 1990s.

## **THE INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGE**

Unlike the détente of the 1970s, the new détente between East and West has lacked a conceptual underpinning, at least in the West, and has been almost a détente by default. Even so, it poses serious problems for the traditional British approach to security, challenging several of the assumptions on which this approach has been based.

The first assumption that the new détente has challenged is the traditional conception of the Soviet Union as a direct threat to British security. Although Mrs. Thatcher has developed a good working relationship with the Soviet leader, the government and the Ministry of Defence still retain the strong belief that as yet there has not been a fundamental shift in the threat. There is less emphasis than in the past on the ideological dimension of the Soviet challenge and rather more on the way the threat has been institutionalized in Soviet and Warsaw Pact military capabilities. The British defense establishment accepts the importance of new thinking in Gorbachev's approach to foreign policy and security, especially his emphasis on reciprocity and reasonable sufficiency, but there is considerable uncertainty about the implementation of the new

ideas. The difficulties that Gorbachev faces from his domestic critics and opponents as well as the possibility that, at some stage, he could be ousted from power are presented as reasons for caution. Furthermore, there is at least some skepticism about whether there has been a real shift in Soviet objectives. More critical members of the policymaking elite see Gorbachev as a leader who is simply pursuing traditional Soviet goals through far more subtle and skillful tactics than those his predecessors followed.

This is not to suggest that policymakers have been oblivious either to the changes that are taking place in Soviet domestic and foreign policies or to the need to react positively to them. Recognition of change has been most apparent in the Foreign Office where the prime concern is not the military threat but the political opportunities and challenges posed by the Soviet Union. There is considerable sensitivity to the potential for political movement in Europe but also a fear that Gorbachev could exploit this to his advantage. The Ministry of Defence also has a sense of the opportunities, especially at the level of conventional arms control, but this is accompanied by a belief that a considerable diminution in the Soviet threat has yet to materialize.

As a basis for military planning, the shift in Soviet declaratory policy is not a good indicator of a reduced threat, unless it is accompanied by concrete measures reducing Soviet capabilities for sudden and decisive military action against Western Europe. Throughout most of 1988, it was claimed that such measures were still lacking, and "when you look at the evidence, whether it be the economy, research and development, forward equipment programmes, military infrastructure, logistics or deployment," there has been no substantial change.<sup>10</sup> Those who hold to the orthodox view of the Soviet threat "point to the continuing 2.5 to 1 imbalance in favour of the Warsaw Pact in terms of tanks; to the 30 divisions they can mobilize within 48 hours to the 90 days of Warsaw Pact stocks compared to NATO's 30."<sup>11</sup> In view of the lack of change in these basic indicators, it is not surprising that the intelligence community and the defense policymaking elite have "still to be convinced that aggressive designs have been placed in the Kremlin's own dustbin of history."<sup>12</sup>

In the event, Gorbachev's December 1988 announcement went some way to meeting what had clearly become another litmus test for the Soviet leader. In his speech at the Wehrkunde Conference in January 1989, Sir Geoffrey Howe acknowledged that

---

<sup>10</sup>P. Hennessy, "Little Cause Found for Optimism over the Cold War Heartlands," *The Independent*, 23 May 1988.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

new thinking seemed to apply to military issues as well and that there were grounds for optimism. Yet there was also considerable caution in the speech, and the Foreign Secretary reiterated that although Gorbachev had recognized a longstanding Western concern about forward deployed Soviet armor, the huge Eastern preponderance in tanks and artillery remained. Furthermore, "Soviet military procurement continues at an unjustifiably high level," giving the Soviet Union "a well-stocked hat full of well-armed rabbits and the Soviet Union will be able to go on surprising us by drawing rabbits from that hat for many years to come, but a lot less will have to be spent on guns before the Soviet consumer stops queuing for butter."<sup>13</sup> Another problem is that Soviet procurement belies Soviet theoretical analyses that highlight the desirability of moving to a nonnuclear world by the year 2000.

