The US Embassy in London and Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez, 1961-69

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One of Saki Dockrill's most significant publications was her monograph, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*¹. In this, the first archival study of the subject, she set Britain's reassessment of its defence priorities in a broad context, looking not only at withdrawal from Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf, but also at relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) over such questions as nuclear sharing and the size of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR). She showed that, in reducing spending, the British initially sought cuts in NATO; yet, by 1968, the Wilson government was set on a European future, eager to abandon the world role and enter the European Community (EC). Saki also looked at the debate over particular weapons systems, such as aircraft carriers and the US-manufactured F-111 aircraft, both vital to a world role. Some previous writers emphasised that the January 1968 decision to quit military bases East of Suez by the end of 1971, was *the* vital turning point in the process of retreat.² Others argued it merely marked an acceleration of earlier decisions, especially those announced in July 1967.³ But, Saki looked further back, seeing harbingers of retreat under the Conservative governments of 1959-63.⁴ Throughout the discussions, a vital question was the need to maintain friendly relations with London's main ally, the United States, which, concerned about its own defence burden, could hardly welcome Britain's retreat. This essay looks at the East of Suez debate from the vantage point of the US Ambassador in London, looking at how his embassy interpreted the various stages of British decision-

making, how well it was informed about the debate and what it did to influence British leaders.⁵

The Bruce Embassy

David Bruce was in London for eight years from March 1961. He had already served as ambassador to France (1949-53) and West Germany (1957-60), and had close links to Great Britain. He was an intelligence officer in London during the Second World War and his wife, Evangeline, was the granddaughter of a Conservative MP. His time in London has already attracted some academic discussion, its appeal boosted by his fascinating diary.⁶ He was highly respected on both sides of the Atlantic for his professionalism and, while he was never personally close to Presidents John F. Kennedy (1961-63) or Lyndon Johnson (1963-68), was known to ‘have the ear of the White House...’⁷ A telling example of his access to Downing Street is the fact that he met Macmillan in January 1963, immediately after French President Charles de Gaulle vetoed the first EC application.⁸ Bruce presided over one of the largest US diplomatic establishments. Particularly significant in dealing with the Labour government was the Deputy Chief of Mission after 1964, Philip Kaiser who, since his time at Oxford University in the 1930s, had come to know several future Cabinet ministers.⁹

Nelson Lankford has argued that it was Lyndon Johnson’s lukewarm attitude to foreign policy that allowed Bruce ‘come into his own as Ambassador to Britain’ in a way that had been impossible under Kennedy, who was a close friend of the British Ambassador to Washington, David Ormsby Gore, and got on well with Macmillan.¹⁰

When Labour took office in October 1964, the new premier, Harold Wilson, had high hopes of establishing close relations with the White House, but Johnson never showed any sign of reciprocating.¹¹ Despite the supposed pre-eminence of Britain's Washington embassy in the relationship, there was plenty of transatlantic business for Bruce to conduct in the 1960s. In particular, three persistent concerns loomed large in the Ambassador's mind and had long-term significance for Anglo-American relations. The first was Britain's economic decline relative to its major competitors, like America, Germany and Japan. Throughout Bruce's time in London, the British economy was dogged by balance of payments problems and low growth. This economic weakness forced the government into expenditure cuts, which, in part at least, led to the second major challenge, Britain's withdrawal from its world role. The third problem was America's growing involvement in the Vietnam War, which stretched US resources and made it difficult for Washington to think of filling the power voids left by its ally's retreat.

Holding the Position, 1961-66

In economic terms, Britain had never properly recovered from the financial strains of the Second World War and, by the late 1950s, with its global system of defence bases and expensive welfare state, was living beyond its means. Under Macmillan there was a situation of 'stop-go economics', whereby attempts to boost domestic demand led to increased imports, which in turn damaged the balance of payments position and forced a return to deflation. In such a situation, it was inevitable Britain should try to make savings in its overseas commitments. The 1957 Defence White Paper aimed almost to

halve military manpower within five years. However, this proved difficult to achieve, not least because Britain clung to its great power ambitions. In October 1961, the Macmillan government laid down Britain's strategic roles as being: to contribute to nuclear deterrence; to defend Western Europe from the threat posed by the Soviet bloc; and to maintain the presence East of Suez. The last was intended to help preserve world order, defend the Commonwealth and guarantee stable conditions for trade, which was vital to national wealth. Any hopes of cutting expenditure in Southeast Asia were reduced, in 1963, when forces were committed to protect Malaysia-Singapore, thanks to the threat posed by neighbouring Indonesia, in the so-called 'confrontation', a period of tension marked by cross-border raids and diplomatic abuse. To adhere to a ceiling on defence spending of spending 7 percent of Gross National Product, it seemed easier to cut manpower in Europe, where the size of the BAOR fell from 77,000 in the mid-1950s to 51,000 in 1962. Despite doubts from the Treasury, the Conservatives also maintained ambitious equipment programmes including, in 1963-64, decisions to build a new aircraft carrier and develop an advanced tactical, strike and reconnaissance aircraft, TSR-2. In June 1963, Lord Home, the Foreign Secretary (soon to succeed Macmillan as premier), wrote, '*We have rejected the idea that we should "choose between Europe and a world role"*'. We have worldwide interests and must therefore have available a worldwide presence to protect them.'¹²

