

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Global Britain's strategic problem East of Suez

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(Received 6 October 2020; revised 24 November 2020; accepted 1 December 2020; first published online 11 January 2021)

Abstract

Why did Britain withdraw from its military bases in the Arabian Peninsula and Southeast Asia midway through the Cold War? Existing accounts tend to focus on Britain's weak economic position, as well as the domestic political incentives of retrenchment for the ruling Labour Party. This article offers an alternative explanation: the strategic rationale for retaining a permanent presence East of Suez dissolved during the 1960s, as policymakers realised that these military bases were consuming more security than they could generate. These findings have resonance for British officials charting a return East of Suez today under the banner of 'Global Britain'.

Keywords: British Defence Policy; British Foreign Policy; Retrenchment; East of Suez; 'Global Britain'; Grand Strategy

Introduction

Britain's 'East of Suez'¹ role had become an 'embarrassment'. That was the view of military historian Michael Howard in 1966. In an article titled, 'Britain's Strategic Problem East of Suez', he wrote that the United Kingdom's major military bases in the Arabian Peninsula and Southeast Asia, namely Aden and Singapore, had become 'liabilities'.² Many in government shared his thinking. Harold Wilson's Labour administration was quietly preparing to withdraw from these last bastions of empire, having accepted the need for retrenchment the year before. The drawdown, which was announced in phases from February 1966 to January 1968, was largely complete by the close of 1971.³

Almost fifty years on, the British government is re-establishing fixed positions East of Suez under the banner of 'Global Britain'. Two new bases have been opened in the Middle East in recent years with a further installation mooted for the Asia-Pacific. On a visit to Bahrain in 2016, Boris Johnson, then UK Foreign Secretary, declared that 'Britain is back East of Suez'. In his speech, Johnson criticised the original withdrawal, which he claimed was taken out of shortsightedness in January 1968 in the wake of a currency crisis. Wilson, he believes, gave in to financial pressures, as well as Cabinet members, such as Roy Jenkins, who wanted Britain to retreat from East of Suez and join the European Economic Community (EEC). He explained:

¹The phrase, 'East of Suez', dates back to Rudyard Kipling's 1890 poem, *Mandalay*, and was used in the wake of the Second World War by British and American policymakers to describe the UK's military bases in the Arabian Peninsula, Malaysia, and Singapore. These installations were maintained despite Britain shedding most of its colonies in Africa and the Indian subcontinent. See Figure 1 in the appendix for a map depicting the UK's presence East of Suez in 1964 (Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Hong Kong, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, Aden and the Protectorate of South Arabia, as well as the Trucial States).

²Michael Howard, 'Britain's strategic problem East of Suez', *International Affairs*, 42:2 (1966), pp. 179–83.

³The vast majority of British forces were withdrawn from the two key bases at Aden and Singapore by the end of 1967 and 1971 respectively. When the Conservatives were returned to power in 1970, they retained a battalion in Singapore until 1974.

Those were the two adversaries, [Chancellor] Roy Jenkins ... who yearned to take Britain into what was then called the European Common Market ... and [Foreign Secretary] George Brown, and the argument went on in the Cabinet for 7 consecutive meetings ... And what was that argument about? It was about Britain's role in the Gulf, and everywhere East of Suez; and whether the country, my country, could any longer afford it ... George Brown lost; the flag came down; the troops came home, from Borneo, from the Indian Ocean, from Singapore, and yes from the Gulf and we in the UK lost our focus on this part of the world ... I want to acknowledge that this policy of disengagement East of Suez was a mistake and ... we want to reverse that policy.⁴

The current British prime minister therefore believes that the original drawdown was taken rashly and ill-advisedly. This amounts to an erroneous and potentially dangerous reading of events – on two counts. First, the UK never actually left 'East of Suez'. It is necessary to distinguish between the *basing strategy* East of Suez, which largely ended with the retreat from Aden and Singapore during the Cold War, and the *East of Suez presence*, which never truly ceased.⁵ The idea of a unique British *role* East of Suez practically disappeared from the lexicon once the major bases were closed and only resurfaced with the unveiling of the Bahrain naval site in 2014. Britain's oscillating involvement in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific in the interim period was not wrapped up in the language of an East of Suez role. Thus, it is fair to say that 'East of Suez' is synonymous with the basing strategy. The role was largely rooted in substance; the role was Aden and Singapore and these bases were the role.⁶ There was little point in proclaiming a special role for the little that remained afterwards.⁷ In the wake of the drawdown from the key military

⁴Boris Johnson, 'Foreign Secretary Speech: "Britain is Back East of Suez"', Bahrain, 9 December 2016, available at: {<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-speech-britain-is-back-east-of-suez>}.

⁵UK policymakers showed a continued willingness to intervene beyond the Euro-Atlantic region. In the 1970s, the British assisted Sultan Qaboos in quashing a rebellion, having helped bring him to power in a palace coup. In the 1980s, the Royal Navy patrolled the Persian Gulf to protect shipping during the Iran-Iraq War. The UK also committed substantial forces to the First and Second Gulf Wars. Further east, Britain signed the Five Power Defence Arrangements with Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and New Zealand on the eve of its departure in 1971; the UK typically sends a lone warship or a squadron of aircraft to participate in the annual *Bersama Lima* exercises.

⁶David McCourt views the East of Suez role broadly as a 'rhetorical construction'. The issue with this argument is that Britain continued to intervene East of Suez after the retreat from Aden and Singapore. The term 'East of Suez' largely disappeared from the lexicon after the Singapore withdrawal and only re-emerged when the Bahrain base was announced. David M. McCourt, 'What was Britain's "East of Suez Role"? Reassessing the withdrawal, 1964–1968', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 20:3 (2009), p. 458. Where McCourt is on more solid ground is in arguing that the UK maintained a 'residual great power' role conception throughout the Cold War. The East of Suez basing strategy (centred on Aden and Singapore) was just one part of that conception, which was then replaced by a greater emphasis on Britain's conventional and nuclear efforts in NATO. David M. McCourt, *Britain and World Power since 1945: Constructing a Nation's Role in International Politics* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2014), p. 168. David Blagden contends that there is substance behind the rhetoric of a great power 'role', despite the tensions that this repeatedly causes for policymakers over resource trade-offs. The fact that the UK today remains committed to a force posture with two aircraft carriers when one would be sufficient to ensure great power 'status' (the French approach) is testament to that. With regard to this article, Blagden would likely agree that the bases in Singapore and Aden were the principal substance behind the East of Suez role. David Blagden, 'Two visions of greatness: Roleplay and realpolitik in UK strategic posture', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 15:4 (2019), pp. 482–3.

⁷After the withdrawal from the major bases at Aden and Singapore, the British kept a handful of small military installations, where local opposition was either non-existent or not powerful enough to challenge the British presence. A refuelling wharf was preserved in Singapore to resupply transiting ships. To this day, the British Army stations a battalion of Gurkhas in Brunei under a quinquennial agreement with the Sultan. On the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, the British evicted the local population in the late 1960s and constructed a military base, which was then leased to the US. Although nominally under British command, the UK presence there is minimal. In sum, none of these sites were/are on the scale of Singapore or Aden. The slight exception to that was Hong Kong, where the British maintained a modest garrison (fewer than five thousand troops in the mid-1960s) until the handover in 1997. The colony was largely absent from the East of Suez deliberations during the 1960s. Unlike Singapore and Aden, which were designed to be regional hubs for power projection, the Hong Kong garrison's sole purpose was the defence of the colony.

installations, British policymakers placed greater emphasis on their role as a bridge between the United States and Europe, courtesy of their involvement in NATO and later the EEC.⁸

Boris Johnson's analysis that East of Suez ended with Harold Wilson's government is therefore correct if he is referring to the basing strategy (although a less charitable interpretation would be that he conflates the *basing strategy* with *presence*). More importantly, however, he is mistaken on the rationale for retrenchment from Aden and Singapore. This article reviews the historical record and finds that the decision to retreat from East of Suez was not a knee-jerk reaction to some domestic political crisis or because Britain's relative economic decline *compelled* retrenchment. This was a process that took place over several years.

What led policymakers to embrace retrenchment? Britain's fiscal position certainly forms part of the explanation, but it was not deterministic. Despite successive financial storms, the UK could still have maintained bases in the Arabian Peninsula and Southeast Asia within a reduced defence budget. The focus on Britain's economic frailties has led to an omission: the shifting strategic calculus for retaining East of Suez. Britain's poor fiscal health prompted a series of defence reviews. It was through this process that policymakers in Whitehall realised that the East of Suez garrisons were doing more harm than good.