Understandable though this caution is, there are several problems in acting according to a set of assumptions that can be characterized either as prudent or as overly conservative. The first is that in a period of relaxation in East-West relations, it is difficult to justify maintaining existing levels of expenditures on defense, especially when there are pressing domestic needs and increasing demands on limited resources. The second is that British policy has diverged considerably from that of the other allies. As the Reagan administration pursued what appeared to be a visionary arms reduction policy, the Thatcher government found itself increasingly uncomfortable. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the INF Agreement, the British government has found itself at odds with the Federal Republic of Germany and, to a lesser extent, Belgium over the issue of short-range nuclear force modernization.

Although the Thatcher government formally welcomed the double zero option enshrined in the INF Agreement, there was also a recognition that the direction of future arms control negotiations might pose problems for the Western Alliance. Concerns over "cascading denuclearization" made the Prime Minister reluctant to consider a third zero in short-range nuclear forces and anxious to ensure that modernization of NATO's short-range nuclear forces through the deployment of a Lance follow-on system goes ahead. It was believed that removal of the remaining U.S. land-based nuclear forces from Europe would sever the linkage between the two parts of the Alliance and that this

---

<sup>13</sup>Text of speech by Sir Geoffrey Howe at the Wehrkunde Conference in Munich, 28 January 1989, reprinted as Appendix 12 of The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee First Report on *Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* Session 1988-89, HMSO, London, March 1989.

would have serious repercussions for NATO's ability to maintain deterrence and defense in Europe. On this particular issue, the United States and Britain have been aligned against the Federal Republic of Germany, which believes it has been "singularized" and is therefore reluctant to accept modernization of short-range nuclear systems. The prevailing sentiment in Bonn is "the shorter the range, the deader the German"; in London it is concern over ensuring that coupling is maintained.

Although there is considerable sensitivity at the official level to the West German predicament and a recognition that the peculiar politics of coalition governments gives the issue an added intractability for Mr. Kohl, the Prime Minister exerted considerable pressure on Bonn for a commitment to modernize. The arguments in favor were that the Lance missile will require replacement by the mid 1990s and there are difficulties in providing congressional funding without a firm commitment to deployment.

Although in April 1988 it appeared that a compromise had been reached on this, the Federal Republic's desire to respond to Soviet overtures to begin negotiations on short-range nuclear forces gave the issue a new twist and an added urgency, and almost certainly underlined Mrs. Thatcher's determination to ensure that NATO strategy continues to have a substantial nuclear element. There was concern in Britain that Bonn's position would alienate U.S. public opinion and encourage the reappraisal of the U.S. commitment to NATO that American critics have long been demanding and that Britain has long feared. There was particular anxiety that German obduracy would encourage an upsurge of support for the proposition "no nukes, no troops." In the event, President Bush was able to fashion a compromise at the NATO Summit of May 1989, based partly on a commitment to early negotiations on short-range nuclear forces, although with the understanding that these talks were not to yield a third zero. In the meantime the modernization issue was effectively postponed. Although this was a compromise, it gave more to the Germans than to Mrs. Thatcher. Bonn came into the Summit with a commitment to modernize and left with a commitment to negotiate, an outcome that did little to alleviate British worries over denuclearization.

The concern over maintaining the nuclear components of Western security policy has also had some effect at the level of strategic arms control, although this has diminished as the Bush administration has slowed down the pace of negotiations with the Soviet Union. However, concerns about the eventual consequences of deep cuts have not disappeared. In the aftermath of Reykjavik, the Thatcher government was particularly vigorous in criticizing the idea of eliminating ICBMs in the second phase of

an agreement dealing with offensive systems. It accepted that reductions of up to 50 percent in strategic offensive forces would not fundamentally alter the strategic landscape but was perturbed at anything that threatened to go beyond. Such an attitude is hardly surprising. Not only does the government share the belief, widespread among European defense elites, that American ICBMs are crucial to the integrity of extended deterrence, it also recognizes that if the superpowers make large-scale reductions in their strategic forces, then the strategic nuclear deterrent forces of Britain and France begin to loom much larger in the East-West balance. Part of the concern is over a dilution of extended deterrence, which is regarded as one of the pillars of the security structure in Europe; and part of it is over the possibility of constraints on national nuclear forces, which provide the insurance against a crumbling of this pillar. At best the British strategic nuclear forces could be seen as hindering further progress on arms control; at worst there would be considerable pressure to include them in a START 2 agreement, something that is a major problem given the minimal nature of the force. From this perspective, part of the response to Reykjavik was a preemptive attempt to preserve Britain's independent nuclear capability.

