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Alliance and the British way in warfare

LAWRENCE FREEDMAN

The British Way in Warfare

The British Way in Warfare was the title of a book by Basil Liddell Hart published in 1932.¹ It was an elaboration of ideas first propounded a year earlier in a celebrated lecture on ‘Economic Pressure or Continental Victories’ to the Royal United Services Institute. Like many of his generation, the more Liddell Hart reflected on his own encounter with war (he had been gassed and wounded at the Somme²), the more he became convinced that such folly must not be repeated. This required transforming the very conduct of war. With equal conviction he believed that he had hit upon some answers. These appeared as general principles of strategy—the ‘indirect approach’—and a particular policy for his own country—‘limited liability’. He claimed that he was doing little more than distilling the essence of a long-standing national approach. This was ‘the British Way in Warfare’.

Britain deviated from this approach at its peril. This was the cause of the catastrophe of 1914–1918. ‘A romantic habit’, he wrote, ‘has led us to hide, and even hidden from us, our essentially businesslike tradition in the conduct of war.’ This had at its heart ‘economic pressure exercise through sea-power’.³ The British sought naturally to gain advantage through ‘mobility and surprise’. Unfortunately, in 1914 they had been seduced by ‘Continental fashions’ which encouraged adoption of a ‘fight-to-a-finish formula’, with the disastrous view that victory could only come through the direct assault by one mass army upon another.

Much of the original lecture was taken up with describing the development of this practice from the ‘awakening’ in the Elizabethan Age onward. As Michael Howard,⁴ Brian Bond⁵ and others have shown, the thesis does not long survive careful scrutiny in terms of British history. In his own search for a British Way in Warfare, David French observes that the only valid generalization reflects the essentially adaptive

¹ Basil Liddell Hart, *The British Way in Warfare* (London, 1932).

² On the influence of the Somme on Liddell Hart, see Hew Strachan, ‘“The Real War”: Liddell Hart, Crutwell, and Falls’, in Brian Bond (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford, 1991).

³ Through the centuries sea-power had been used for two purposes: ‘one financial, which embraced subsidizing and military provisioning of allies; the other military, which embraced seaborne expeditions against the enemy’s vulnerable extremities’. Basil Liddell Hart, ‘Continental Victories or Economic Pressure’, *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* (1931), p. 500.

⁴ Michael Howard, ‘The British Way in Warfare: A Reappraisal’, in M. Howard (ed.), *The Causes of Wars* (London, 1983).

⁵ Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought* (London, 1977).

character of British strategic policy: 'Policy-makers pursued policies which seemed to be calculated to achieve their dominant policy aims at minimum cost. British defence policy was consistent only in its *apparent* inconsistency'.⁶

The question at the heart of the *British Way in Warfare* was really one of grand strategy. To what extent should Britain, as a tolerably defensible island, involve itself in the politics of mainland Europe? As with all theorists of restraint, Liddell Hart's own healthy preoccupation with the peace that might follow a war only worked so long as the adversary could also imagine a return to 'normal relations' and was not out to transform the old order. For limited ends, limited means might be adequate, but Liddell Hart strained to go further in using limited means for total ends.

Within this framework, 'limited liability' could only refer to the boundaries imposed by Britain on its contribution to alliance. 'We were tied to them both in policy and strategy as never before', he grumbled of 1914:

We became one with them and subordinated our policy to theirs. Some would say that we were not even co-equal with them, save in so far as it was by the free will of our leaders that we were committed to following the dictates of a Continental strategy which drew us willy-nilly into a policy foreign to our traditions.⁷

But Britain's liability to events on the continent was *not* limited. The enduring nightmare of the country's grand strategy had been a fear of a Europe dominated by a single power with access to the resources of a whole continent and so well able to withstand any pressure that Britain could impose. Such a power would eventually build up its own ability to project its strength across the Channel. If Britain's interests were bound up with the balance of power on the continent, then it was unrealistic to suppose that actions designed to sustain a favourable balance could be undertaken without concession to the sufferings and sensitivities of those closest to the front line.

Unfortunately, Liddell Hart's argument for 'limited liability' depended on Britain's interests being looked after by continental states who were in no position to define limits to their involvement. Thus, as Michael Howard observed so trenchantly,

a commitment of support to a Continental ally in the nearest available theatre, on the largest scale that contemporary resources could afford, so far from being alien to traditional British strategy was absolutely central to it. The flexibility provided by sea power certainly made possible other activities as well: colonial conquest, trade war, help to allies in Central Europe, minor amphibious operations: but these were ancillary to the great decisions by land, and they continued to be so throughout two world wars.⁸

As the big issues of war and peace tended to turn on the control of territory, for Britain to influence the shape of the European state system it had to insert its army into areas of contention. It therefore had no choice but to forge an alliance which could ensure a link with a continental-sized army as well as a base for a British expeditionary force. This meant that the *British Way in Warfare* would inevitably be influenced by its principal ally.