Given the Conservatives' determination to maintain the world role, Bruce could be content with British defence policy in this period. Neither does he seem to have recognised any contradiction between the fulfillment of a world role and his own desires

for a stable British economy and membership of the EC. He also approved British opposition to Indonesia.¹³ Such concern as existed on the US side, concerned London's commitment to NATO. When, in the light of tension with the Soviet Union over Berlin in 1961, Kennedy urged NATO members to increase their defence efforts, Bruce realised this would sit uneasily alongside Britain's need for retrenchment.¹⁴ In February 1962, when the US government learnt the content of Britain's upcoming Defence White Paper, it provoked what Bruce termed 'deep disappointment' and led Kennedy to complain in a personal message to Macmillan.¹⁵ But Bruce commented that, 'As long as they continue to finance their independent nuclear deterrent, and keep the present ceiling on their total military expenditures, there is little chance, in my opinion, of BAOR being adequately manned and equipped.'¹⁶ Fortunately for Macmillan, as tension over Berlin eased, so did US concern about the BAOR and whereas, in early 1962, Washington would have welcomed Britain's abandonment of the nuclear deterrent, by the end of the year Kennedy had offered the Prime Minister Polaris missiles with which to deliver it.

By October 1964, when Harold Wilson narrowly won power, there was a serious balance of payments deficit of £400 million. Yet, Labour ruled out devaluation of the Pound and wanted Washington to support the currency. The Americans were willing, partly because a devaluation of the Pound could lead to speculation against the Dollar. Washington helped put together a \$3 billion support package for Sterling following Labour's first budget. While hoping that Britain would maintain its key role in Western defence, Americans wanted to see Labour reduce its domestic spending plans, but it was always clear that there might be some cutbacks East of Suez. A weekend ministerial

meeting in November 1964 agreed, under Treasury pressure to a ceiling of £2 billion on defence spending (at 1964 prices) by the financial year 1969-70. A comprehensive review of defence spending was launched and some aircraft projects were scrapped, with cheaper alternatives to be bought 'off the shelf' from America. TSR-2, for example, was replaced by the F-111. Another meeting, in June 1965, discussed the possible reduction of bases East of Suez, but the British still intended to maintain a presence there, perhaps withdrawing from Singapore to a base in Australia. The White Paper of February 1966 was very much a compromise on East of Suez. It planned major reductions in the Mediterranean and Middle East, and lower spending in the Far East once the 'confrontation' with Indonesia ended. East of Suez. Britain would not 'undertake major operations of war except in co-operation with allies.' The aircraft carrier planned by the Conservatives was cancelled, but the F-111 was still seen as a means to exercise power in the region. In 1969-70 and Southeast Asia would still absorb over a third of the defence budget and no date was set to leave Singapore.¹⁷

Faced by this cautious approach to defence cuts, the Americans showed only limited concern about British plans. During Labour's early months, Bruce's greatest concern in the defence field was still Europe. He hoped Wilson would not rule out participation in the so-called 'Multilateral Force', which involved a system of nuclear-sharing among NATO allies and was designed to prevent West Germany seeking nuclear weapons. This issue dominated the first Wilson-Johnson summit in December 1964. Then again, the Americans also took the opportunity at the meetings to express their support for Britain's world role; it was clear that they were anxious to see this

maintained.¹⁸ The Prime Minister had warned the Ambassador in the wake of the November 1964 Chequers meeting that Labour could not maintain current expenditure on the world role, but he also described himself as an ‘East of Suez man’¹⁹ and Bruce’s diaries during the defence review only intermittently suggest worries about Britain’s commitment to the region. This picture confirms Saki Dockrill’s finding that, from Washington’s perspective, ‘details about the current Defence Review coming from London were vague and fragmented.’²⁰

In February 1965 the Ambassador, fearing another ‘run’ on the Pound, expressed doubts as to whether Britain’s payments problems could be surmounted ‘without a large cutback in prestige expenditures abroad’ and he was aware that some in London favoured a wholesale withdrawal from East of Suez.²¹ One of these was the deputy Prime Minister, George Brown, who told Philip Kaiser that, while he understood the US wanted Britain to remain East of Suez, it should be possible to dispense with some commitments there.²² At one point, in September, British civil servants even told a US team that ‘the jig is up as far as the UK being able indefinitely to maintain its base’ at Singapore was concerned. However, Bruce wondered if this was ‘not part of a play to induce the US and others to take over part of their east of Suez burden.’²³ In October 1965, the Shadow defence secretary, Enoch Powell, told the Conservative Party conference that the East of Suez position must be reconsidered, leading Bruce to note that ‘this will alarm people at home.’²⁴ He was certainly correct in this judgement. The Under-Secretary of State, George Ball, had argued a few months earlier that it was in US interests to prop up the Pound, because otherwise Britain might save money by withdrawing from East of Suez,

leaving Washington to pick up the commitments on a permanent basis. And in June, the Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, told the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, James Callaghan, that US support for Britain in its financial difficulties 'was conditional on their being no change in Britain's world-wide political commitments.'²⁵ In mid-September, Bruce accompanied Ball to meetings with Wilson, where the Under-Secretary 'pointed out in detail the disastrous consequences if the word should be spread that Western power might be withdrawn or diminished' and warned 'neither the US nor Australia had any intention of letting the British off the hook' in Southeast Asia.'²⁶