British government spokesmen have also been in the forefront in demanding that a drastic reduction of nuclear weapons in Europe be accompanied by measures designed both to deal with the conventional imbalance in favor of the Warsaw Pact and to minimize the Pact's capacity to launch a sudden attack from a standing start. This theme has elicited a positive response from Mr. Gorbachev. As well as the unilateral measures announced in December 1988, the Soviet leader has acknowledged the need for asymmetrical reductions in the negotiations on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). Indeed, the progress that has been made in CFE, especially since President Bush's initiative at the NATO Summit, has been far more rapid than expected. Not only has the possibility of a first-phase CFE agreement below NATO's current level of forces become an element in British calculations, but the government also has to consider the possibility that a second phase CFE could result in deep cuts in conventional forces, perhaps in the region of 50 percent of current levels. Although Britain has long been a supporter of conventional force reductions in Europe, steps of this magnitude raise difficult questions about the viability of flexible response and forward defense. Moreover, the Conservative government will face a dilemma in the event that progress is made toward deep cuts: Even if Pact forces are restructured along these lines, there will still be a need, in the

government's view, to retain a strong nuclear component in NATO force structure and planning. Yet this will be increasingly difficult to legitimize once Soviet conventional superiority has been removed.

The other guiding principle for Britain in the negotiations is to ensure the maintenance of a substantial U.S. military presence in Western Europe. Yet this runs up against another trend challenging the British security policy framework—the weakening of the U.S. commitment to West European security. The United Kingdom, along with the other European allies, has been able to rely extensively on the United States for its security throughout most of the postwar period. Several developments now suggest that the period in which Western Europe has been a net security consumer is coming to an end, and Western Europe will have to become a more vigorous security producer. This is not to argue that there will be a rapid or abrupt U.S. disengagement from Western Europe. It is clear though that there is growing dissatisfaction in the United States with the level of resources devoted to the security commitment to Western Europe, especially in view of what is widely seen as a lack of European reciprocity in terms of burden sharing. Several considerations could lead to a reduction in the American willingness to underwrite the security of Western Europe to the extent that it has done throughout the postwar period.

The first is that the original commitment was based on notions of U.S. primacy and West European weakness. These conditions have both changed. On the one side, the West Europeans have developed economically to a point where they have become a serious competitor of the United States. Economic competition and American concerns over European protectionism, which could well increase as a result of the creation by the end of 1992 of a single European market, can easily sour the atmosphere in which security cooperation takes place: They intensify frustrations over what Americans see as European unwillingness to share the burdens of security as fully as they are capable of doing. On the other side, there is a growing recognition in the United States that there are limits to American power. Although the argument that the United States is in decline is contested, in view of the budget deficit it is clear that further economies will have to be made in defense spending. The need to balance capabilities and commitments has also precipitated a serious debate about security priorities. In these circumstances, it is not certain that Western Europe will continue to enjoy the position that it has held in U.S. defense planning throughout the postwar period.

The second consideration with very serious implications for West European security is the changing assessment of nuclear weapons in the United States. As in Britain, so opinion in the United States on nuclear weapons has become bifurcated. And although one strand of opinion will regard West German desires for the "third zero" very critically, others will believe that this could encourage the allies to move away from the strategy of first use, which, in an era of nuclear parity, appears particularly dangerous for the United States. If there will be some in the U.S. debate who will welcome the West German desire to negotiate on short-range nuclear forces, however, Washington is more likely to see it as a challenge to the fundamentals of the Alliance. In these circumstances, there is a distinct possibility that West German and U.S. frustrations will feed upon each other and that there will be added pressure from Congress for U.S. troop cuts. At a time of budgetary stringency, dissatisfaction with European allies, either because they are reluctant to share burdens and risks or because they are too positive in responding to Gorbachev (especially if compounded by anxieties over the potential for Fortress Europe after 1992), could rapidly generate demands for large cuts in the American military presence in Western Europe.