This tendency has been as evident during the Cold War as it was during two world wars. The maintenance of the 'special relationship' with the United States became

⁶ David French, *The British Way in Warfare, 1688–2000* (London, 1990), p. 232.

⁷ Liddell Hart, 'Continental Victories', pp. 487–8.

⁸ Howard, 'The British Way', p. 180.

the centrepiece of British strategy during the Cold War. As a result, British military provision came to be assessed as a subscription for entry into American policy-making. This article raises two questions with regard to this approach: the tendency for the process to become circular as the influence gained was used to sustain the ability to pay the subscription, and the particular problems when the relationship moved from deterrence to the actual conduct of military operations.

It concludes by considering the problems of sustaining the relationship with the United States in the aftermath of the Cold War. Now that the risk of great power conflict has declined, the issue of how states might employ force without accepting pain disproportionate to any objectives which they might hope to achieve has been pushed even more to the fore. The article suggests that Britain might be returning once again to France as principal ally.

The logic of alliance

Liddell Hart's complaint over 1914 was really about the logic of alliance. He was, of course, not alone—then or since—in finding the entente a mixed blessing. Shared concerns over German power in central Europe were qualified by colonial rivalry elsewhere and memories of the Napoleonic era. Neither country wholly trusted the other's motives and staying power. Prior to both 1914 and 1939 question marks against the British continental commitment undermined whatever deterrent effect the entente might have achieved.

During the traumatic years of 1940 and 1941, France was replaced as the principal ally by the United States. The compatibility of this 'special relationship' derived from the fact that the United States was a larger version of Britain—not only in its origins and culture but also in its maritime character and its distance from the heart of Europe. From the moment it found itself alone in 1940, Britain's grand strategy was to draw in the United States. Churchill's relief at Pearl Harbor is well recorded.

Silly people—and there are many, not only in enemy countries—might discount the force of the United States. Some said they were soft, others that they would never be united. They would fool around at a distance. They would never come to grips. They would never stand blood-letting.

These are comments we have heard since. Churchill himself was reminded of a remark by Edward Grey who had observed how the United States is like 'a gigantic boiler. Once the fire is lighted under it there is no limit to the power it can generate.'⁹ By contrast French stock was low, and while Churchill could have his sentimental side when it came to links with France, in 1944 he was in no doubt.¹⁰

In the face of the Russian move into the centre of Europe, the balance of power after 1945 came to depend on maintaining a standing force on the other side of the

⁹ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. 3, The Grand Alliance (1948–53)*, pp. 607–8. See Eliot Cohen, 'Churchill and Coalition Strategy in World War II' in Paul Kennedy (ed.), *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven, 1991).

¹⁰ He told de Gaulle: 'Each time I have to choose between you and Roosevelt, I shall always choose Roosevelt . . . Each time we have to choose between Europe and the open sea, we shall always choose the open sea.' Cited in David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy & World Power in the 20th Century* (London, 1991), p. 30.

Iron Curtain, and this involved a US as much as a British commitment. There would be insufficient time to mobilize and dispatch an expeditionary force. In this context, Germany rather than France became Britain's principal continental ally. Initially, France had taken this role, in the signing of the 1948 Brussels Treaty, and it was not until the mid-1950s that Germany joined NATO. However, during the 1960s, France under General de Gaulle refused to accept the disciplines of alliance, NATO headquarters left Paris and, in 1966, France left the integrated military command. Germany provided the theatre in which the future of Europe would be decided and also, eventually, the crucial front-line manpower which would ensure that the defence of the Iron Curtain was a manageable proposition—though how manageable remained a debate for at least three generations of defence analysts and planners. The US backed it all up with a nuclear threat which soon dominated all calculations.

As Britain could not provide the necessary balance by itself it saw its role in terms of keeping the alliance together. The advantage was quite straightforward. The American connection helped it sustain a residual position in the world and, when combined with the German connection, helped keep the Soviet threat far from its shores. In this way the British Way in Warfare became tied to the American just as in 1914 it had become tied to the French.

Not all found this comfortable. Many judged American strategic thinking to be extraordinarily crude, especially when it came to nuclear weapons. The logic of nuclear deterrence, and the risk of mass destruction on an unimaginable scale, were regularly denounced as a transatlantic perversion in terms similar to those in which Liddell Hart had condemned the continental perversion of throwing together mass armies. Moreover, this time the inequality in the relationship was beyond doubt. The terms of cooperation were set by the Americans.

Britain's relative decline encouraged the view that its contributions to the defence of the West and international political norms should be pooled with those of its continental allies in a collective European contribution, which in effect risked dependence once again upon France rather than the United States as the primary ally. This led to a debate that has been so central to much post-war security policy. How can Britain participate in a collective European defence entity in such a way as to avoid even hinting at the possibility of managing without the United States and without losing opportunities for exploiting its 'special relationship' and a distinctive role in international affairs?