Large military bases in the Arabian Peninsula and Southeast Asia had become strategically vulnerable. They were designed to serve as hubs from which to operate but had instead become targets for local nationalist and communist movements. Far from enhancing agility, the bases became a drag on British resources. Thus, the rationale for preserving East of Suez shifted over the course of the 1960s; the increasing strain placed on British forces outweighed the diminishing benefits that could be accrued from retaining permanent military installations. The choice was made to abandon East of Suez and concentrate on NATO commitments in Europe.

If there were indeed sound, strategic reasons for withdrawing in the first place, is it wise to reverse those decisions? This article will first delve into the archival record and chronologically trace how the thinking on East of Suez evolved during the 1960s. The analysis incorporates defence reviews, diplomacy with key allies, as well as wider political and economic developments that shaped grand strategic thinking. The second section will summarise the argument, before testing it against alternative explanations. The third section contains the most significant contribution: the policy recommendations for British officials who are charting a return East of Suez today.

Revisiting retrenchment: Tracing the decision to withdraw from East of Suez

Harold Wilson entered office in October 1964 to find British forces perilously overstretched. In Europe, the UK was bound by the 1954 Brussels Treaty to maintain four divisions (fifty-five thousand troops) – the British Army on the Rhine (BAOR) – in West Germany. While ministers felt that this figure could be reduced, given that the risk of war with the Soviet Union was low, they assessed that 'our first concern should be Europe'.⁹

In the Persian Gulf, Britain was responsible for the defence of Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the Trucial States (which later became the United Arab Emirates). All were regarded as vulnerable to Soviet influence, as well as predation from aspiring regional hegemony (Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran) because they were resource rich. Kuwait not only provided 40 per cent of Britain's total oil requirements, but the Emir also held £300 million of British pound sterling reserves.¹⁰ These interests were safeguarded by a large military base in the port of Aden (located in modern day Yemen). Not only did it serve as a deterrent against local expansionism, but it was also a stepping-stone to Singapore.

⁸See later subsection, 'East of Suez was sacrificed at the altar of the European Economic Community' and fn. 93 for more detail.

⁹UK National Archives (hereafter UKNA), Kew, CAB 130/213, 'Defence Policy' meeting at Chequers, 21 November 1964.

¹⁰Simon C. Smith, 'Britain's decision to withdraw from the Persian Gulf: A pattern not a puzzle', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 44:2 (2016), p. 332.

In Southeast Asia (or ‘the Far East’ as British officials termed it), the UK had a major base in Singapore, as well as smaller installations dotted across Malaysia and Brunei. British forces were engaged in a ‘low-intensity guerrilla war’, known as the ‘Confrontation’, with Indonesia on behalf of Malaysia in the jungles of Borneo.¹¹ The unification of the British territories of Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak with Malaya in 1963 had prompted Indonesian President Sukarno to undermine the new grouping. The British were obliged to defend the nascent federation under the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement. The ‘Confrontation’ drew in over fifty thousand British and Commonwealth soldiers, as well as one-third of the Royal Navy’s surface fleet.¹²

Even before Wilson entered office, civil servants had started to question the efficacy of Britain’s East of Suez role. Foreign Office mandarins, who could normally be relied upon to resist any proposed cut in commitments, believed that the Singapore base had become a political ‘liability’. They predicted that ‘future Malaysian governments are likely to be more radical than at present and less tolerant of foreign military establishments’. Officials also highlighted the base’s declining utility as a staging point for other military operations in the area (relating to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization or SEATO), now that ‘the bulk of our land forces in the area have their hands too full with the Borneo fighting (or with internal security duties in Singapore itself)’. Finally, they noted that the cost of the Singapore base – £300 million a year (£6.1 billion in today’s money), or 15 per cent of the total defence budget – was wholly disproportionate to the UK’s marginal economic interests (only 3 per cent of Britain’s world trade was done in the region). They noted that ‘other Western nations trade just as successfully with South-East Asia without deploying military strength there’. All of that said, the Foreign Office was against any drawdown while the ‘Confrontation’ was ongoing. Nothing should be done which might jeopardise ‘the global Anglo-American partnership ... that is cardinal to the conduct of our whole foreign policy’.¹³

To begin with, ministers followed their advice. The new team agreed to limit defence expenditure at £2 billion in 1964 prices (£41 billion in today’s money) by 1969–70, instead of letting it rise to £2.4 billion, but they refused to axe any of the UK’s commitments in Europe or East of Suez.¹⁴ With regard to the latter, ministers felt that Britain had a responsibility in Southeast Asia to the United States, Australia, New Zealand and the Malaysian Federation so any grand strategic changes would have to wait until the ‘Confrontation’ had abated. In the interim, defence spending on new capabilities would be cut so that budget did not exceed the new ceiling.¹⁵ Within six months, however, it was clear that such reductions would be insufficient. Only £200 million had been saved; defence spending was still on course to rise to £2.2 billion by 1970.¹⁶

To rectify this, Defence Secretary Denis Healey distributed a paper to the principal forum for British grand strategy, the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (or DOPC, which included Wilson, Healey, Chancellor James Callaghan, Wilson’s deputy George Brown and Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart).¹⁷ Healey explained how the changing character of war was making the bases East of Suez more vulnerable, as ‘relatively poor countries can get sophisticated equipment quickly and cheaply from the great powers’, namely the Soviet Union and China. He proposed a ‘major revision of our Middle East commitments’ and a ‘substantial change in our Far

¹¹Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia, 1961–1965: Britain, the United States, Indonesia and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 235.

¹²William Roger Louis, ‘The dissolution of the British Empire in the era of Vietnam’, *The American Historical Review*, 107:1 (2002), p. 13; John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 290.

¹³UKNA CAB 148/7, ‘British Policy Towards South-East Asia’, Foreign Office memo for DOPC, 22 September 1964.

¹⁴UKNA CAB 130/213, ‘Defence Policy’ meeting at Chequers, 21 November 1964.

¹⁵For example, one of the planned five Polaris submarines was scrapped, as the government judged that a continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent would be achievable with four boats. UKNA CAB 148/18, DOPC meeting, 29 January 1965.

¹⁶UKNA CAB 130/213, Defence Expenditure Review, 8 June 1965.

¹⁷Michael Stewart was appointed Foreign Secretary in January 1965 but was replaced in August 1966 by George Brown, who served until March 1968.

East posture'.¹⁸ With regard to the latter, he believed that Britain should withdraw from Singapore after the 'Confrontation' had concluded and establish a smaller base in Australia (if Canberra was willing to foot the bill). In future, British power in Southeast Asia would be limited to air and naval assets. NATO obligations, meanwhile, were to be spared from any cuts.

The DOPC met at Chequers, where they agreed that the BAOR should be exempt from any reductions. The transatlantic alliance was going through one of its periodic bouts of instability, largely thanks to President Charles de Gaulle, who had withdrawn the French Navy from NATO's Mediterranean command and was threatening further acts of nonconformity. Civil servants assessed that, while the probability of a Soviet assault on Europe was low, a drawdown would 'provoke a major crisis of confidence within the Western alliance'.¹⁹ Ministers agreed that the core should be prioritised above the periphery.²⁰

The DOPC shifted its gaze towards the Arabian Peninsula. Instead of serving as a springboard for operations in the Persian Gulf and the Asia-Pacific, the Aden base had become the target of a nationalist insurgency. With Egyptian (and, by extension, Soviet) support, the National Liberation Front was conducting a campaign of targeted assassinations and bombings to undermine British rule in Aden.²¹ By mid-1965, London had been forced to station five additional battalions in the port in a futile attempt to maintain order.²² The 'presence of British troops', Denis Healey later noted, 'was becoming an irritant rather than a stabilising factor'.²³

Ministers therefore agreed at Chequers to pull out of Aden. They also accepted that this would eventually lead to a broader retreat from the Persian Gulf. 'The influence of Arab nationalism', they noted, 'was bound to extend in the area and pressures against our presence would increase'.²⁴ Wilson's deputy, George Brown, argued that 'we should not seek to duplicate such military facilities in the Persian Gulf [after the withdrawal from Aden], where there was some reason to believe that our military presence was of doubtful advantage to our oil interests and might indeed on the contrary be a disruptive influence'.²⁵ Within nine months of taking office, the DOPC had approved the withdrawal from the biggest military base in the Middle East, as well as a further drawdown in the long run. Their reasoning was based on the declining utility of hard power to protect economic interests in the face of Arab nationalism.

What of Britain's commitments further east? Unilateral withdrawal from Southeast Asia was seen as unpalatable while the 'Confrontation' was still ongoing. That did not, however, stop ministers from planning for the aftermath. They agreed that, 'once confrontation ended it was likely that we should have to withdraw from Singapore'. Even if Malaysia's Tunku Abdul Rahman or Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew 'wished us to remain they would probably be unable to resist popular pressure for our withdrawal'. Looking to the 1970s, the DOPC foresaw a world in which 'bases like Aden and Singapore with large static garrisons would have been eliminated'.²⁶ It is significant that, contrary to Boris Johnson's interpretation, Wilson's government embraced radical changes to Britain's East of Suez commitments as early as June 1965.