The other development that makes troop cuts more likely is the relaxation of tensions between the superpowers. Most of the conditions for a revival of the congressional pressure for U.S. troop cuts have been present since the early 1980s. In a period when U.S.-Soviet tensions were running high, however, this seemed a rather unwise option. With the improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations, it can be contemplated with greater equanimity. Indeed, President Bush placed the possibility of U.S. troop cuts firmly on the agenda at the NATO Summit when he proposed an equal ceiling of 275,000 troops in Europe for the United States and the Soviet Union. This would require large asymmetrical cuts by the Soviet Union. Although the U.S. cuts would be rather more modest, the Bush proposal was nevertheless very shrewd in domestic political terms. Not only did it help forestall congressional pressure for unilateral troop cuts, but it also made clear to the allies that the United States was determined to relieve its share of the burden as a result of conventional arms control.

The other point about a relaxation of tensions in which there is an attempt to restructure the military relationship in Europe is that it promises to ease some of the U.S. concerns over the risks associated with extended deterrence. The commitment to Western Europe inevitably places the United States in harm's way. Yet this is far less

intolerable if the likelihood that the commitment will be challenged is diminishing. A reduction in troop levels could, however, ultimately be seen as a weakening of the commitment.

The implication of all this is that the major elements in the British approach to security are increasingly being subject to challenge. The nuclear component of security has been challenged first by the Reagan administration and subsequently by the Federal Republic. Furthermore, American and West German differences, and especially the sense of mutual frustration and resentment that accompanies them, may further erode the political cohesion of the Alliance. Therefore, the United Kingdom faces an environment in which there could be less dependence on the American security guarantee than in the past.

The problem is partly one of structure and partly one of strategy. This dual nature of the challenge to British security policy makes it difficult to contain. One response to concerns over the weakening American commitment to the existing security structure, for example, would be to place more emphasis on the national strategy. Yet the same kind of developments that are challenging structure are also challenging both NATO and British strategy. Conversely the challenge to strategy would be less disturbing were it not being accompanied by challenges to the security structure. The current U.S. reappraisal, while less dramatic than that threatened by John Foster Dulles in 1954, could prove more enduring and more serious. When this is allied with Gorbachev's rhetoric about a common European house, it suggests that the security arrangements established in the 1940s are entering a period of decay.

#### IV. ADJUSTING TO CHANGE

Adapting to the changing security environment of the 1990s will be extremely difficult for Britain because the demands of structure, of strategy, and of accommodation are diverging to a far greater extent than ever before. A policy that has been based on clear convictions about the Soviet threat, the continuing U.S. security guarantee, the primacy of the "special relationship," the role of nuclear weapons, and the contribution of detente and arms control becomes much more uncertain when each of these elements is changing. Yet British policy at the end of the 1980s is still based on familiar responses and traditional patterns. The difficulty is that although a stable policy framework is appropriate when the international environment is changing only marginally, it is less suitable when the pace of change increases. Indeed, the implication of the preceding analysis is that Britain will find it very difficult to reconcile the desire to maintain the structure of security and the desire for East-West accommodation with its national strategy. Hitherto tensions among these three elements of British security policy have either been minimal or have been easily contained. Tensions, however, seem to be increasing. One possible response to concerns over the American nuclear guarantee, for example, is to place increasing emphasis on the British strategic deterrent, but the direction of superpower arms control policy and British dependence on the United States for the D5 missile both militate against this.

In other words, the rather comfortable assumptions upon which British defense policy has been based for much of the postwar period appear increasingly irrelevant. If they have not yet been overturned, they are becoming fragile. In these circumstances, the key issue for British defense policymakers and planners in the early 1990s is whether they should attempt to maintain the security structure in its existing form or, recognizing that change is inevitable, help to adapt it. The danger with the former approach is that Britain could become isolated as major allies such as the Federal Republic and the United States move toward accommodation with Moscow and a downgrading of the role of nuclear weapons in European security. The danger with promoting change is that it could accelerate the dismantling of existing security structures before any real alternatives have been created. The choices that Britain has to make in its security policy during the next few years, therefore, are likely to be more fundamental than at any time since the late 1940s.