The delicacy of these issues meant that pronouncements on British defence policy came to be habitually couched in terms of the requirements of alliance. In the nuclear area itself there was no obvious answer to the question of 'how much is enough?' while the question of enough in the conventional area did not seem so pressing when so much reliance was placed on the dissuasive effect of the utter devastation of total war. As a result, when setting the level of forces—from troops in Germany to Trident submarines—the key factor so often appeared to have been to find the minimum point at which the effort would appear credible and worthwhile to the United States, as the price of admission to American policy-making. This fits in with David French's stress on the continuity in British strategy of a calculus designed to achieve 'dominant policy aims at minimum cost'.

British strategy came to depend upon two key propositions. First, no serious international objective could be met independently of the United States. The

primary requirement of policy was to persuade the United States to recognize its wider obligations. Secondly, none the less the United States could not be wholly trusted to fulfil these obligations in a sensible and effective manner. Therefore Britain must strive to influence American strategy to provide it with the benefit of British wisdom and experience. This in turn required playing an active part in policy implementation. Britain's contribution would be shaped as much by the credit to be gained with Washington as narrowly operational considerations.

There was an element of circularity in this approach. The exercise of influence required an independent capacity for action. However, this in itself was problematic given the reduced circumstances of post-war Britain. If it was assumed that a British voice at the 'top table' would work to the general benefit of international peace and stability then it did not seem unreasonable to expect that some of its influence be used to gain assistance in the effort to preserve the attributes of a great power. Not surprisingly the attachment to this status often appeared as an end in itself rather than simply a means to a higher end.

The British way in nuclear strategy

The broad contours of this approach and its problems have been well documented in the nuclear sphere.¹¹ British policy was never based on the assumption that the country's security could be achieved independently of its European allies. Cold War strategy depended upon holding NATO together and this, in turn, required a continued American commitment to the alliance. However, sheer power and self-sufficiency, as well as the Atlantic Ocean, meant that a limited liability policy when it came to European affairs was a far more realistic option for Washington than it had ever been for London. Those countries that depended on the United States accepting an effectively unlimited liability, for that was the real logic of nuclear deterrence, thus had to make the case that they were worth the commitment.¹²

An independent national deterrent was still deemed to be essential although not for an independent strategic purpose. British policy-makers got themselves in a terrible tangle whenever asked to explain the circumstances in which the national nuclear strike capability might be used when American forces were being held back. Despite convoluted official rationales, the purpose of Britain's nuclear capability was less to deter the Russians directly, let alone take them on in a nuclear exchange, than to influence the general conduct of American Cold War strategy.¹³

In practice, within the nuclear sphere, much of the influence gained was required to convince the Americans that an essential part of this strategy was to sustain an independent British nuclear capability. Initially, Britain had been impelled to develop its own capability because it had been frozen out of the American programme after

¹¹ Andrew Pierre, *Nuclear Politics: The British Experience with an Independent Strategic Force, 1939–1970* (London, 1972); John Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations, 1939–1984: The Special Relationship* (London, 1984); Ian Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship: Britain's Deterrent and America* (Oxford, 1994).

¹² See Lawrence Freedman, *The Price of Peace: Living with the Nuclear Dilemma* (New York, 1986).

¹³ Lawrence Freedman, Martin Navias and Nicholas Wheeler, *Independence in Concert: The British Rationale for Possessing Strategic Nuclear Weapons*, Nuclear History Program: Occasional Paper 5 (Center for International Studies, University of Maryland, 1989).

the war. Having demonstrated that it could do this, it was granted renewed access to the American programme under the Eisenhower Administration. The decision, in 1954, to develop a British thermonuclear weapon was designed 'to maintain our influence with the United States'. The Americans, it was claimed,

would certainly feel more respect for our views if we continued to play an effective part in building up the strength necessary to deter the aggression than if we left it entirely to them to match and counter Russia's strength in thermo-nuclear power.¹⁴

From that point on the maintenance of an *independent* nuclear deterrent—in the sense of national control over an autonomous strike capability—became dependent upon American largesse, particularly in terms of ballistic missiles. Despite the rhetoric of independence, the deterrence concept actually adopted by Britain was premised on *interdependence* with the United States. The initial nuclear role envisaged for RAF Bomber Command was to help create the conditions in which US Strategic Air Command could mount a successful strike against Warsaw Pact targets. As this role became less necessary then British planners resorted to theories of second centres of decision-making, with which they persevered until the end of the Cold War. British nuclear forces were targeted with the United States' and jointly committed to NATO.¹⁵

The choice not to develop a special nuclear alliance with France, at least if it carried any risk of alienating the Americans, was made while the British were still attempting to re-establish cooperation with the Americans after the end of the Manhattan project.¹⁶ While policy-makers were on occasion intrigued by the possibility of some nuclear deal with France,¹⁷ there were two fundamental obstacles. First, the terms of Anglo-American cooperation precluded American technology which had been transferred to Britain being transferred to a third party.¹⁸ Secondly, the two countries could not reconcile their grand strategic principles: British policy-makers always argued that the first priority was to sustain the American nuclear guarantee to Western Europe as a whole rather than to sustain a national deterrent, while the French judged alliances to be untenable in the nuclear age and so stressed national independence above all else.¹⁹

Despite these differences, the two countries did share a basic commitment to nuclear deterrence. As the 1980s progressed they found themselves combining to re-assert the primacy of deterrence in the face of tendencies within the Reagan

¹⁴ CAB 128/27 7 July 1954. Jan Melissen, 'The Struggle for Nuclear Partnership: Britain, The United States and the Making of an Ambiguous Alliance', PhD thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1992.