In November 1965, Wilson's Secretary of Defence, Denis Healey, told McNamara, that Britain hoped that the US, Australia and New Zealand would play a greater role in defending Western interests in the Indian Ocean in future. This reflected British plans for sharing burdens with its allies around the world.²⁷ Nonetheless, it hardly suggested a wholesale withdrawal from East of Suez and the way the British portrayed the review was calculated to ease American fears. Thus, McNamara felt the F-111 purchase was 'the best evidence that [the British] intend to maintain their commitments east of Suez.'²⁸ The provisional findings of the defence review were a major item for a Wilson-Johnson summit, in December, ahead of which Bundy told the President, 'We need a British role at Singapore for as far ahead as we can see...'.²⁹ Wilson set out the decisions in a brisk manner and hinted at an eventual withdrawal from Singapore, after the 'confrontation' with Indonesia ended, but he said Britain intended to remain a force East of Suez after that. The complicated nature of his position is brought out in the American record:

Not talking withdrawal – and only when confrontation ends; we know you cannot take our place; but for the long-run, and if confrontation ends, we can't keep up our present arrangements indefinitely; in the end we are thinking of a scheme involving withdrawal to northwest Australia.³⁰

This two-sided approach does much to explain Saki Dockrill's judgement that, at the end of the talks, 'it was arguable how far the Americans had really appreciated the magnitude of Britain's plans to reduce its world commitments in relation to its financial capacity.'³¹

Bruce attended both the summit meeting and more detailed talks, with a British delegation led by Healey and Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart, in Washington in January 1966. Here, again, the British were keen to calm any fears of a premature withdrawal. On the one hand, they believed a withdrawal from Singapore was inevitable in the long-term (thanks to anti-colonialist pressures) and would buy only a limited number of F-111 aircraft. On the other hand, they planned to remain in the Persian Gulf, were investigating a base in northern Australia and wanted to develop 'quadripartite' co-operation with the US, Australia and New Zealand. Bruce felt they 'allayed American fears that they would no longer, in view of diminished economic and financial resources, play a global political and military role.' Despite substantial cuts, the British, 'with improved cost effectiveness should still command an important military establishment.'³² All this confirmed American expectations, prior to the talks, that British proposals would 'involve comparatively minor and, from our viewpoint, generally manageable adjustments in their overseas military posture, at least for the next two or three years.'³³ Yet, it seems Bruce and his colleagues were deceived. There was already an element of

dishonesty in the British position in that, once the ‘confrontation’ ended, and if it proved impossible to secure an Australian base, the only real option was a complete withdrawal from Southeast Asia.³⁴ The Ambassador’s position in London does not seem to have given him any greater insight into the direction of Labour’s defence cuts than that of Washington.

Sounding the Retreat, 1966-67

A month after the White Paper, Wilson secured a clear majority in another general election, but only four months after that the future of Britain’s defence posture was thrown into doubt by renewed pressure on Sterling. At the same time, political changes in Indonesia paved the way for an end to ‘confrontation’, which in turn allowed the British to contemplate a early withdrawal from Malaysia-Singapore. An initial round of further defence cuts was announced, as part of an emergency deflationary package, on 20 July 1966, and another defence review followed, with Brown, now Foreign Secretary, seeing Britain’s future as lying in EC membership, the corollary of which was an end to East of Suez. A ministerial meeting in December agreed to discuss a full withdrawal from Southeast Asia and an interim White Paper, in February 1967, was followed within weeks by approval of a ‘peripheral strategy’, whereby forces would quit mainland Southeast Asia in 1975-76. Brown explained this concept to US, Australian and New Zealand representatives at a meeting of the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), in Washington on 18-20 April. It was a pivotal moment in the history of British foreign policy. Predictably, his statement drew a negative US response, with McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk unable to understand why an

announcement had to be made so far in advance of the actual withdrawal. Such a step could only complicate the Western position in the region, at a time when the Vietnam War was at its height. Brown replied, not only that the Labour government must make budgetary savings and must announce these soon in order to placate its critics, but also that ‘white faces’ were increasingly unwelcome in Asia and British defence chiefs needed to plan for a new future. The most the British would do to placate their allies was to preserve a ‘capability’ to intervene in the area after the mid-70s. The White Paper of July confirmed these decisions. Privately, the British also decided to withdraw from the Persian Gulf, but they did not publicise this decision for fear of instability in the region, where British forces supported a number of Arab sheikhdoms.³⁵

How successful were Bruce and the Embassy in discovering British intentions during this phase? As the July 1966 crisis struck, Bruce warned Washington about the British economy in dramatic terms:

The country seems at the mercy of economic drift and unsuccessful improvisation... We must also contemplate the likelihood that they would require a further curtailment of Britain’s ability to continue even at present planned levels the military commitments East of Suez and probably in Germany. I do not conclude that Britain is going down the drain, but every sluice gate is beginning to open.³⁶

But economic experts in Washington, and even some of his own staff, felt such warnings too pessimistic.³⁷ When the Ambassador visited Washington shortly afterwards, to prepare for another summit, McNamara again urged that the British ‘must maintain, even

if in diminished strength, their semi-global military posture, especially East of Suez and in Germany', a view endorsed by the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk.³⁸ The US government briefly considered underwriting Britain's financial obligations in return for pursuing the kind of foreign policy Washington wanted to see – including a bid to enter the EC and the abandonment of the nuclear deterrent. Bruce, however, was among those opposed to such a dramatic offer.³⁹ As it transpired, Wilson, who was anxious to appear bullish in the face of the latest economic crisis, told Johnson 'that the UK will continue to carry its share of the load East of Suez.'⁴⁰