These choices are also likely to be determined to a considerable degree by the party in office. A Conservative government will almost certainly be reluctant to move too fast down the arms control road, especially where that is seen as undermining the structural and strategic elements of British security. A Labour government, in contrast, would be more enthusiastic about arms control at all levels. It would be much readier to include Trident in strategic arms control negotiations than would a Conservative government, be less opposed to the West German position on short-range nuclear force negotiations, and be more sympathetic to deep cuts in conventional forces. The Labour Party has long argued that defense is only one component of security and is best achieved through cooperation rather than confrontation with the Soviet Union. A Labour government, therefore, would be more in tune with the policies of the European allies and the United States. Although a Conservative government would bow to the inevitable, it could become alienated from many of its NATO allies. Ironically, such a government could well find itself propelled closer to France as both states attempt to preserve their room for maneuver, especially in terms of strategic forces.

The nature of the government could also influence the British response to moves toward greater West European defense cooperation. The Thatcher government has always been hostile to a West European defense identity on the grounds that it could prove divisive in NATO. If the European allies are too self-reliant, the United States might believe that it is no longer needed in Europe; at the very least it could provide a pretext for American troop withdrawals that the United States is anxious to take for budgetary and political reasons. Not surprisingly, therefore, Mrs. Thatcher has been suspicious of moves in this direction and in the mid 1980s warned the French and Germans that their efforts to achieve a greater degree of cooperation were in danger of creating divisive sub-structures within the Atlantic Alliance. The Thatcher government has exhibited the same kind of ambivalence toward European defense cooperation as it has done toward the European Monetary System. The problem is that British ambivalence about defense cooperation could be destructive of the whole enterprise, as it has been in the past. How important this issue will be, of course, remains uncertain. If the creation of the single European market provides an impetus to greater cooperation in defense, and if the U.S. commitment to Western European security is seriously in question, then greater European self-reliance in defense could be a matter of urgency. If the process of East-West accommodation continues, however, the incentives for greater

West European defense cooperation could decrease in spite of these other developments. In the event that moves are made to provide an alternative structure for maintaining West European security, a Labour government would be better placed than the Thatcher government to adopt policies that respond positively both to new opportunities in East-West relations and to the cooperative process among West European states. The Labour government played a crucial role in the creation of the postwar security structure, and a post-Cold War Labour government in the 1990s would be very well placed to create new security structures based on close cooperation with Britain's West European allies and with the erstwhile adversary.

Whatever government is in power, the 1990s will almost certainly prove difficult for ministries of defense and the armed forces. Justifying level funding let alone increased defense spending is difficult in an environment when a large portion of the electorate believes that the Cold War has been won, that peace has broken out in Europe, and that arms control offers an opportunity to dispense with existing force structures. Indeed, budgetary constraints are already in evidence. As David Greenwood has pointed out, when expressed in constant prices, British defense spending for 1989-90 is 8.5 percent less than actual expenditures in 1984-85.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, although the Thatcher government, which remains more sympathetic to military spending than any alternative government, has pledged to provide 5 percent more cash for defense for both 1990-91 and 1991-92; that might be insufficient to cover the increase in costs resulting from inflation. To compound the problem, the British armed forces confront demographic problems that are not entirely different from those facing West Germany. The declining birth rate of the 1960s and 1970s means that in the first half of the 1990s there will be a much smaller pool of the 16- to 19-year-olds who provide three-quarters of all new recruits. This in turn means that to maintain force levels, the services have to attract a larger portion of this group. If they are to deal with the problems of manning and recruitment through the lean years of the 1990s, however, they will have to make military service more attractive. The more money that is spent on personnel, the less there will be for procurement in a period when major reequipment programs are in train.

The implication of all this is that during the 1990s the United Kingdom will find it more difficult than ever before to play the role of "good ally," at least in terms of its

---

<sup>1</sup>Paper presented at a conference organized by Department of War Studies, King's College, London, 19-20 July 1989. The analysis of economic and demographic constraints draws heavily on David Greenwood's work in this area.

contribution to the Alliance. Yet this is not atypical. Increases in defense spending will be difficult to justify in almost all NATO nations, so long as Gorbachev pursues a flexible diplomatic approach to Western Europe. The CFE negotiations have raised expectations about the prospects for arms control in the 1990s and could result in a climate in which there are public and parliamentary expectations that savings can safely be made in the defense budget. While the problem could be alleviated somewhat by higher rates of economic growth, defense spending in the first half of the 1990s is likely to be characterized by declining or at best static budgets and rising costs. In such circumstances, it will be very difficult for the United Kingdom to continue doing all that it has been doing in defense.