¹⁵ Lawrence Freedman, 'British Nuclear Targeting', *Defence Analysis*, vol. 1 (1985).

¹⁶ Margaret Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence: Britain and Atomic Energy, 1945–1952*, vol. I, *Policy-Making* (London, 1974), pp. 152–9. A major drawback was considered to be the leftist sympathies of leading French nuclear scientists, and in particular Joliot-Curie.

¹⁷ The possibility was discussed in the late 1950s as France's nuclear intentions became clearer. As leader of the Opposition, Edward Heath expressed himself in favour of closer nuclear cooperation with France. He spoke of a future European defence system, including 'a nuclear force based on the existing British and French forces which could be held in trusteeship for Europe as a whole'. Edward Heath, *Old World, New Horizon: Britain, the Common Market and the Atlantic Alliance* (London, 1970), p. 73. In government he tried but failed to improve cooperation.

¹⁸ Ian Smart, *Future Conditional: The Prospect for Anglo-French Nuclear Co-operation*, Adelphi Paper No. 78 (London, 1971).

¹⁹ However see Richard Ullman, 'The Covert French Connection', *Foreign Policy*, No. 75 (Summer 1989).

Administration to deny this primacy. This came first with the elaboration of President Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI),²⁰ and then with the US–Soviet Reykjavik summit of November 1986. In both cases, there was a rhetorical commitment by the President to a radical shift away from dependence on threats of nuclear retaliation²¹ and a potential threat to continued support for the British Trident programme.²² Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher dealt with both these challenges by using her personal relationship with Reagan to extract a promise to uphold deterrence and protect Trident. Her initial reaction to Reagan's readiness to eliminate all strategic ballistic missiles during the coming ten years was 'as if there had been an earthquake beneath my feet'. As she had done in late 1984 to calm the row over SDI, in December 1986 she flew to Camp David and secured a statement ensuring better consultation next time round and continued support for the modernization of the British deterrent.²³

The end of the Cold War potentially meant further strain on the nuclear relationship. Both the United States and Russia agreed to substantial cuts in their arsenals. However, British strategy was also moving towards a more marginal role for nuclear deterrence, including eliminating most categories of sub-strategic systems, and so the significance of doctrinal nuances was much reduced. Moreover, Trident itself was not threatened by strategic arms control.

None the less, there was a palpable intensification of the level and frequency of contacts over nuclear issues with France. The centrepiece of a much greater convergence—a joint stand-off missile to replace Britain's obsolescent free-fall bombs (the WE-177)—did not get off the drawing board. In the summer of 1986 André Giraud, French Minister of Defence, began to promote the idea of collaboration. By December 1987 Giraud and British Secretary for Defence George Younger revealed that the project was under serious consideration by their two countries.²⁴ Over the next few years talks continued, with the British considering collaboration with the United States as the natural alternative. Ultimately, following the end of the Cold War, the decision was taken not to replace the WE-177. The French were extremely disappointed at the loss of an opportunity for collaboration on nuclear hardware. Even so, by 1993 the British were talking in unusually positive terms about cooperation with France.²⁵

²⁰ The most critical official expression of the Strategic Defence Initiative is to be found in the speech by the then Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, 'Defence and Security in the Nuclear Age', on 15 March 1985. Reprinted in *RUSI Journal*, vol. 130 (June 1985).

²¹ On the Reykjavik summit, see Michael Mandelbaum and Strobe Talbott, 'Reykjavik and Beyond', *Foreign Affairs* (Winter 1986–87). For a discussion of some of the themes of the summit, see articles in *International Security* (Summer 1987).

²² This was not too serious in the case of SDI, although those who took the programme at face value asserted that it was. This is discussed in Lawrence Freedman, 'The Small Nuclear Powers', in David Schwartz and Ashton Carter (eds.), *Ballistic Missile Defense* (Washington, DC, 1984).

²³ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London, 1993), p. 471.

²⁴ *Sunday Times*, 20 December 1987; *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 21 December 1987.

²⁵ A Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine was established by the two countries in November 1992. At the Franco-British summit of July 1993 this was turned into a permanent standing body. According to Secretary for Defence Malcolm Rifkind, 'The most striking and welcome aspect of this joint work has been the confirmation that there are no differences between France and the United Kingdom on fundamental nuclear issues'. 'UK Defence Strategy: A Continuing Role for Nuclear Weapons?', Speech to Centre for Defence Studies, London, 16 November 1993.