¹⁸UKNA CAB 130/213, Denis Healey, 'The Defence Review: A Personal Note', 11 June 1965.

¹⁹UKNA CAB 148/52, Defence Review Working Party memo for DOPC, 'Reduction by Half of British Forces in Germany', 3 May 1965.

²⁰Instead of reducing the BAOR's size, ministers sought to tinker with the financing of the commitment. They entered into prolonged negotiations with the West German government to reduce Britain's balance of payments deficit. See Geraint Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War: The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964–1970* (Woodbridge: Boydell/Royal Historical Society, 2009), pp. 100–05.

²¹Aaron Edwards, *Defending the Realm? The Politics of Britain's Small Wars since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 161.

²²UKNA CAB 148/18, DOPC meeting, 5 August 1965.

²³Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 280.

²⁴UKNA CAB 130/213, MISC 17/6th meeting, 13 June 1965.

²⁵UKNA CAB 130/213, MISC 17/7th meeting, 13 June 1965.

²⁶UKNA CAB 130/213, MISC 17/6th meeting, 13 June 1965.

In August 1965, Singapore was ejected from the Malaysian Federation, a development that accelerated this thinking. Ministers judged that it would be ‘undesirable and dangerous not to accept that recent developments have significantly shortened the prospects of our being able to stay in Singapore’.²⁷ Officials also noted the growing strength of the Socialist Front (Barisan Sosialis), which might undermine the support of local civilian labour, without which the base could not function.²⁸ Ministers agreed to consult their allies over possible peace talks with Indonesia in order to bring the ‘Confrontation’ to an end as soon as possible. If this could be achieved, Britain could then withdraw from Singapore to northern Australia.

The following month, diplomats from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States made clear to their British counterparts that they were opposed to any drawdown from Southeast Asia in the foreseeable future.²⁹ For Australia and New Zealand, Britain’s base in Singapore provided their forward defence. The US, meanwhile, was busy entangling itself in Vietnam; the Johnson administration wanted the British to remain East of Suez as they were reluctant for practical and domestic political reasons to become the world’s sole police officer.³⁰ The Americans had some tangible leverage over the British, as the US Treasury was supporting the pound.³¹

Despite these objections, policymakers in London continued to quietly plot a course of limited retrenchment. ‘Whatever our allies now say’, Foreign Office mandarins noted, ‘Singapore may have proved untenable by 1970’.³² The month after allied talks, Defence Secretary Denis Healey told Wilson ‘that it would be right to give up the bases in the Middle East and to be ready to move from Singapore to Darwin’ when the ‘Confrontation’ concluded.³³ Healey’s advice clearly shaped the prime minister’s thinking. Wilson told the Americans later that year that the British ‘could not expect to hold Singapore indefinitely’, given that the island had fallen prey to ‘Chinese political penetration’.³⁴

The prime minister’s message was not well received in Washington; Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara warned Wilson that continued US involvement in NATO could not be assured if the American public came to suspect that allies such as

²⁷UKNA CAB 148/22, DOPC, ‘Repercussions on British policy in Southeast Asia of the Secession of Singapore from Malaya’, 25 August 1965.

²⁸UKNA CAB 130/239, MISC 76/1st meeting, 15 August 1965.

²⁹UKNA FO 371/181529, ‘Singapore/Malaysia Quadripartite Talks’, 8 September 1965.

³⁰US Secretary of State Dean Rusk had earlier warned Denis Healey that ‘at heart, the American people are isolationists’ and would favour retrenchment from Europe if allies like Britain refused to share the burden globally. *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1964–1968, Volume XII: Western Europe, 236. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 7 December 1964.

³¹Clive Ponting suspects that Wilson struck a deal in which the Americans provided financial support for the pound (to stave off devaluation) in exchange for the British remaining East of Suez. See Clive Ponting, *Breach of Promise: Labour in Power* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 54. The reality is that the Americans had a strong interest in the British currency’s stability. Treasury Secretary Henry Fowler advised President Johnson that the ‘devaluation of sterling ... would have disastrous consequences for the dollar’. See *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Volume XII: Western Europe, Memorandum from Secretary of the Treasury Fowler to President Johnson, Washington, 18 July 1966. While Washington wanted London to retain its commitments East of Suez, its support for the pound had more to do with the health of the dollar. Given how much the Johnson administration was spending at home (the ‘Great Society’ programme) and abroad (Vietnam) without raising taxes, the dollar was in a precarious position; the US Treasury feared that it would be the next target for speculators. Ponting’s theory has been debunked by many historians. See Steven G. Galpern, *Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2013), p. 272; Saki Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 220; John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 67–9; John W. Young, *The Labour Governments 1964–70, Vol. II: International Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 41.

³²UKNA CAB 148/44, Foreign Office paper for DOPC: ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’, 20 October 1965.

³³UKNA PREM 13/215, Meeting between Harold Wilson and Denis Healey, 8 October 1965.

³⁴UKNA PREM 13/686, Meeting between Harold Wilson, Robert McNamara, George Ball, and McGeorge Bundy, 17 December 1965.

Britain were retreating from their shared responsibilities elsewhere.³⁵ Disregarding these concerns, the Labour government pressed on with changes that would ultimately limit the UK's ability to operate East of Suez. The previous Conservative administration had shirked the decision over whether to order a new aircraft carrier, the CVA01, as a replacement for the *Ark Royal*. Healey, who was 'inclined towards the RAF', preferred the American F-111 bomber.³⁶ He believed that this long-range aircraft could provide a general capability for the British to intervene East of Suez at a lower premium than the aircraft carrier project.

In addition to the predicted cost of the CVA01, Healey reasoned that the only area where it could be used was East of Suez, but this was the government's first target for reductions once the 'Confrontation' was over.³⁷ The other DOPC ministers agreed that they 'would not be justified in planning for a large independent capability in the Far East into the 1980s'.³⁸ Given that aircraft carriers were regarded as 'the symbol of British power East of Suez',³⁹ this episode therefore sheds light on the government's thinking with regard to East of Suez in the long term.⁴⁰

The aircraft carrier debate fed into the wider Defence Review of 1966, which prompted the Navy Minister, Christopher Mayhew, to resign on the grounds that: 'you cannot have East of Suez without sea-borne airpower'.⁴¹ Not being privy to the DOPC discussions, Mayhew was unaware that ministers had accepted a broader withdrawal from East of Suez once conditions were more favourable.

The government's thinking had evolved substantially since taking office. A close reading of the Defence Review suggests that significant changes were afoot. It stated that the Singapore base would only be retained 'as long as the Governments of Malaysia and Singapore agree that we should do so *on acceptable conditions*'. It also mentioned that a smaller, replacement base in Australia was already under discussion.⁴² The review therefore hinted at the DOPC's plan to move from Southeast Asia to northern Australia after the 'Confrontation'. Healey went further in the House of Commons, warning that Britain would 'go home' if this new facility near Darwin was not available in the event of a UK withdrawal from Southeast Asia.⁴³

The government also used the Defence Review to announce the withdrawal from Aden.⁴⁴ The nationalist fires being stoked by Gamal Abdel Nasser were out of control. The rationale for military bases was evolving in Whitehall. Denis Healey told MPs that, 'to seek to maintain military facilities in an independent country against its will can mean tying down so many troops in protecting one's base that one has none left to use from it. The base then becomes a heavy commitment in itself and loses all its military value'.⁴⁵ The Aden withdrawal, combined with the evolving

³⁵FRUS, 1964–8, Volume XII: Western Europe, Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 27 January 1966.

³⁶Edward Hampshire, *From East of Suez to the Eastern Atlantic: British Naval Policy, 1964–70* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 229.

³⁷UKNA CAB 148/25, DOPC meeting, 19 January 1966.

³⁸UKNA CAB 148/25, DOPC meeting, 22 January 1966.

³⁹Phillip Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez, 1947–1968* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 298.

⁴⁰Despite the decision not to build a large aircraft carrier (the CVA01 would have been almost fifty-five thousand tonnes), the UK did not experience a 'carrier gap'. In 1970, three 'through-deck cruisers' (essentially mini-carriers at 20,000 tonnes each) were ordered to replace the ageing Centaur- and Audacious-class ships. The 1970 decision does not detract from the fact that in 1966 ministers judged that carriers would not be necessary, given that the UK would have scaled back its commitments East of Suez by the early 1980s.

⁴¹Christopher Mayhew, 'Witness seminar: The East of Suez decision', ed. Peter Catterall, *Contemporary Record*, 7:3 (1993), p. 626.

⁴²HM Government, *The Defence Review* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1966), p. 8, emphasis added.