In what ways might the government respond to budgetary stringency? One possibility is to opt for an approach that avoids clear-cut choices and reverts to the salami cutting characteristic of the 1970s. This would effectively be a defense review by stealth and one that inflicted equal misery on all the services. The problem is that the national order of battle would be maintained at the expense of a real loss in combat effectiveness. Consequently, a government of either party might deem it necessary to attempt once again to establish a clear hierarchy of roles and missions. Should such an approach be preferred, attention could be directed toward one or another of the services as the main candidates for cuts.

When such an approach was attempted in the early 1980s the Navy was the main candidate for cuts. Reducing the size of the surface fleet was not regarded as an attractive option; it simply appeared less unpalatable than the alternatives. Part of the reason for this was the powerful political rationale for maintaining force levels on the Central Front. It was contended that cuts would be politically embarrassing at a time when the U.S. Congress was particularly anxious over burden sharing. At first sight, the political considerations that made BAOR and RAF Germany sacrosanct in the early 1980s appear more important rather than less when the Atlantic Alliance is engaged in conventional arms control negotiations with the Soviet bloc. Yet the negotiations on conventional forces in Europe offer opportunities as well as constraints. They are likely to change the terms of the defense debate. Arguments over burden sharing are likely to give way to disputes over burden shedding as NATO nations attempt to obtain a large share of the benefits of force reductions. The argument will no longer be about how much is enough but how little is enough. In these circumstances, BAOR and RAF

Germany could appear more attractive options for major force reductions than in the past.

The Navy, in contrast, can claim that in the event of a conventional arms control agreement in Europe leading to a reduction in the American military presence in Western Europe, the ability to provide reinforcement and resupply across the Atlantic will become more important than ever before. Moreover, a CFE agreement, especially if followed by an accord on the need for deep cuts in a second phase of negotiations, would provide compelling evidence to the public and Parliament that the Soviet threat had substantially diminished. Although potential instability in Eastern Europe makes it unwise to ignore possible contingencies in the European theater itself, success in the arms control negotiations could encourage a shift of focus to out-of-area threats. Such trends as the spread of ballistic missile technology and chemical warfare capabilities mean that insecurity and instability in the Third World in the 1990s are more likely to increase than diminish. Western Europe cannot be indifferent to such an eventuality and in circumstances where the Soviet threat has been more or less discounted, the focus could shift from Europe to the Third World. In these circumstances, navies would take on a new importance, or at least go some way toward regaining their former importance. Consequently, a 50 frigate and destroyer navy would be a basic prerequisite for security in the 1990s, even at the expense of cuts in the Army and Air Force.

In short, the changes of the late 1980s and the early 1990s are calling into question many of the judgments and assumptions that have shaped British security policy for much of the postwar period. Consequently, a defense review, far from being an unwelcome prelude to cuts in military capability as it has appeared so often in the past, could provide an opportunity for either a Conservative or a Labour government to reappraise outmoded assumptions and adjust priorities in a way that is both rational and orderly. The danger is that a Conservative government would be too reluctant to do this and a Labour government too enthusiastic. The key to British security policy in the 1990s is to preserve valid elements of the traditional approach while abandoning those that are no longer relevant. The difficulty in this lies in differentiating the factors of continuity from those of change, a difficulty that is exacerbated by the complex interplay between the choices that are made at the military level regarding the interservice balance and the choices that are made at the political level about whether security is best achieved through a national, West European, or Atlantic framework. Formidable as

these problems may be, however, they have to be confronted. In a world where the pace of political change has begun to transform the security environment and the security agenda, there are no easy options and no escape from painful dilemmas. British defense policymakers and planners have to recognize that the decisions of the 1990s will be more momentous than any of the choices that have been made since the 1940s.