The British continued to give out messages designed to reassure the Americans, such as Wilson's undertaking to Johnson, in November, that the position in Southeast Asia would be held, at least for the time being.⁴¹ However, it is noteworthy that, even in Washington, some officials believed the burdens on Britain were becoming too great to sustain. As early as July 1965, Francis Bator, of the National Security Staff had warned it was too much to expect the UK to maintain the value of Sterling, cut domestic spending, remain East of Suez *and* keep a sizeable army in Germany.⁴² In September 1965, Dean Acheson, a former Secretary of State, talked of Britain as a 'wizened island.'⁴³ And in October 1966, Leddy, of the State Department's Bureau of European Affairs, hoped Washington would ignore a request, recently made by Wilson, to 'enlighten Brown on the importance of Britain's world role...'. Leddy argued, 'The Foreign Secretary is on our side... and I hope we will not discourage him by overstressing the East of Suez argument. They will do what they will East of Suez and I see no further mileage [in] belabouring the world responsibility there at the cost of Britain's responsibilities in

Europe.’⁴⁴ Like Bator, Acheson and Leddy, Bruce, too, was concerned about Britain’s economic strains and keen to see it join the EC, but he never seems to have drawn the conclusion, in the clear way Leddy did, that it was therefore better to ease off the pressure on London to play a world role.

The British largely succeeded in hiding their plans for a rapid retreat from East of Suez from the Americans and other allies, until the very brink of Brown’s announcement to SEATO in April. The uncertainty of the embassy about future British policy can be seen in a 1 March report from Kaiser, following ‘the most massive, back-bench disaffection on any major issue since the Government has been in power’, when its own MPs bitterly attacked the ambiguities in the Labour government’s defence policy. Kaiser believed these ambiguities were deliberate:

The present ‘straddling’ policy on East of Suez, while it displeases Little Englanders and Europe-Firsters, still holds heavy hints of retrenchment and ultimate withdrawal. To put this policy in clearer focus would alienate not just ‘imperialists’, but those who genuinely feel (and it is noteworthy that Wilson and Healey are both in this camp) that Britain does have a contribution to make in the area and that in any event this presence gives Britain a degree of influence on US policy which it would otherwise not have.

The London Embassy feared ‘the effect of the debate will be to toughen British policy along lines least congenial to us’, but also felt that the ‘first test’ was likely to be a contest over further cuts in the BAOR and that ‘on balance, we would expect continuation of the essentially “straddling” defence policy...’.⁴⁵

Bruce noted, on 21 April, that East of Suez was a 'subject we have been following closely here for some time' and Washington knew, ahead of the SEATO meeting, that Brown's main purpose was to discuss East of Suez. The Americans prepared some arguments against further British cutbacks there, including one that there had been 'considerable progress made in recovering from the balance of payments crisis.' But one memorandum warned, 'we should recognize that at some point in the mid-70's we could well lose the British East Asian military presence altogether.'⁴⁶ By mid-April, then, the US understood that a dramatic British move was *possible*. However, the rumours only turned into reality a few days before the SEATO meeting, when a British journalist, Henry Brandon, leaked the story in the *Sunday Times* of 16 April.⁴⁷ The US response was predictable. Bruce, who hoped the British would 'desist from making any such announcement as is contemplated', was asked to deliver a firmly-worded memorandum from Rusk to Brown. While sympathetic to Britain's economic difficulties, this expressed deep concern about 'making significant reductions in force unless and until there is a real change in the Vietnam situation.' If Britain persisted, it would encourage opponents of the Vietnam war to argue that there were no vital Western interests in Southeast Asia; it could lead some Senators to push for US military reductions in Europe; and it would be treated as 'a victory' by Communist states like China.⁴⁸ Other allied governments expressed similar concerns. The shock of Britain's move led Johnson to ask Wilson, when they met at the funeral of former German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, whether the British government was 'going crazy' in planning to quit Southeast Asia.⁴⁹

Over the following weeks, Bruce found that the British were no longer prepared to compromise much on cost-cutting, even for the sake of their American allies. He encouraged a visiting US official, William Benton, to raise the issue with Wilson in late April, pressing the case that any reductions should be made ‘without fanfare or publicity’, in view of the possible adverse effects ‘in relation to Vietnam.’ But Wilson commented that it was partly because of Vietnam that Britain did not advocate an even earlier withdrawal.⁵⁰ Even two Labour critics of Wilson, Woodrow Wyatt and Christopher Mayhew, told the Ambassador that the Prime Minister would push the reductions through and, despite Bruce’s argument to the contrary, predicted Johnson would accept the position.⁵¹ In early May, Brown asked to see Bruce privately. He again set out the British case for the cuts, but also revealed the offer to retain the ‘capability’ to re-intervene East of Suez after the mid-1970s. The Ambassador did not hide his strong feelings. He told Brown that an announcement of retreat, ‘eight years in advance of it being carried into effect’, was ‘more likely to cause bitter controversy between the US and UK Governments than any other issue between us during the last few years.’ Bruce tried to persuade the British to delay any final decision until Wilson and Johnson met, and in order to secure this he stated the situation in the starkest terms:

... the appearance of our being deserted (for that is how the project would be analyzed) in the midst of our Vietnamese involvement, by a Government assumed to be our most loyal ally, headed by a Prime Minister who had repeatedly declared himself an ‘East of Suez Man’, would seem to me unwise, provocative and absolutely unacceptable to us...⁵²

The Ambassador was present when McNamara, on a visit to London a few days later, took up similar themes with Healey.⁵³ There was another written appeal on 12 May from Rusk to Brown about the withdrawal, which Bruce delivered personally.⁵⁴ During this time, as Saki Dockrill noted, US policy was co-ordinated with other allies to increase the pressure on the British.⁵⁵ Yet, over the following weeks, American feelings subsided. Ahead of the next Johnson-Wilson summit, Bruce reported that, 'Important as the Far East and Middle East are, for the British they are less compelling than domestic economics and politics...' and explained:

An announcement in July of substantial savings in [the East of Suez] area, looking ahead to what may be a stormy Labor Party Conference in September, is probably the juiciest bone he [Wilson] can throw his critics. It commends itself in both budgetary and foreign exchange savings... and it appeals to the growing number who, for doctrinal or emotional reasons, want to reduce Britain's world role.