The British way in conventional campaigns

While the decisions on nuclear strategy were seen as fundamental to British security, those geared to actual military operations, especially if they involved ground troops, were often much more difficult. It was the mismanagement of a joint operation to retake the Suez Canal in 1956 which undermined French confidence in Britain's capacity to act resolutely. Ten years later France withdrew from NATO's integrated military command. While practical cooperation in defence planning between the two countries continued on an informal basis, there were no joint operations.

By contrast, Britain worked closely with the United States. The presumption of policy was that Washington should always be given some support when it was acting on behalf of the 'Free World'. Inevitably, a number of actions taken by Washington were deemed to be of doubtful wisdom but, if a request was made for more than mere moral support, the British always tried to come up with something. This might just be a token offering—enough to allow the Americans to say that they were acting as part of a broad international coalition. Hence the contingent of barely 100 men sent to the Multi-National Force in Beirut in 1983–4 and, though this was more substantial, the extra ships to police the Gulf waters during the later stages of the Iran–Iraq War.²⁶

Certainly when Britain refused to cooperate—in Vietnam in 1965 and then over the operation in Grenada in 1983—there were crises in the special relationship.²⁷ Equally when Britain went into battle without the United States the degree of American support was critical to the outcome. When it was withdrawn in 1956 in Suez it was fatal; the 1982 Falklands campaign succeeded in part because of American supplies to the task force.

In two cases both the stakes and the British contribution were of a higher order: Korea in 1950 and the Gulf. In both, the tendency to gear forces and operations to gain an entrée into American policy-making was evident. The decision to send ground forces into Korea in the summer of 1950 came at a time when senior British policy-makers were preoccupied with the thought that the country's days as a great power were numbered and that they could only be prolonged by the recreation of the war-time special relationship.

The initial contribution was naval. The Foreign Office and the Chiefs of Staff were wary of American pressure for the despatch of some ground forces. There were the standard concerns with regard to over-stretch, with Malaya and Hong Kong posing their own demands, and little desire to reverse the process of post-war demobilization. Even accepting that the aggression by the North against South Korea warned of a general Communist offensive, there were worries that the effort required to liberate the South—and incidentally return to power a not very impressive regime—would weaken the West's ability to cope with aggression elsewhere in more important places, notably Europe.

As the issue came to a head in July 1950 fears were expressed that American forces

²⁶ On the pressures to send troops to Beirut in 1983 and Mrs Thatcher's reluctance to do so, see *The Downing Street Years*, pp. 326–7.

²⁷ On Grenada, see *The Downing Street Years*, pp. 328–33. On Vietnam, see Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London, 1992), pp. 385–8.

were heading for a Dunkirk-type evacuation from the remaining redoubt at Pusan. The Chiefs of Staff even contemplated pushing an air campaign based on a form of graduated pressure until North Korea agreed to withdraw.²⁸ In fact, the Americans were becoming confident of their ability to hold Pusan, were injecting into it substantial numbers of troops and were looking ahead to pushing the North Koreans right back and securing 'a rapid and decisive result'. The pressure grew for an early announcement of a substantial British land contribution. From Washington, Ambassador Oliver Franks warned in a letter to Prime Minister Attlee on 15 July that at stake was not enhanced British influence if it acted, but more negatively decline if it took only the role of spectator. Then any advice it had to offer would come to be resented and disregarded.²⁹

Acknowledging the logic of the situation the Chiefs of Staff overcame their initial reluctance. Sending ground troops was still 'militarily unsound' but the strong 'political arguments' were recognized. These required nothing 'less than a Brigade Group'. Cabinet minutes record that the reason for the decision to send the ground troops to Korea was its 'valuable effect' on American public opinion. Afterwards, Franks wrote enthusiastically from Washington how 'underneath the thoughts and emotions engendered at times by difficulties and disagreements between us and them there is a steady and unquestioning assumption that we are the only dependable ally and partner'.³⁰

The Gulf War

A similar set of pressures can be detected at work in the summer of 1990 following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had been in the United States when the crisis broke and had immediate talks with President Bush. It has been suggested that at this point she injected into the American stance some backbone that would otherwise have been lacking. It seems more likely that the two leaders—of a similar generation and mind-set—reinforced each other's predisposition to take a tough line in the face of blatant aggression. Mrs Thatcher does however appear to have taken the crisis as an opportunity to reassert the 'special'

²⁸ See for example Sir John Slessor's proposal at a meeting of the Chiefs on 17 July. Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War, vol. I, A Distant Obligation* (London, 1990), pp. 100–1. The key advantage of this—in the spirit of limited liability—was that it could be implemented by the American Air Force without requiring a greater British contribution. The problem with this scheme was that the Americans were already actually committed to a land campaign. To suggest that they should adopt an alternative course presumed that they would be driven out of Korea. To push this option would appear, correctly, as a defeatist rationale for British passivity.

²⁹ "Too often in the past we have taken our time to make a decision with the result that often, when we have done what was in line with American ideas, we have got no credit or approval for it: the decision has followed upon and seemed to be extracted from us by the massive discussion, criticism and pressure that has been built up in the United States . . ." Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part*, p. 103. Alex Danchev confirms that for Franks, 'the initial British reaction to any major question is the most important from the American point of view'. Alex Danchev, *Oliver Franks: Founding Father* (Oxford, 1993), p. 125.