⁴³Denis Healey, House of Commons, 22 February 1966, available at: {<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1966/feb/22/defence-review>}.

⁴⁴HM Government, *The Defence Review*, p. 8.

⁴⁵Denis Healey, House of Commons, 7 March 1966, available at: {<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1966/mar/07/defence>}.

language on Southeast Asia, as well as the CVA01 decision, signalled that Britain's days East of Suez were numbered.

In August 1966, the British government received some welcome news as the 'Confrontation' came to an abrupt end; President Sukarno was displaced in a military coup led by General Suharto. Despite this 'good fortune', the British government's balance sheet made for grim reading.⁴⁶ The previous month, Britain had endured a significant currency crisis. The government staved off devaluation, but the rescue package to stabilise the pound diverted money away from other departments. Thus, in October 1966, the Chancellor called for a tighter cap on defence spending: £1.85 billion by 1970/71.

Despite his resentment at having to take the knife to the defence budget once again, Healey proposed the idea of equal cuts in Europe, the Persian Gulf, and Southeast Asia.⁴⁷ This 'strategy based on penny-packages' (that is, a limited deployment such as a frigate or a battalion to honour an alliance commitment) would, he claimed, enable Britain to meet its alliance obligations but at a reduced cost.⁴⁸ For East of Suez sceptic and the newest member of the DOPC, Richard Crossman, the Defence Secretary's proposal meant leaving 'token forces ... quite unable to fulfil any of the precise obligations' to allies in the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia.⁴⁹

Sending a lone warship would be of little use to an imperilled ally. In such a scenario, British forces would likely find themselves dragged into a regional conflict in which they would be hopelessly outnumbered. Why did Healey propose such a plan, having previously accepted the need to retrench? At heart, he remained committed to the alliances with Australia, New Zealand and the US. He hoped to maintain a shell of the East of Suez presence (that is, without any significant military bases).

Healey's suggestion was given short shrift. The prime minister and the chancellor, James Callaghan, were opposed to a general reduction in capabilities while commitments were maintained. It made little sense, given that officials had already established: (a) the declining efficacy of hard power East of Suez; and (b) that any cuts in Europe would undermine NATO. More stringent measures East of Suez would be required. Accordingly, ministers commissioned a study on the likely impact of a total withdrawal from Southeast Asia.⁵⁰

Three months later, Healey submitted his revised plans to the DOPC. By 1970/71, the UK would have removed all British land forces from Southeast Asia; naval and air support would continue until 1975/76.⁵¹ The decision to ultimately leave Singapore had been reached in 1965, but a date had now been agreed. In future, Britain would adopt a 'peripheral strategy', bolstered by 'a minimum military presence' (naval and air assets) in northern Australia.⁵²

The Australia base was more of an aspiration than a firm commitment. Wilson agreed with Healey that Britain had a duty to Canberra and Wellington, as they had previously 'joined with us in resisting aggression'. Then again, he mused, 'it was not essential that we should have forces stationed in Australia, any more than Australia and New Zealand had forces stationed in this country in 1914 or 1939'.⁵³ Even some of Healey's staff later confessed that the whole idea was 'crazy', given that Canberra had never shown much enthusiasm for it.⁵⁴

⁴⁶Denis Healey, House of Commons, 27 February 1967, available at: {<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1967/feb/27/defence>}.

⁴⁷UKNA CAB 130/301, MISC 129/1st meeting, 22 October 1966.

⁴⁸Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Volume II* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), 9 December 1966 entry, p. 156.

⁴⁹Ibid., 22 October 1966 entry, p. 86.

⁵⁰UKNA CAB 148/25, DOPC meeting, 9 December 1966.

⁵¹UKNA PREM 13/13/1384, Ministry of Defence note to DOPC, 21 March 1967.

⁵²UKNA CAB 148/30, DOPC meeting, 22 March 1967; UKNA CAB 148/32, DOPC, 'Political/Military and Economic Implications of Far East Force Reductions', 11 April 1967.

⁵³UKNA CAB 148/30, DOPC meeting, 22 March 1967.

⁵⁴Patrick Nairne, 'Witness seminar: The East of Suez decision', p. 626.

In July, the wider Cabinet officially signed off on Healey's drawdown plans and the peripheral strategy after he toned down the language of 'minimum military presence' to 'capability for use' (the F-111 aircraft), thereby implying that British forces would not be *permanently* stationed in the region. Finally, the withdrawal announcement was also blurred to the 'middle 1970s'⁵⁵ to placate Britain's allies, who were chiefly troubled about the effect of a public announcement on regional stability.⁵⁶

It should be noted that the government did not include the Persian Gulf when the drawdown plans were unveiled in July 1967. It would, however, be wrong to read too much into this. By this stage, the DOPC was unconvinced that military bases helped to guarantee the safe passage of oil. The Six-Day War of June 1967 provided further proof of their declining utility. Supposed allies such as Kuwait placed an embargo on oil supplies to Western powers, including the UK, for their ties to Israel. Ministers noted that 'the recent Middle East crisis had demonstrated the inability of our forces overseas to play any worthwhile role in a critical situation'.⁵⁷ The Six-Day War therefore indirectly confirmed the futility of a basing strategy in securing influence with local regimes.

Some ministers were intent on declaring 'intentions in respect to our future position in the Middle East in terms comparable to those which were envisaged in respect of the Far East'. The majority, however, judged that 'present circumstances in the Middle East' meant 'it would be imprudent and contrary to our interests to make any statement in this regard at the present time'.⁵⁸ Thus, despite the Persian Gulf not being included in the Southeast Asia withdrawal announcement, 'both regions were set on the same trajectory by July 1967'.⁵⁹ The result was certainly enough to satisfy East of Suez sceptics in the wider Cabinet; Transport Secretary Barbara Castle triumphantly declared in her diary that 'East of Suez is dead'.⁶⁰

Britain publicly embraced retrenchment from East of Suez on 18 July 1967 when Healey unveiled the government's drawdown plans to the House of Commons. The timetable was brought forward six months later. In November, the government devalued the pound from \$2.80 to \$2.40 after another financial crisis. Chancellor James Callaghan resigned (having staked his job on avoiding devaluation) and was replaced by the pro-European Roy Jenkins. The new chancellor insisted on further cuts in public spending to support the pound at its new level.

In January 1968, the Cabinet convened to decide on the requisite medicine. Jenkins identified large savings from the education and healthcare budgets. It would, however, be political suicide for a Labour chancellor to reduce social spending in isolation. To sweeten the pill, Jenkins targeted the defence budget; he proposed to shelve an order of fifty F-111 aircraft from the United States and to shift the East of Suez withdrawal *date* from the mid-1970s to March 1971.⁶¹

It is important to appreciate that the heated Cabinet debates that followed (and which Boris Johnson focused on in his Bahrain speech) were over the timing of drawdown and not over whether to retrench. The latter had already been accepted. Foreign Secretary George Brown underscored that 'it would be wrong to suppose that any new major change of policy was now in question ... the issue was now whether our withdrawal should be accelerated'.⁶² He was, however, concerned that a hastened retreat would jeopardise the UK's alliances in Southeast Asia. Similarly, Healey was irate about the cancellation of the F-111 contract, as it was regarded as a means of providing a 'capability for use' East of Suez (that is, in the event that Australia and

⁵⁵HM Government, *Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1967), pp. 5–6.

⁵⁶For example, the US Defense Secretary thought that 'it would be disastrous for HMG to say anything in public about plans to withdraw completely from the Far East in the longer term'. UKNA PREM 13/1455, Meeting between Denis Healey and Robert McNamara, 9 May 1967.

⁵⁷UKNA CAB 148/30, DOPC meeting, 26 June 1967; UKNA CAB 128/42, Cabinet meeting, 6 July 1967.

⁵⁸UKNA CAB 148/30, DOPC meeting, 3 July 1967.

⁵⁹Smith, 'A pattern not a puzzle', p. 340.

⁶⁰Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries, 1964–70* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), 27 July 1967 entry, p. 285.

⁶¹UKNA CAB 129/135/5, 'Public Expenditure: Post-Devaluation Measures', 3 January 1968.

⁶²UKNA CAB 128/43/1, Cabinet meeting, 4 January 1968.

New Zealand required assistance). Both men had carefully managed expectations with Britain's allies throughout 1967, but the UK was now clearly scuttling on its commitments. A reasonably methodical process of retrenchment was morphing into a disorderly rout.