Furthermore, it is thought by some to strengthen the Common Market bid.⁵⁶ It was part of an ambassador's role, of course, to provide objective political reports on the state to which he was accredited and, in this telegram, Bruce showed he could understand Wilson's position, even if it ran counter to US interests. More surprising, perhaps, at the Johnson-Wilson encounter on 2 June, there were no fireworks over East of Suez. This may partly have been because, by coincidence, the meeting occurred as war broke out between Israel and the Arabs, a crisis that forced Britain and the US together.⁵⁷

It was not that Washington had accepted the idea of British withdrawal, but there was no sign Wilson would back down. In late June, the US embassy believed that 'under

almost any circumstances the British are going to be out of Singapore-Malaysia by mid-1970's.' Bruce felt London might yet be dissuaded from an immediate announcement of this, but he also believed such a 'planning assumption' would leak and be 'tantamount to a decision to get out.' Around this time, the Ambassador seems to have gained a fuller grasp of thinking within Whitehall. It was not only economic problems, popular opinion and a desire to focus on Europe that pointed away from the world role. Defence planners needed a long 'lead-time' to plan force levels and equipment procurement. In other words, even the British military chiefs wanted to settle the future of the world role in clear terms, abandoning any costly attempt to 'straddle' multiple roles. It is also noteworthy that Bruce was confused about Washington's purpose by now: did they really want to keep a British presence East of Suez after the mid-1970s, or did they simply want to forestall an early announcement of a rapid retreat?⁵⁸ There was another bout of protests about British intentions from America and other allies in mid-July, but London again rejected such pleas.⁵⁹

Accelerating Withdrawal, 1967-68

The drastic decisions of July 1967 did not end Labour's attempts to re-define Britain's defence posture. In November, there was another Sterling crisis, so severe that the government had to devalue the Pound, accompanied by more expenditure cuts and the replacement of Callaghan at the Treasury by Roy Jenkins. Like Brown, Jenkins was a critic of the East of Suez role and a keen advocate of focusing on EC membership. Before the year ended, he put forward a plan to retire from Southeast Asia by 1971 and from the Persian Gulf even earlier. Despite support from the Prime Minister, the Chancellor found

tough opposition from some other ministers over the details. Healey was keen, for example, to retain the F-111 order. A series of divisive cabinet meetings in January, accompanied by pressure from the US and other allies, led to a compromise decision, announced on 16 January, to withdraw from both Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf by December 1971.⁶⁰

In this last, short phase of the debate, it is possible to trace Bruce's views and the work of his staff in some detail. In the wake of the unpleasant surprises of the previous April, the embassy was well aware of the possibility of dramatic British action. But they were also helped by disaffected individuals in the British government, who were willing to share their dismay over events. Even senior ministers, including Brown and Healey, were happy to reveal details of Cabinet discussions with US officials. It was not that the Foreign and Defence Secretaries were opposed to withdrawal in principle. Both, of course, had been deeply involved in planning the July 1967 cuts. But now, they opposed Jenkin's drive for a more rapid retreat, accompanied by the end of the F-111 purchase and, with it, any capacity for re-intervention. Bruce first seems to have become aware of differences inside the Cabinet on 6 January, after sending over a message from Rusk to Brown, which began, 'I am deeply disturbed by information which has just reached me that HMG may be considering accelerating its withdrawal from the Persian Gulf.' Bruce talked to Brown about this over the telephone and gathered the latter had 'been trying, to some extent vainly, to... persuade his colleagues not to freeze their attitudes on defence matters until he has discussed these questions with the Secretary...' Bruce telegraphed Rusk to tell him that Brown seemed 'sympathetic to our views, but has encountered

strong opposition in the Cabinet.’ However, when Bruce saw Wilson, the latter was quick to downplay any problem and said he would discuss the issue with Johnson when they met for their next summit in February – which hardly suggests that he wanted to be open with his key ally about the scale of the new cuts.⁶¹

Confirmation of the bitter Cabinet debates came in a ‘private chat’ between Healey and the Embassy’s Political-Military Counsellor, Ron Spiers, three days later, where the discussion, ‘which lasted an hour, was frank and far ranging.’ Healey claimed the position was better than it had been a month before, when he feared ‘lunatic’ Cabinet decisions, but a ‘big majority’ were in favour of a rapid withdrawal from Malaysia-Singapore and the Persian Gulf. He and Brown felt it made sense to leave the Gulf, but they were holding out for a longer timescale on leaving Southeast Asia. The Defence Secretary hoped to save much of the F-111 order, but complained that Wilson had ‘led the pack’ against this. In drawing this ‘rather extraordinary conversation’ to Rusk’s attention, Bruce thought it ‘impossible to predict what compromises may finally be reached’ and felt it unlikely whether anything Rusk might say to Brown would ‘necessarily alter what seems probable British action.’ Significantly, Bruce also opposed any idea of threatening the British: it was merely ‘essential... we remain on record as still believing they should continue to honor their present obligations.’⁶² However defeatist the Ambassador’s judgement, it proved a realistic one. Over the following days, the contemplated withdrawals remained ‘a stormy subject’ but Jenkins largely got what he wanted.⁶³