³⁰ Farrar Hockley, *The British Part* p. 103. Ra Jong- yil, 'Special Relationship at War: The Anglo-American Relationship during the Korean War', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 7 (September 1984), pp. 309–10.

Anglo-American relationship which had taken a battering with the retirement of Ronald Reagan and the apparent inclination of the Bush Administration to focus on Germany, as the ascendant European power. As France and Germany equivocated, British officials spared little time in pointing out to their American counterparts who their real friends were when it came to the crunch.³¹ Yet again, however, and despite the lack of practical cooperation on the ground, Britain was made aware that ‘out of area’ its principal European ally remained France. Mrs Thatcher remarked in her memoirs: ‘the French were the only European country, apart from ourselves, with the stomach for a fight’.³²

The Persian Gulf was an area in which Britain could claim long connections and expertise. In 1961, British troops had shielded Kuwait against an Iraqi threat to its newly gained independence. Close relations were maintained thereafter and Kuwaiti investments played a significant part in the British economy. Yet despite all of this the initial British inclination was to attempt to limit its liability. Merely eight days before the invasion, Defence Secretary Tom King had announced the outlines of a programme of defence cuts—*Options for Change*—following the end of the Cold War. There was concern in Whitehall that an ‘out of area’ crisis might be used to obstruct these cuts.

So, as with Korea, the first move was maritime—in this case strengthening the existing patrol in the Gulf which had been underway since 1980.³³ The next move, taken as soon as the Prime Minister returned from the United States and initially offered as Britain’s main contribution to the multi-national force gathering to protect Saudi Arabia, was to send aircraft—most notably Tornado F3 air defence fighters and Jaguar ground attack aircraft. These could be presented as being largely defensive in character.

Such a contribution promised the maximum political profile with the minimum of risk, but in practice it was too small to be truly significant. Initially, more aircraft were sent—the GR3 strike version of the Tornado. The more daring nature of this deployment did not generate much excitement. By September it was apparent that ground troops would have to be sent if a serious commitment was to be demonstrated. A range of options was considered. Might the point be made by a token garrison in Bahrain to protect Tornado squadrons? Probably not, as the main signal would be a desire to stay as far away from likely action as possible. Would a lightly armed airborne brigade suffice? Not necessarily as there were already plenty of light forces. What the Americans wanted was more tanks.

The Prime Minister recognized the virtue of responding to a real operational requirement, especially if a substantial military input might achieve a greater influence over the policy output. Even so she was nervous as to a possibly negative public reaction and, as serious, that British tanks might send a signal of quite the wrong sort if they disgraced themselves with constant breakdowns. Engine troubles

³¹ Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict* (London, 1993), pp. 74–6. Also on Britain and the Gulf, see Jolyon Howarth, ‘United Kingdom Defence Policy and the Gulf War’, *Contemporary European Affairs*, vol. 4 (1991); and Louise Fawcett and Robert O’Neill, ‘Britain, the Gulf Crisis and European Security’, in Nicole Gnesotto and John Roper, *Western Europe and the Gulf* (Paris, 1992).

³² *The Downing Street Years*, p. 819.

³³ Now the one frigate in the Gulf, off Dubai, was to be supported by a frigate from Mombasa and another which had been in Malaysia.

were embarrassing enough in exercises in Germany: they would be catastrophic in actual war. It would be pointless to send less than a full armoured brigade. Fortunately the recent collapse of the Warsaw Pact meant that the risk of cannibalizing the tanks left in Germany to ensure that those in the Gulf remained serviceable was acceptable. Mrs Thatcher was reassured. Thus on 14 September it was decided to send the 7th Armoured Brigade.

The next major decision, on 22 November, was to increase further the British land forces to an armoured division, with extra ships and aircraft.³⁴ General Sir Peter de la Billière's account of how this came about is intriguing, especially in the opportunity it provided for him to press for British forces to fight with the VII Army Corps rather than under the US marines. This affair provides a fascinating insight into the interaction of military and political factors and the balance between seeking a degree of autonomy from a generally dominant ally and then using this autonomy to exercise influence over the ally's conduct.³⁵

As it became apparent, in early November 1990, that the United States intended to double its forces the case for British reinforcements was strengthened. Without them 'our own contribution to the Coalition would begin to look very small'. A division, de la Billière observed, 'would both increase our prestige in theatre and give us more influence in the shaping of policy'.³⁶ This argument he put to the Secretary of State for Defence, Tom King, on 10 November. 'To go in with half-hearted measures . . . would do nothing for our national credibility'. However, it should be noted that his concern was not only to enhance British influence with the Americans, but to use this influence to fight 'the war we wanted to fight, and in the way we wanted to fight it'.³⁷

He was worried that a contribution restricted to brigade strength would have a severely restricted freedom of manoeuvre as it would have to fight under an American divisional commander, with whose tactical plan it would have to conform. By contrast, a division would be allowed to work to its own plan in the area allocated to it for its operations.³⁸ For both positive and negative reasons he wanted to move away from the marines. The positive, upon which he chose to make his case with General Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander-in-Chief of American forces, was that the terrain in which the Marines were preparing to fight was full of obstacles

³⁴ The British role is described in Secretary of State for Defence, *Statement on the Defence Estimates: Britain's Defence in the 90s*, vol. 1 (Cmnd 1559-I, July 1991); House of Commons Tenth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1990-91, *Preliminary Lessons of Operation Granby* (August 1991).