What was particularly galling for Healey and Brown was that the savings that could be realised from defence were marginal; Jenkins was only insisting on them as political insurance for unpopular cuts to social spending. Indeed, the costs of maintaining Britain's military bases East of Suez for another few years were largely irrelevant. On hearing of Britain's intention to leave, the rulers of Qatar and Abu Dhabi offered to cover the £25 million cost of stationing British forces in the region.⁶³ London was uninterested in these proposals; the rationale for stationing troops in the Persian Gulf had diminished. Ministers noted that the garrisons were ineffective as they 'could not defend our oil supplies'. Any blowback would be limited as 'the oil producing states needed us as customers for their oil'.⁶⁴

Healey and Brown stubbornly resisted changes to the withdrawal timetable and the cancellation of the F-111 contract, but they were outvoted in Cabinet. Wilson, who had become 'desperately worried about the survival of the government and of his premiership' in the wake of devaluation, signed off on Jenkins's proposals.⁶⁵ On 16 January 1968, the prime minister told the House of Commons that 'our commitments, and the capacities of our forces to undertake them, should match and balance each other'. Britain would therefore be withdrawing from East of Suez as its 'security lies fundamentally in Europe and must be based on the North Atlantic Alliance'.⁶⁶

Reconsidering retrenchment: the causes of Britain's retreat from East of Suez

This article has shown that key members of the Labour government questioned the efficacy of Britain's two major installations East of Suez – Aden and Singapore – as early as 1965 (that is, over two years before the January 1968 deliberations). The DOPC were unable to publicise this shift in strategic thinking, as Britain was duty-bound to assist the fledgling Malaysian Federation in its 'Confrontation' with Indonesia. Ministers deemed it necessary to honour the UK's alliances in the Asia-Pacific. The announcement was made in stages with Aden in February 1966 and Singapore in July 1967. The timetable for retrenchment was ultimately accelerated in January 1968 due to the political fallout from devaluation.

This chronological correction is important because it sheds light on the underlying motives for the withdrawal. Retrenchment was not a rash mistake as Boris Johnson claims. Officials had been evaluating global commitments for years as part of a deliberative effort to find savings in the defence budget. In the act of appraising Britain's global commitments, officials came to realise that permanent military installations in unstable regions were less a strategic asset and more a security vulnerability.

In the Middle East, the base at Aden was designed for power projection, but its efficacy declined after it was targeted by Arab nationalist movements. British officials feared that the Nasserist-sponsored violence would spread to Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the Trucial States. When the treaties with the protectorates in the Gulf were first signed, the costs were minimal as Britain could impose its will through the gunboat. The situation was much less favourable by the 1960s, as local nationalist movements were empowered by the wave of decolonisation and able to access cheap technology from great power patrons. British policymakers assessed

⁶³Denis Healey, House of Commons, 9 November 1966, available at: {<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1966/nov/09/persian-gulf-theatre-costs>}; UKNA PREM 13/2209, Telegram (34): 'Bahrain to Foreign Office', 10 January 1968.

⁶⁴UKNA CAB 128/43/1, Cabinet meeting, 4 January 1968.

⁶⁵Roy Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 217.

⁶⁶Harold Wilson, House of Commons, 16 January 1968, available at: {https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1968/jan/16/public-expenditure#S5CV0756P0_19680116_HOC_3}.

that the blood and treasure required to maintain order was disproportionate to the benefits accrued from the basing strategy.

The Six-Day War and the oil embargo demonstrated the limits of the UK's influence over Arab elites. George Brown was critical of 'the Kuwaitis [who] feel free to discriminate against British interests while we remain committed to their defence'.⁶⁷ Moreover, while many local rulers wanted to retain UK forces (and some even offered to pay for their upkeep) as a security guarantee, the British doubted whether their views were shared by the wider population. The political agent in Bahrain later noted that, had it not been for Egypt's defeat in the Six-Day War, 'we might well have had an Aden situation in the Gulf'.⁶⁸ The same assessment was made for Southeast Asia. While Lee Kuan Yew may have wanted the British to remain, London regarded that option as impractical, given the presence of Chinese-backed political movements in Singapore.

Having summarised the findings, it is now worth examining how this article's interpretation relates to existing explanations for retrenchment.

The East of Suez withdrawal was the inevitable result of Britain's economic decline

The argument that financial pressures *compelled* retrenchment merits consideration. After all, reminders of the country's poor economic health pervade memoirs and the archival record. The prime minister's private secretary later reflected that, 'one cannot understand the Wilson government's conduct of its foreign policy without constantly remembering that it had to be done under a permanent economic thundercloud'.⁶⁹ Looking at Table 1, one might easily conclude that there is a clear correlation between Britain's economic decline and its ability to fund its armed forces.

Table 1. British defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP, 1964–70.⁷⁰

1964/65	1965/66	1966/67	1967/68	1968/69	1969/70
5.9	5.8	5.6	5.6	5.3	4.9

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the first verdict to emerge was one of *economic determinism*. In 1973, Phillip Darby assessed that 'ultimately lack of resources rather than intellectual rejection ensured its abandonment'.⁷¹ Michael Dockrill agreed that the withdrawal is 'the one clear case where economic circumstances forced Britain into a sudden change of course'.⁷²

This argument underrates the agency of the Labour government. Imposing a £2 billion ceiling on the defence budget was a political choice, not a necessity.⁷³ Had the Conservatives won the 1964 election, they would likely have let spending rise to £2.4 billion by the end of the decade. The Labour Party was elected on a mandate to increase spending on social services. This raises a further question: did Harold Wilson's administration jeopardise Britain's security interests for the sake of better health care?

US Secretary of State Dean Rusk certainly thought so; he 'could not believe that free aspirins and false teeth were more important than Britain's role in the world'.⁷⁴ Yet the reality is more

⁶⁷UKNA DEFE 11/548, 'Kuwait Commitment', 14 August 1967.

⁶⁸Anthony Parsons, 'Gulf withdrawal', *Contemporary Record*, 2:2 (1988), p. 43.

⁶⁹Michael Palliser, *Looking Back: The Wilson Years, 1964–1970* (Pau: University of Pau, 1999), p. 23.

⁷⁰Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 'Military Expenditure Database', available at: {<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>}.

⁷¹Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez*, p. 334.

⁷²Michael Dockrill, *British Defence since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 126–7.

⁷³Edward Longinotti, 'Britain's withdrawal from East of Suez: From economic determinism to political choice', *Contemporary British History*, 29:3 (2015), p. 322.

⁷⁴UKNA PREM 13/2081, Meeting between George Brown and Dean Rusk, 11 January 1968.

complicated. It is true that Labour wanted to invest more at home, but this was not the sole reason for the budget ceiling. British policymakers were concerned that they were spending a disproportionate amount on defence compared to their European neighbours. When Wilson took office, West Germany was spending 4.3 per cent of GDP on defence, compared to Britain's 5.8 per cent.⁷⁵ As such, when the British public were suffering from the effects of deflationary measures in the mid-to-late 1960s, 'it was inevitable that the Labour Government should have felt it essential only to spend resources on defence which were commensurate with the size of British economy, and not to continue to take on burdensome defence commitments which neither Germany nor France were prepared to support'.⁷⁶ Moreover, many of Britain's European neighbours were able to trade successfully East of Suez without having fixed military bases in either the Middle East or the Asia-Pacific.

Irrespective of the motives for the defence cap, its imposition did not automatically spell the end for East of Suez. The budget ceiling forced ministers to make a choice and they opted to ring-fence the BAOR and nuclear deterrent budgets at the expense of East of Suez commitments. As George Peden notes, 'there were, in theory, other options: the nuclear deterrent might have been abandoned or NATO commitments might have been cut'.⁷⁷ Both were protected as European security was prioritised in the grand strategic trade-off.⁷⁸ As Foreign Secretary George Brown explained: "the one thing that would make no sense at all would be to keep troops at the furthest and most expensive end of the line and not defend our own front door in Europe. Our troops are on the mainland of Europe as an essential part of the defence of this country."⁷⁹

This *economic determinism* argument also overlooks the fact that the Gulf monarchs were prepared to cover British expenses to remain. If it were just a matter of making ends meet, London would have surely accepted this offer. Moreover, British policymakers knew that they might be hit with financial penalties for abandoning East of Suez; lucrative defence contracts in the Middle East were lost because of the scuttle.⁸⁰ In short, retrenchment, particularly from the Persian Gulf, could hardly be seen as a silver bullet to Britain's financial woes.

The reasons for the drawdown run much deeper than a story of economic decline. This article has refined the economic argument away from its deterministic origins. Britain's poor fiscal health led policymakers to appraise Britain's global defence obligations. The process of reviewing these commitments exposed the flaws of a basing strategy. Military installations in volatile regions were increasingly seen as an excessive liability.

The East of Suez withdrawal was the result of domestic politics

This article also contrasts with the work of Jeffrey Pickering, David Reynolds, Gill Bennett, and John Darwin (hereafter the devaluation school) who highlight the importance of domestic politics on the withdrawal process. Devaluation upset the political balance of power in Cabinet as the chancellor, James Callaghan, was replaced by ardent Europeanist, Roy Jenkins. The crisis

⁷⁵SIPRI, 'Military Expenditure Database'.