On 11 January, visiting Washington to explain the likely reductions, Brown had a 'bloody unpleasant' meeting with Rusk, who asked 'Why don't you act like Britain?' But this was preaching to the converted. Brown privately told the Americans that 'these were the saddest days of his life' and even encouraged Johnson to plead with Wilson for a rethink. Yet there was little hope this would achieve anything.⁶⁴ Bruce delivered the message, read over summaries of the Rusk-Brown talks and concluded, 'It looks as if the jig is up for any real British military activity after 1970 in the Far East, and probably in the Middle East. The Cabinet... seem to have decided Great Britain cannot have both guns and butter.'⁶⁵ On the 14th, the Embassy also heard 'through the grapevine' that the Cabinet had approved all the expected cuts, including cancellation of the F-111 purchase. At this point, Bruce's personal feelings spilled over in his diary: 'I feel these decisions in the military field represent a gross deficiency in good judgment. Once their forces leave an area, reentry will be more or less impossible.'⁶⁶ He was even more outspoken in a letter to Washington, saying the likely British cuts were 'calamitous, destructive, selfish, myopic, and threatening to world orderliness... They constitute, perhaps, the most deplorable resolve, except for Munich, that any British Government has taken during the last 150 years.' He also used the cuts to defend his past reports:

This Embassy has, I realize, for a long time been viewed in some Departmental quarters at home as over pessimistic in its assessment of the probable course of British foreign policies, especially as concerns defense commitments. The truth is, we have been witnessing the gradual, now accelerated, decline of a formerly great power...

Yet, he also concluded that, 'Reproaches from one nation to another, are seldom constructive.'⁶⁷

There was another message from Johnson to Wilson on the 15th, declaring, 'if you decide to forego the acquisition of the F-111, everyone here will regard this as a total disengagement from any commitments whatsoever to the security of areas outside Europe.' The message had a threatening tone, with its hint of reductions in US military purchases from Britain.⁶⁸ But, in Bruce's words, 'the President lost both his pleas'. On the morning of Wilson's announcement of the new cuts, a 'tired and dispirited' Healey gave more, detailed information to Spiers, including the names of those ministers who had resisted the F-111 cancellation and precise voting figures from Cabinet meetings. Healey also confirmed US suspicions that there was a trade-off between domestic and international reductions: the F-111 cancellation was a 'sacrificial goat' designed to placate those who had hoped to raise the school leaving age. It was partly because of this meeting that Bruce commented on the 'wonderfully efficient' way his staff gathered information:

They have built up a sort of intelligence system, and it is quite remarkable how forthcoming, on the basis of personal trust and friendship, some of their British counterparts have been in keeping them advised of what is going on behind the scenes.⁶⁹

But it is doubtful whether this co-operation would have been so full had Brown and Healey not been so alienated by their own government's policy. The British had been much less forthcoming over their thinking on defence in 1965 and 1967. The Embassy's

intelligence-gathering may have been much improved compared to those earlier occasions, but the lesson learnt was a simple one – that information on a government's inner machinations is most easily obtained when its members are happy to provide it.

Curiously, in reflecting on the January 1968 crisis, the Ambassador reserved his most withering comments for Healey, whose 'record in supporting defense measures now renounced was consistent.' To underline the point, Bruce listed several statements made by the Defence Secretary in recent years about the need to remain East of Suez and to purchase the F-111. Yet, Healey did not resign when these commitments evaporated. 'If he did, he would sink, at least temporarily, into political oblivion, which would not be to his liking.'⁷⁰ The Ambassador understood there would be little cost at election-time to Wilson from defence cuts: 'abdication of a world role has depressed the citizens, but has not seemed to have stirred up great popular resentment. In Britain, as far as elections are concerned, foreign policy is of minor interest...'⁷¹ The real importance of the recent defence debates lay with political personalities. Summing up the situation for Rusk in late January, Bruce argued that they had strengthened Jenkins' position as a possible future Prime Minister. The ambassador also noted the 'unusual' alliance between Jenkins and Wilson, even though they had never been 'on especially good terms', and the fact that the F-111 had provided 'the greatest battle' because its cancellation signalled 'the abandonment by Britain of any global role or influence.'⁷² As to Wilson's February summit with Johnson, Bruce predicted that 'the President will not reproach Wilson when the latter comes to Washington, but the Prime Minister will find himself regarded as a man with whom Lyndon Johnson would not care to go to a water hole.'⁷³ This proved too