³⁵ General Sir Peter de la Billière, *Storm Command: A Personal Account of the Gulf War* (London, 1992).

³⁶ De la Billière, *Storm Command*, pp. 82-3.

³⁷ De la Billière, *Storm Command*, p. 99.

³⁸ De la Billière, who had begun his active service in Korea, refers to an 'unhappy incident in the Korean War when a British brigade had fought under an American command' (*Storm Command*, p. 81). He does not elaborate but he must be referring to the battle of Imjin in April 1951 when 29 Brigade attempted to hold a hopeless position in the face of a massive Chinese offensive. Despite being left isolated and without proper support, they did in fact succeed in slowing the offensive, but at the cost of 1,000 casualties—a quarter of the British front-line strength. Of the 850 men of the Gloucesters only 169 could be mustered after the battle. The bulk had been taken prisoner. Max Hastings has commented how many of those involved with Imjin 'believed that it revealed the fatal disadvantages of committing an independent national brigade group in a major war'. To illustrate the point he cites one officer's observation that when Brigadier Tom Brodie told the largely American Corps headquarters 'that his position was "a bit sticky"', they simply did not grasp that in British Army parlance, that meant "critical"'. Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (London, 1987), pp. 260-1.

and would leave a British armoured division contained and unable to use the sort of far-ranging, fire-and-manoeuve tactics in which they specialized. He was aware that Schwarzkopf was planning a 'left hook' against the Iraqi forces, that is the grand encirclement manoeuvre which would cut off the Iraqi lines of retreat and take on Saddam Hussein's Republican Guards. While this was going on, the job of the marines would be essentially diversionary, to pin down Iraqi forces on the Kuwaiti-Saudi border, where their commanders expected the main coalition attack to develop. De la Billière took the view that the British should be part of the main thrust, and working with the US Army with whom they shared basic NATO procedures. The size of the commitment meant that 'we must at least be given a chance to show what our armour could do in an environment which suited it'.³⁹

There was a less heroic side to this argument. Precisely because the Iraqis were expecting the coalition offensive to originate from the sector occupied by the marines, their own positions were heavily fortified. The 'left hook' promised to take the Iraqis by surprise is a classic example of an 'indirect approach'. Even though they were not expected to progress far, the marines were geared to the direct assault. Moreover, their reputation has gone before them. This was, noted de la Billière, one of 'being exceptionally gung-ho'. Adding to his anxiety was a suspicion that the marines' concern about their own future would lead them to make their case against cuts in the US defence review by attempting to 'win the war against Saddam on their own'.⁴⁰ He noted official casualty estimates of as high as 17 per cent. 'I was damned if I would allow the British, having put so much into the Gulf conflict, to take casualties out of all proportion to their numbers'.

With Tom King, de la Billière pressed the point that reinforcements, by making resubordination possible, could possibly mean *less* casualties. Such thoughts, however, were not shared with General Schwarzkopf. The British Commander did not want to be considered 'chicken' and he considered the positive case for resubordination to VII Army Corps strong enough. His plan was greeted with considerable US hostility. It was only agreed following a demonstration that the British could provide their own logistic support to a division operating independently in the desert. 'I knew I had spent much of my credit forcing through this major decision, but I also knew that the breakthrough was many times worthwhile.'⁴¹

Here again, the British had used the influence gained by making a significant contribution to a multi-national effort to ensure maximum freedom of manoeuvre. De la Billière's concern to avoid unnecessary sacrifice and his preference for an indirect strategy—in the form of the 'left hook'—would have been applauded by Liddell Hart. However, it is worth noting that the campaign fought by the marines was neither as costly nor as marginal as de la Billière feared. Indeed, so weak was the resistance shown by the Iraqi front-line that the marines found themselves moving rapidly towards Kuwait City—so that they reached the outskirts before anyone else and then had to kick their heels waiting for the Arab armies to catch up to play their assigned role of liberating the City.

³⁹ De la Billière, *Storm Command*, p. 93.

⁴⁰ De la Billière, *Storm Command*, p. 93.

⁴¹ De la Billière, *Storm Command*, p. 153.

Conclusions: after the Cold War

What then is the future of the British way in warfare? At stake is not simply a question of the demise of a particular threat but of a whole type of threat, most especially that of the emergence of a domineering power on the European continent. Outside of Europe the Iraqi threat was a recognizable version of this type. Such threats have always required alliance and it was natural that strategic policy was geared to identifying the minimum necessary to make any given alliance work. Now it is not only the typical threat which is unclear, but also the seriousness of individual challenges and by extension the demands that they can be allowed to make on national resources and the identity and interests of potential allies.