⁷⁶Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 218.

⁷⁷G. C. Peden, *Arms, Economics and British Strategy: From Dreadnoughts to Hydrogen Bombs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 332.

⁷⁸This aligns with Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory. States adjust resources to balance against more powerful, proximate, and hostile states. While British policymakers did not think a Soviet attack on Western Europe was imminent, the continent's security was equated with Britain's security. No reductions could be made which might undermine the NATO alliance and, by extension, Britain's core interests. Second-order interests in the periphery, which were becoming more expensive in blood and treasure, would have to be sacrificed. Stephen M. Walt, *The Origin of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

⁷⁹George Brown, House of Commons, 28 February 1967, available at: {<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1967/feb/28/defence>}.

⁸⁰King Faisal of Saudi Arabia punished Britain for causing regional instability by revoking a £40 million armoured car contract, awarding it instead to the French. Tore T. Petersen, *The Decline of the Anglo-American Middle East, 1961-1969: A Willing Retreat* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), p. 73.

also weakened Harold Wilson, who gave Jenkins the authority to proceed with cuts to East of Suez.⁸¹ The devaluation school appears to have influenced Boris Johnson, given that he placed such emphasis on the January 1968 Cabinet meetings in his Bahrain speech.

Other historians have pushed back against the devaluation school and shown that the decision to retrench was reached long before January 1968; by that stage, the debate was over *when*, not *whether*, to withdraw. Matthew Jones believes that the ‘rubicon of a pullout’ was crossed in 1966.⁸² Saki Dockrill places great emphasis on the July 1967 Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy.⁸³

While a number of scholars agree with Dockrill and Jones that the East of Suez withdrawal was a process that took place over years, they differ over the cause of retrenchment. Tore Petersen, for example, argues that ‘Wilson and the Labourites were intent, all along, on ending Britain’s overseas commitments for reasons of ideology’, namely anti-imperialism.⁸⁴ This paints the Labour Party with too broad a brush. To be sure, figures such as Richard Crossman and Tony Benn were opposed to any East of Suez commitments but this was not true of Wilson, Healey, Callaghan, and Brown, who held sway on the DOPC. If the latter group were so ideologically minded, then why did they not implement retrenchment in 1964? Why did they continue the ‘Confrontation’ and honour Britain’s obligations to Australia and New Zealand, which were a legacy of imperial ties? Petersen’s argument is also difficult to reconcile with Healey’s pursuit of an Australia base.

Petersen contends that Nasser’s defeat in the Six-Day War ‘provided Britain with a golden opportunity’ to rectify the situation in Aden, but ‘the local scene was of little concern to Labour’.⁸⁵ This overlooks the security situation in the port, which deteriorated substantially in early 1967. The British had to send an extra battalion to cover their retreat. *The New York Times* was even likening the situation to Vietnam.⁸⁶ The troubles in Aden underscored the rationale for broader retrenchment. Such bases were now not only more expensive to maintain, but they also no longer fulfilled their strategic promise.

In contrast to Petersen, P. L. Pham believes that the DOPC was committed to East of Suez and only withdrew because of pressure from unruly Labour MPs. In the words of one rebel, ‘there were all sorts of right-left arguments within the party. The Europeans had a funny alliance with the extreme left. The extreme left were against imperialism, of course, and were against East of Suez. The Europeans were in favour of concentrating our efforts on Europe.’⁸⁷ Pham sees a clear link between the Parliamentary Labour Party’s growing restlessness and the government’s decision to publish a Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy in July 1967. Several weeks before Healey presented his revised proposals to the DOPC, over sixty malcontent backbenchers abstained on a defence vote. Pham, who only concentrates on Southeast Asia and not the bases in the Arabian Peninsula, believes this was ‘the great turning point’ and notes that Healey’s subsequent withdrawal timetable from East of Suez was ‘put together so hurriedly that the Cabinet Office and Foreign Offices had little notice of them, and no time to properly judge their effects’.⁸⁸

⁸¹Jeffrey Pickering, ‘Politics and “Black Tuesday”: Shifting power in the Cabinet and the decision to withdraw from East of Suez, November 1967–January 1968’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 13:2 (2002), pp. 144–170; David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1991), p. 230; Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, pp. 297–8; and Gill Bennett, *Six Moments of Crisis: Inside British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 95–121.

⁸²Matthew Jones, ‘A decision delayed: Britain’s withdrawal from South East Asia reconsidered, 1961–68’, *English Historical Review*, 117:472 (2002), p. 594.

⁸³Dockrill, *Britain’s Retreat from East of Suez*, pp. 194–5.

⁸⁴Petersen, *The Decline of the Anglo-American Middle East*, p. 2.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁸⁶Hendrick Smith, ‘Aden is a “Little Vietnam” for Britain’, *The New York Times* (23 July 1967).

⁸⁷Mayhew, ‘Witness seminar: The East of Suez decision’, p. 635.

⁸⁸P. L. Pham, *Ending ‘East of Suez’: The British Decision to Withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore, 1964–1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 147, 196.

As this article has demonstrated, ministers had been considering the retreat from Singapore since the summer of 1965. The DOPC had already accepted the need to retrench, even if they had not conveyed so to the parliamentary party. The defence rebellion of February 1967 might have 'surprised' Wilson, but it did not change anything that was set in motion.⁸⁹ Ministers had already agreed to undertake another review of defence policy in late 1966 (months before the backbench MPs abstained), which included the possibility of a total withdrawal from Southeast Asia.

East of Suez was sacrificed at the altar of the European Economic Community

Throughout the 1960s, a cross-party consensus (at least among the Conservative and Labour leaderships) emerged that Britain should join the EEC. The Macmillan government applied for entry in 1961, only for Charles de Gaulle to veto the bid. In 1967, Harold Wilson announced that Britain would reapply. Some scholars believe the timing of Britain's approach to Europe and its retrenchment from East of Suez are not coincidental. Saki Dockrill, for example, believes 'Europe played a major role in determining Britain's decision on East of Suez.'⁹⁰ The logic runs that Britain had to retrench from East of Suez to prove its European credentials to the French president.

Dockrill is right that Europe was a key factor, but this did not relate to the EEC. Rather, it was NATO commitments that the British cared about. In April 1967, Foreign Secretary George Brown told Dean Rusk that 'there was absolutely no connection whatsoever between the timing of the [withdrawal] proposals ... and the timing of any renewed British approach to Europe'.⁹¹ He had little reason to lie, given that the Americans wanted the British to join the EEC.

The closest that officials came towards acknowledging the link between the two was in 1964, when Foreign Office mandarins noted that, 'as long as Britain wants eventually to join the European Economic Community, she must maintain a posture of active interest in Europe. To some extent this will be judged by the level of our military commitment on the mainland of Europe'.⁹² British grand strategy was not reoriented on the basis that Charles de Gaulle *might* retract his veto. Moreover, a significant contingent of the Labour Party was hostile towards British membership of the EEC. Indeed, leading Cabinet members and East of Suez critics, such as Tony Benn, Barbara Castle, and Richard Crossman, could hardly be described as enthusiasts of the EEC bid.

In summary, the direct links between the abandonment of East of Suez and the EEC bid are tenuous. It is, however, fair to argue that, once retrenchment from Aden and Singapore was complete, the UK's role was recast to emphasise its European credentials through its involvement in both NATO and the EEC. This was seen as essential to maintaining relevance in Washington. Having dismantled its military bases, the resources could be repurposed to strengthen Britain's role as a bridge between the United States and Europe.⁹³

The argument presented here – that the strategic rationale for maintaining sizeable military bases East of Suez eroded over the course of the 1960s – is closest to the regional studies of Steven Galpern and Matthew Jones. Neither book explicitly sets out to explain why Britain withdrew from East of Suez but both shed light on the matter. Galpern concentrates on Britain's

⁸⁹Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government: 1964–1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 377.

⁹⁰Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*, p. 218.

⁹¹UKNA PREM 13/1455, Quadripartite Ministerial Meeting, Washington, 20 April 1967.

⁹²UKNA CAB 148/8, DOPC, Long Term Study Group, 'Level of British Forces in Europe (draft by the Foreign Office)', 29 July 1964.