pessimistic. As so often, Johnson adapted himself to the continuing retreat of his ally with extraordinary restraint. Indeed this, the last Wilson-Johnson summit proved one of the warmest.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Historians recognise a decline in the significance of the 'special relationship' in the 1960s, partly because the withdrawal from East of Suez, alongside the devaluation of Sterling, made Britain less valuable as an ally for Washington.⁷⁵ Yet, the friendly relations between the US Embassy and British governments throughout Bruce's ambassadorship lend weight to Alan Dobson's point that, whatever the decline in the *importance* of the relationship, bilateral links still retained a good *quality*.⁷⁶ Certainly, the Ambassador himself had easy access to British ministers, right up to the Prime Minister, when he needed to discuss issues. Nonetheless, looking at the East of Suez question, it is clear that an open and cordial atmosphere is no guarantee that an Embassy will be well-informed on a close ally's plans. For a long time in 1965-67, while it recognised a rapid retreat from Britain's world role was possible, the Embassy did not realise how seriously Labour ministers were contemplating such a step. The April 1967 announcement came as something of a shock to the Ambassador and his staff, not helped by the fact that a journalist had 'scooped' the story first. After that, they were more alert to the possibilities of a precipitate retreat but, as seen above, the Embassy's successful intelligence on British thinking in January 1968 was decisively helped by the readiness of Brown and Healey to reveal the inner workings of the Cabinet. However large and well-connected the Embassy was, it could not break down the secret workings of Whitehall unless helped

from within. The record of the Embassy in predicting British policy was, therefore, mixed.

It is legitimate to ask, in light of this, how vital the Embassy was to the smooth functioning of transatlantic relations. It would be wrong of course to judge its value on one issue. Bruce's officials were involved in a plethora of subjects, from trade promotion to the provision of consular services, which arguably made the Embassy irreplaceable as an institution. However, political-security issues on such delicate issues as defence spending, the Western alliance and NATO, were also handled at a higher level, in talks between foreign and defence ministers and, at the highest level of all, at summits. Did a resident ambassador still have a meaningful role in exchanges on these topics? In answer to this question, it is surely significant that Bruce was often present at the most important meetings. He briefed the President before summits, acted as host to McNamara and Rusk when they visited London and delivered messages to Wilson, Brown and others.

Ambassadors might not be as central to diplomatic contacts as they had been a century earlier, but they continued to oil the machine and, when a crisis blew up, were on the spot to handle the challenge. Bruce was also important it seems, for providing Washington with an objective understanding of why the British took the decisions they did, even if he disagreed with it. Then again, viewed in retrospect, it has to be asked whether he could not have been clearer in his own mind about the contradiction between recognising the dire state of the British economy and yet expecting the country to maintain its global position. In 1965-66, US-based officials like Bator and Leddy were aware that Britain could not bear all the burdens that Washington expected it to sustain. Acceptance of such

an argument might have given greater clarity to US policy, had Bruce joined the chorus, and it might have made Washington more aware, at an earlier date, of the likelihood – and even the wisdom – of Britain's retreat from East of Suez.

Notes

I am grateful to the British Academy and the University of Nottingham for funding research into David Bruce's diaries and at archives in the United States.

¹ Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002. A more recent analysis on Southeast Asia is P.L. Pham, *Ending East of Suez: the British decision to withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

² Jeffrey Pickering, *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998) and 'Politics and "Black Tuesday": shifting power in the Cabinet and the decision to withdraw from "East of Suez",' *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2002).

³ David Greenwood, *The Economics of the East of Suez Decision* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1973).

⁴ See also Matthew Jones, 'A Decision Delayed: Britain's withdrawal from Southeast Asia reconsidered', *English Historical Review*, vol. CXVII, no. 472 (2002), 569-95.

⁵ The chapter therefore builds on an increasing interest among scholars in the role of embassies. See, for example: Michael Hopkins, Saul Kelly and John Young (eds), *The Washington Embassy: British ambassadors to the United States, 1939-77* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009); Jonathan Colman, 'Portrait of an Institution: the US Embassy in London, 1945-53', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 4 (2009), 339-60.

⁶ Nelson Lankford, *The Last American Aristocrat: the biography of David K.E. Bruce* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995); Jonathan Colman, 'The London Ambassadorship of David K.E. Bruce during the Wilson-Johnson years, 1964-68', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol.

15, No. 4 (2004), 327-52; and 'Introduction' to Raj Roy and John W. Young (eds.), *Ambassador to Sixties London: the diaries of David Bruce, 1961-69* (Dordrecht: Republic of Letters Publishing, 2009).

⁷ Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Arlington, Virginia, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection (hereinafter FAOHC; available online at http://www.adst.org/Oral_History.htm), Sheldon Krys interview.

⁸ Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia, David Bruce diary (hereinafter Diary), 16 January 1963.

⁹ Philip Kaiser, *Journeying Far and Wide* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), 59-71.

¹⁰ Lankford, *American Aristocrat*, 312.

¹¹ John W. Young, *The Labour Governments, 1964-70: Volume II, International Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 21-2; and see Jonathan Colman, *A Special Relationship? Harold Wilson, Lyndon Johnson and Anglo-American relations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

¹² Italics in original. Quoted in Dockrill, *East of Suez*, 40.

¹³ Diary, 28 September 1963.

¹⁴ Diary, 21 July 1961.

¹⁵ Diary, 17 February 1962.

¹⁶ Diary, 29 March 1962.

¹⁷ See Dockrill, *East of Suez*, chapters 3, 4, 6 and 7; Young, *Labour Governments*, 35-45.

¹⁸ Saki Dockrill, 'Forging the Anglo-American global defence partnership: Harold Wilson, Lyndon Johnson and the Washington summit, December 1964', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (December 2000), 107-29.

¹⁹ Diary, 27 November 1964.

²⁰ Dockrill, *East of Suez*, 116.

²¹ Diary, 9 February and 15 March 1965.

²² National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland, Record Group (RG) 59, POL7UK, box 2777, telegram, London to State, 6 February 1965.

²³ Diary, 5 September 1965.

²⁴ Diary, 17 October 1965.