In the Gulf War, Britain hit upon a way in warfare which combined prominence with influence at a manageable cost. Its key ally, the United States, assumed the greater part of the burden of the campaign and adapted its own traditional way of warfare to demands to keep casualties to a minimum. The basis for this was a commonality of political purpose and the availability of an indirect strategy which could meet that purpose. Desert Storm could be understood within the same political framework which had helped forge Anglo-American cooperation in dealing with Nazi and Communist threats: a clear case of aggression led by a suitably demonic figure requiring a concerted response from the western democracies.

The British government's instinct for continuity as the cold war concluded, and even before the Gulf War began, had been to seek a grand strategy still geared to this sort of threat and this sort of alliance. As defence became intertwined with the debate about the future of the European Community which led eventually to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty of December 1991, Britain argued strongly against the idea of a European defence entity taking over from NATO and eventually succeeded in watering down the relevant provisions in the Treaty (helped by the unimpressive showing by the Community in dealing with the Yugoslav crisis). During this debate all the traditional British suspicions of the French, generally seen as the most enthusiastic integrationists, came to the fore.

Yet though the debate was conducted in terms of how best to reform Community institutions and the virtues of monetary union, a classic strategic question lurked not far beneath the surface: how to handle German power. In her memoirs, Lady Thatcher records her alarm at the lurch towards German unification in 1989–90 and that 'the last and best hope seemed the creation of a solid Anglo-French political axis which would ensure that at each stage of reunification—and in future economic and political developments—the Germans did not have things all their own way'. President Mitterrand of France was sympathetic yet, as she notes, little came of these discussions because he preferred to stick to his established policy of 'moving faster towards a federal Europe in order to tie down the German giant'.⁴² She records little success with her efforts at the same time to persuade George Bush to think of a new balance of power in Europe. The Americans had marked Germany out as the most effective partner for their future European business.

One conclusion from this experience might have been that balance of power

⁴² *The Downing Street Years*, p. 796.

thinking was now obsolete. However, another was that such thinking was still relevant but that Britain was no longer a significant balancing power. A shift in French foreign policy towards an axis with Britain at the expense of Germany would have seemed a negative move. Building on the established Franco-German partnership, with all its stresses and strains, provided a more positive image and was building on an established relationship.

While others may have shared Britain's concerns about German power, their inclination, including the United States', was to harness this power rather than contain it. Only Britain at that time seemed to be prepared to think in terms of generating a countervailing power, and it could not do this by itself. If Britain tried to do so then it risked discovering that the rest of Europe could manage without it.

If there was still to be a balance of military power, against whom was it to be directed? Here even Mrs Thatcher did not consider Germany problematic. Rather she based her pitch for keeping NATO in good repair on the basis of the residual danger from Russia. The immediate reaction to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe was caution.⁴³ A few months after the conclusion of the Gulf War came the failed Moscow coup of August 1991 and then the break-up of the Soviet Union. By this point it was hard to base a strategy on the risk of a reconstituted Soviet threat to NATO countries, though soon it was less hard to see a threat to former parts of the Soviet empire.

So long as the focus is on Moscow then the United States has to be cultivated as principal ally, an inclination reinforced through traditional ties as well as a congenial political culture. In practice, however, the main security problem in Europe during the early 1990s was not a resurgent Russia but a collapsing Yugoslavia. During the course of this conflict the Americans preferred to stand on the sidelines and were certainly not prepared to risk ground forces. The Germans, for historical and constitutional reasons, remained absent. In the end it was Britain and France, working closely together, which provided the foundation of the UN intervention force in Bosnia. Both countries had become aware of the limits of what they could do without the United States, and the need to work without support from the United States within those limits. This was hardly the basis for a new balance of power within Europe but it did suggest that of the substantial European powers Britain and France could find themselves regularly working closely together. This might not be so much because of a convergence in their ways of warfare but because, alone among their substantial allies, they were the two with some sense that warfare might be necessary at all during Europe's post-communist upheavals.

⁴³ The 1990 *Defence Estimates* warned that the 'defence planner' must keep in mind the 'darker' possibilities; 'he must look to possible mistakes and failures in the political scene, rather than successes'. Political shifts 'can happen—or be reversed—much faster than defence provision can be changed, run down or re-built'. Secretary of State for Defence, *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1990*, vol. 1, Cmnd 1022-I (London, 1990), p. 17. The warning next year was that while the 'Soviet capability to mount a large-scale offensive into central Europe is diminishing' and so no longer put the demands as before on NATO, risks were still faced, though these were 'far less obvious and monolithic':

The Soviet Union remains an unstable military superpower, whose capabilities need to be counter-balanced if stability is to be preserved in Europe. These capabilities still present the most serious, if not the most immediate, threat to Western security.

Secretary of State for Defence, *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1991*, vol. 1, Cmnd 1559-I (London, 1991) p. 31.