⁹³In 1975, Foreign Secretary James Callaghan declared that the British were the 'bridge builders'. Jim Callaghan, 'Challenges and Opportunities for British Foreign Policy', Fabian Tract, 439 (1975), p. 10. Prime Minister Tony Blair took up this role conception in 1997, stating 'we are a bridge between the US and Europe'. Tony Blair, quoted in 'Tony Blair's five guiding lights', *BBC News* (11 November 1997), available at: {<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/29353.stm>}.

presence in the Middle East and its linkages to oil and the stability of pound sterling. Policymakers, he discerns, eventually ‘reached the conclusion that keeping British forces in the Gulf to protect against the possibility of some future event that denied Britain access to oil ... was not worth the cost of keeping those forces there’.⁹⁴ In his work on Anglo-American cooperation and rivalry in Southeast Asia, Jones notes that, during the 1960s, London began to ‘question how long the obtrusive British bases could be maintained before local hostility was generated and they were driven out’.⁹⁵

This article builds on their regional studies by examining the East of Suez withdrawal holistically. Galpern’s analysis is correct, but Southeast Asia is an essential component of the East of Suez story. The Singapore base and the British contribution to the ‘Confrontation’ were the most significant aspects of the East of Suez role in the 1960s. The same point goes for Jones’s excellent study of Southeast Asia; Aden and the Persian Gulf are integral aspects of the East of Suez history and must be told alongside the developments further east. This article has demonstrated that the rationale for retrenchment was the same in both regions: the basing strategy had become increasingly counterproductive to British interests.

Reversing retrenchment: Britain’s return East of Suez

The lessons of this study are particularly pertinent to those who are currently charting a return East of Suez today. Since the Cameron government, it has been British policy to re-establish fixed positions in the Persian Gulf. The decision to reverse retrenchment therefore predates the Brexit vote and the May government’s ‘Global Britain’ foreign policy. Gareth Stansfield and Saul Kelly believe that the motives for returning were twofold: (1) to strengthen burgeoning economic ties with the Gulf states and (2) to ‘do something’ to remain close to the Americans as they ‘pivot’ to Asia.⁹⁶

In December 2014, Britain announced that it would build a new naval base in Bahrain, the first of its kind since the withdrawal in 1971. The site is now the permanent home of a Royal Navy Type 23 frigate, four minesweepers, and a Bay-class dock landing ship. In 2017, Britain and Oman reached an agreement giving Britain long-term basing rights at Duqm port, the only facility in the region capable of berthing the UK’s new aircraft carriers. The installation will also house a sizeable logistics and training hub for the British Army. The RAF, meanwhile, has access to airfields in Qatar, Oman, and the UAE.

Since the Brexit vote, the Asia-Pacific has been incorporated in the return East of Suez under the banner of ‘Global Britain’. Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson announced in February 2019 that Britain will soon establish a ‘permanent’ presence in the region; a new base in Singapore or Brunei has been mooted.⁹⁷ More recently, the Royal Navy’s Fleet Commander, Vice Admiral Jerry Kyd, has floated the idea of a Carrier Strike Group being ‘forward-based’ in the ‘Indo-Pacific’.⁹⁸

Is it wise to return East of Suez? Prime Minister Boris Johnson believes the original withdrawal was a mistake, taken out of economic shortsightedness and to enhance Britain’s EEC membership bid. This article has shown that neither of these explanations adequately accounts for the decision. The East of Suez basing strategy had become more costly in terms of blood and treasure; many of the nationalist groups opposed to British rule had foreign backing, courtesy of the

⁹⁴Galpern, *Money, Oil, and Empire*, p. 280.

⁹⁵Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia*, p. 268.

⁹⁶Gareth Stansfield and Saul Kelly, ‘A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf’, RUSI briefing paper (April 2013), available at: {https://rusi.org/system/files/East_of_Suez_Return_042013.pdf}.

⁹⁷Gavin Williamson, ‘Defence in Global Britain’, RUSI, London (11 February 2019), available at: {<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-in-global-britain>}.

⁹⁸Vice Admiral Jerry Kyd, quoted in Lucy Fisher, ‘Britain set to confront China with new aircraft carrier’, *The Times* (14 July 2020), available at: {<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/britain-set-to-confront-china-with-new-aircraft-carrier-v2gnwrr88>}.

Soviet Union and China. The military installations in both regions no longer served as a useful deterrent or a platform from which to operate in the area. Moreover, policymakers in the 1960s realised that these symbols of British power failed to accrue much influence with local elites.

It is vitally important that the current generation of British officials are clear-eyed about the rationale for the original withdrawal. Trade is seemingly a key component of the ‘Global Britain’ vision. The UK is exploring trade deals in Asia and has formally expressed an interest in joining the revamped Trans-Pacific Partnership. This invites the question: will a return East of Suez enhance the trade prospects of ‘Global Britain’? In the 1960s, British policymakers realised that many of their European counterparts were trading well in the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East without permanent installations in either region. The same applies today; Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands have developed strong trade links with Southeast Asia without needing military bases in the region. It therefore remains unclear why ‘Global Britain’ advocates now believe that a revamped basing strategy is necessary to facilitate new trade agreements.

Singapore today is a wealthy and stable country that could potentially host a larger British base. Yet the dynamic with China has changed significantly over the past fifty years. Theresa May’s government had high hopes for a free trade agreement with Beijing.⁹⁹ A new base in the Asia-Pacific would undoubtedly scupper any chances of that. Moreover, there are security concerns. Wherever one sits in the debate over how best to manage Chinese assertiveness, it should be evident that forward-deploying warships to the region will increase the danger of escalation. David Blagden believes that ‘this risk could even be *more* pronounced for Britain, if – say – Beijing decided that a UK warship was an appropriate proxy target against which to assert its counter-Western preferences without guaranteeing the full blowback that would follow an attack on a US naval vessel’.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, a British base in Singapore would play into Beijing’s suspect narrative that Western powers are at fault for mounting tensions in the South China Sea.

Turning to the bases in Bahrain and Oman, the local threat environment has evolved since the 1960s.¹⁰¹ Today, the British no longer need fear Egyptian-backed revolutionaries. Yet the region could hardly be described as a beacon of political stability. Bahrain was rocked by protests during the Arab Spring. It is true that Oman has traditionally been regarded as one of the more secure monarchies in the region. During the Arab Spring, for example, protestors demanded reforms rather than regime change. Yet with the passing of the popular Sultan Qaboos in January 2020, Oman’s future looks uncertain. It would be overly optimistic to assume that the country’s relative political stability can endure indefinitely.

Tensions with Iran pose a further threat to the new UK bases. Tehran has long guarded against the return of the British. During the Iraq War, for example, Iran funnelled weapons to Shia militias in Basra to undermine the British presence. Royal Navy sailors were captured on two occasions when their patrol boats were surrounded by Iranian fast attack craft. Since then, the decades-old rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has intensified. By developing close ties with the Gulf monarchies, the UK has placed itself firmly in the Sunni corner of this evolving sectarian conflict.

Not only are the local conditions not amenable to a return East of Suez, but the UK’s ability to do so is also questionable. Britain’s East of Suez role today is reminiscent of Denis Healey’s

⁹⁹The Cameron and May administrations hailed ‘a golden era’ in UK-China relations. That language has been toned down since Boris Johnson became prime minister in July 2019, although he did originally intend to allow Chinese firm Huawei into the UK’s 5G infrastructure, despite repeated warnings from allies. The government reversed this decision in July 2020, amid the fallout from China’s mishandling of Covid-19 and Hong Kong. A UK-China Free Trade Agreement may no longer be a top priority.

¹⁰⁰David Blagden, ‘Power, polarity, and prudence: The ambiguities and implications of UK discourse on a multipolar international system’, *Defence Studies*, 19:3 (2019), p. 221.

¹⁰¹For more on Britain’s interests in the Persian Gulf, see David B. Roberts, ‘British national interest in the Gulf: Rediscovering a role?’, *International Affairs*, 90:3 (2014), pp. 663–7; and Doug Stokes and Paul Newton, ‘Bridging the Gulf?’, *RUSI Journal*, 159:1 (2014), pp. 16–21.

'penny packages' idea in late 1966. The UK no longer possesses the capacity to return at scale (a situation which is unlikely to change, given the economic ramifications of Covid-19). The trouble with such lean deployments, as one former British general noted, is that they 'would be large enough to "get us into trouble" but too small to get us out of trouble once it starts'.¹⁰² The Royal Navy boasts 19 high-end frigates and destroyers but these are not all operational at one time; those warships that are deployed are spread thin. This was aptly demonstrated in July 2019 when the Iranian Navy detained a British flagged oil tanker, despite the efforts of HMS Montrose.

This issue will intensify when the UK deploys the first of its aircraft carriers in 2021. In a high-threat environment, such as the Gulf, an aircraft carrier will require an escort of two destroyers, two frigates, an attack submarine, a tanker and a solid support ship.¹⁰³ The deployment of a Carrier Strike Group will necessitate such a concentration of an unprecedentedly small escort fleet that the Royal Navy will struggle to perform its other commitments, which are currently (just about) fulfilled by lone-ship deployments.¹⁰⁴ Thus, while a Queen Elizabeth-class Carrier Strike Group will represent the most powerful UK naval force since the 1970s, it will come at the expense of a British presence elsewhere.