²⁵ Record of McNamara-Callaghan meeting, 30 June, and Ball memorandum, 6 August 1965, quoted in Dockrill, *East of Suez*, 116-17.

²⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson Library (LBJL), Austin, Texas, National Security File (NSF), Country File (CF), United Kingdom (UK), box 208, London to State Department, 10 September 1965.

²⁷ Diary, 26 November 1965.

²⁸ Cyrus L. Sulzberger, *An Age of Mediocrity* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 265.

²⁹ LBJL, Office Files of the President, box 13, Bundy to Johnson, 16 December 1965.

³⁰ LBJL, Francis Bator papers, box 2, Notes of President's meeting with Wilson, 16 December 1965.

³¹ Dockrill, *East of Suez*, 134-7, quote from 136; Pham, *Ending*, 70-72.

³² Bruce Diary, 27 and 28 January 1966.

³³ NARA, RG59, Lot 67D305, box 398, 'Summary of Joint State-Defense Scope Paper', 21 January 1966.

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- ³⁴ Dockrill, *East of Suez*, 148-9 and 155-6; Pham, *Ending*, 74-7; John Subritzsky, *Confronting Sukarno: British, American, Australian and New Zealand diplomacy in the Malaysian-Indonesian confrontation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 199-201.
- ³⁵ On the 1966-7 review see: Dockrill, *East of Suez*, 157-99; Young, *Labour Governments*, 45-9; and, on the Washington meeting, Pham, *Ending*, 154-8.
- ³⁶ Diary, London to State (for Under-Secretary), 11 July 1966.
- ³⁷ LBJL, Francis Bator papers, box 3, memorandum for the President, 27 July 1966; Colman, 'London Ambassadorship', 336-7.
- ³⁸ Diary, 22 July 1966.
- ³⁹ Diary, 27 July 1966.
- ⁴⁰ LBJL, Francis Bator papers, box 3, memorandum for the President, 29 July 1966; and see Pham, *Ending*, 118-22.
- ⁴¹ The National Archives (TNA), Kew, PREM 13/808, Wilson to Johnson, 28 November 1967.
- ⁴² Bator memorandum, 29 July 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1964-68, Vol. XII, document 247, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v12/ch6> (accessed 23 June 2011)
- ⁴³ Sterling Library, Yale University, Dean Acheson papers, draft memorandum to Robert Schaetzel, 10 September 1965. I am grateful to Prof. Donna Lee of Birmingham University for pointing out this source.
- ⁴⁴ NARA, RG59, POL1UK-US, box 2786, Leddy to Rusk, 13 October 1966.
- ⁴⁵ LBJL, NSF, CF, UK, box 210, London to State Department (signed Kaiser), 1 March 1967.

⁴⁶ LBJL, NSF, CF, UK, box 211, Kohler memorandum for the Secretary, 41 April 1967.

⁴⁷ Henry Brandon, *Special Relationships: a foreign correspondent's memoirs* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 213-15; Pham, *Ending*, 151-4.

⁴⁸ Bruce Diary, 21 April 1967, with memorandum from Rusk to Brown.

⁴⁹ TNA/PREM 13/1528, Palliser to Maclehorse, 25 April 1967.

⁵⁰ Diary, Benton to Bruce, 29 April 1967.

⁵¹ Diary, 1 May 1967.

⁵² Diary, Bruce to Rusk, 6 May 1967.

⁵³ Diary, 10 May 1967; LBJL, NSF, CF, UK, box 211, London to State Department, 10 May 1967.

⁵⁴ Diary, 12 May, with Rusk to Brown and copy of Bruce to Rusk, 12 May.

⁵⁵ Dockrill, *East of Suez*, 189-90.

⁵⁶ Diary, Bruce to Rusk, 30 May 1967.

⁵⁷ Diary, 2 June 1967; Pham, *Ending*, 173-6.

⁵⁸ Diary, Bruce to Leddy, 20 June 1967.

⁵⁹ For example, LBJL, NSF, CF, UK, box 211, Rusk to Brown, 7 July 1967.

⁶⁰ Dockrill, *East of Suez*, 199-208; Pham, *Ending*, chapter 7; Young, *Labour Governments*, 49-52.

⁶¹ Diary, 6 January 1968, with copies of telegrams.

⁶² Diary, 9 January 1968, with copy of telegrams.

⁶³ Diary, 11 January 1968.

⁶⁴ TNA/PREM 13/1999, New York to Foreign Office, 11 January (including Brown quote); LBJL, NSF, CF, UK, box 212, Rostow to Johnson, 11 January 1967 (including

‘saddest days’); *FRUS, XII*, document 288,

<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v12/ch6> (accessed 23 June 2011).

⁶⁵ Diary, 12 January 1968, with Johnson to Wilson telegram.

⁶⁶ Diary, 14 January 1968.

⁶⁷ Diary, Bruce to William Bundy, 15 January 1968.

⁶⁸ Diary, Johnson to Wilson, 15 January 1968.

⁶⁹ Diary, 16 January 1968; LBJL, NSF, CF, UK, box 211, London to State, 16 January 1968.

⁷⁰ Diary, 17 January 1968.

⁷¹ Diary, 22 January 1968.

⁷² Diary, Bruce to Rusk, 23 January 1968.

⁷³ Diary, 16 January 1968.

⁷⁴ Diary, 8 February 1968.

⁷⁵ For example: C. J. Bartlett, *The Special Relationship* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 109-18; David Dimbleby and David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart* (London: BBC Books, 1988), 256; John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), 72.

⁷⁶ Alan Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1995), 138.