If the carrier group is in the Pacific when a crisis erupts in the Gulf, will Britain be able to defend its interests there, while honouring its other commitments closer to home? The Royal Navy regularly partakes in NATO exercises from the North Atlantic to the Black Sea. It is arguably more important for the UK to uphold its NATO obligations in Europe if the US is intent on shifting resources to the Asia-Pacific. Can the UK square this circle in returning East of Suez and honouring the 'continental commitment', while pressures on resources mount?¹⁰⁵

A heavy bet is being placed on the reliability of allies. The Royal Navy plans to include American, Australian, and European warships in a flexible UK-led Carrier Strike Group, thereby freeing up British warships for service elsewhere.¹⁰⁶ In 2018, MPs on the Defence Committee scathingly observed that, 'operating aircraft carriers without the sovereign ability to protect them is complacent at best and potentially dangerous at worst'.¹⁰⁷ Alternatively, allied ships can pick up the slack in other regions. This strategy is not without risks, given the changeability of allies. During the Iran tanker crisis of July 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the British were responsible for protecting their own shipping.¹⁰⁸ The Biden administration

¹⁰²Paul Newton, quoted in Stansfield and Kelly, 'A Return to East of Suez?', p. 13.

¹⁰³Admiral Sir Philip Jones, 'First Sea Lord's Gallipoli Memorial Lecture', RUSI, London (23 November 2017), available at: {<https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2017/november/23/171123-first-sea-lords-gallipoli-memorial-lecture>}.

¹⁰⁴This issue will become even more pronounced between 2023 and 2027 when the Royal Navy is likely to suffer a 'frigate gap'. The ageing Type 23s are due to be decommissioned on an annual basis from 2023, but the next generation of frigates (Type 26 & Type 31) will not enter service until 2027. Louisa Brooke-Holland, 'Naval Shipbuilding: February 2020 Update', House of Commons Library Briefing Paper (5 February 2020), available at: {<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8807/>}.

¹⁰⁵The operating costs of Carrier Enabled Power Projection are estimated at £357 million per annum. This would amount to almost 1 per cent of the total UK defence budget (£39.5 billion in 2019/20). Note that this figure does not include the operating costs of escort ships. National Audit Office, 'Carrier Strike – Preparing for Deployment' (26 June 2020), available at: {<https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/007678-001-Carrier-Strike-preparing-for-deployment.pdf>}.

¹⁰⁶National Security Adviser Mark Sedwill told MPs that the carriers 'will almost inevitably be used in the context of allied operations'. Mark Sedwill, Oral Evidence for 'Modernising Defence Programme' inquiry, House of Commons Defence Committee (1 May 2018), available at: {<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/defence-committee/modernising-defence-programme/oral/82257.pdf>}.

¹⁰⁷House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Beyond 2%: A Preliminary Report on the Modernising Defence Programme' (12 June 2018), available at: {<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmdfence/818/818.pdf>}.

¹⁰⁸Paul Dallison, 'Mike Pompeo: UK must look after its own ships', *Politico* (22 July 2019), available at: {<https://www.politico.eu/article/us-secretary-of-state-mike-pompeo-uk-must-look-after-its-own-ships-iran/>}.

will likely prove a more steadfast partner, but future US leaders may be drawn inwards by domestic strife. To the extent they look beyond their own shores, their gaze will largely concentrate on Asia, the new geopolitical centre of gravity. Thus, it is risky to assume that the US Navy will always be on hand to assist the Royal Navy elsewhere.

Finally, the return East of Suez raises ethical and political questions. First, is the government comfortable about deepening ties with regimes that have questionable human rights records? Second, does the British public know of and support a return East of Suez? The latter did not factor in the decision to withdraw during the 1960s. The electorate had little awareness or interest in these matters; East of Suez was not an issue in either the 1964 or 1966 elections. Historian William Roger Louis agrees that ‘the dismantling of the empire took place in Aden, Sarawak, and North Borneo with hardly a flicker of attention from the British public’.¹⁰⁹ It is not clear whether such deferential conditions hold true today.¹¹⁰

Above all, the government has yet to spell out its objectives in returning East of Suez. Is the goal to protect commercial interests, the global commons, the ‘Special Relationship’ or all three? The 1966 Defence Review noted that ‘defence must be the servant of foreign policy, not its master’.¹¹¹ Today, the government risks putting the cart before the horse, by opening military bases without specifying their political purpose. It falls on those drafting the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy to rectify this oversight. Their task has been made harder and more pressing by Covid-19, as the economic fallout from the crisis will further stretch the UK’s resource base.

Britain has genuine economic and political interests East of Suez. The real question is: do these concerns necessitate the establishment of permanent military bases in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific? History suggests not. Policymakers should be realistic about the reasons for withdrawing in the first place or else they may be in danger of repeating the mistakes of the past.

Acknowledgements. I thank Paul van Hoof, Dan Jacobs, Peter Slezkine, Henry Lawton, Lora Botev, the 2019–20 Ernest May Fellows at Harvard Kennedy School, and the four anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments on earlier versions of this article. I am also grateful to Rob Johnson, Dominic Johnson, Steve Walt, Barry Posen, John Bew, and Neil MacFarlane, as well as the participants of an International Security Program seminar at Harvard Kennedy School, for influencing my thinking on this topic.

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¹⁰⁹Louis, ‘The dissolution of the British Empire’, p. 22.

¹¹⁰In 2019, a poll found that half (53 per cent) of the public are supportive of the ‘Global Britain’ vision. See UK in a Changing Europe, ‘Global Britain’ (3 June 2019), available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/global-britain-identity-and-britains-influence-world>. Yet there is some ambiguity on the meaning of ‘Global Britain’. Another survey found that 28 per cent of the public did not know what the slogan means. Worryingly for the government, a quarter of the public understand ‘Global Britain’ to mean ‘a nation with strong and secure borders, focused on issues at home’. See British Foreign Policy Group, ‘UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs: Annual Survey – 2020’ (June 2020), available at: <https://bfpgrp.co.uk/2020/06/public-opinion-foreign-policy/>.

¹¹¹HM Government, *The Defence Review*, p. 4.

Appendix

This map depicts the East of Suez presence in 1964. Many of these states were independent but had security treaties with Britain (for example, Malaysia, Kuwait), while others were formal protectorates (for example, the Trucial States). Several were formal colonies (for example, Hong Kong) and a handful had no formal links but had strong ties to the British military (British advisers were heavily involved in the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman’s defence infrastructure and the Royal Air Force had unrestricted access to two airfields).

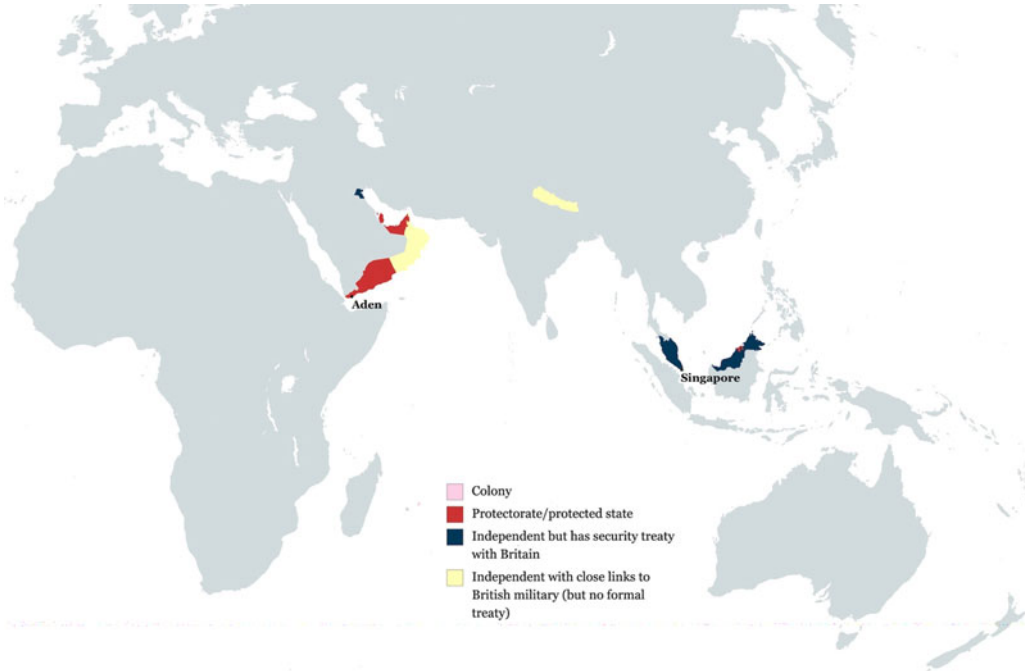


Figure 1. Britain’s East of Suez presence, 1964.