

“WE HAVE JUST ABOUT HAD IT”: JACK SLESSOR, THE FOREIGN OFFICE, AND THE ANGLO-AMERICAN STRATEGIC DEBATE OVER ESCALATION OF THE KOREAN WAR, 1950-51¹

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This paper develops a new understanding of the Anglo-American strategic debate during the first year of the Korean War, using hitherto absent material from the personal papers of one of its major participants: the British Chief of the Air Staff, Marshal John “Jack” Slessor. In deciding to intervene in the Korean conflict, Britain and the United States were united in motivations: reacting out of geopolitical, international and Cold War psychological considerations. But the enhanced vulnerability of British territorial possessions in East Asia, in addition to the proximity of the British homeland to Soviet nuclear forces in Europe, conditioned a more cautious strategic policy. In response to the strategic conflict with the escalatory policies of General Douglas MacArthur, the British state was not a unitary actor. Slessor and the military lobby engaged in vocal criticism of the Pentagon’s war prosecution, using their own channels in Washington to articulate concern. Conversely, Ernest Bevin’s Foreign Office was reluctant to take measures that could jeopardize his vision of an enduring transatlantic alliance. Building on the research of authors including Peter Lowe, the paper argues that this inter-departmental dissension within the British decision-making establishment was a vital determinant of transatlantic strategic policy. Only once the Foreign Office became confident that the alliance was sufficiently solidified did it emerge in full support of Slessor’s position. As a consequence of this newly established unity, the opinions of MacArthur’s London-based detractors were to prove an vital factor in precipitating President Truman’s decision to dismiss the controversial General.

1 I would like to thank my university supervisor Dr Adam Cathcart for his advice and encouragement, and my friend Bryony O’Neill, for all her help, support and friendship during my research.

Paradoxically, the Korean War of 1950-53 produced both operational unity and strategic disunity within the Anglo-American alliance to an unprecedented extent. On the battlefield, relations between the two powers remained close throughout the war, but possibly achieved their zenith during the period of February-March 1951 when the United States aircraft carrier *USS Bataan* was subordinated to the British chain of command, conducting joint operations with the heavy cruiser *HMS Belfast*.² This is indicative of integrated cooperation on a truly remarkable level, symbolizing the strength of attachment between the military forces of the two allies.

Nonetheless, behind this impressive cooperation lay a potentially dangerous strategic dispute. The high-risk, escalatory policy of General Douglas MacArthur, Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations Command, garnered strong criticism from the British Chiefs of Staff, led by the vocal Chief of the Air Staff, Sir John 'Jack' Slessor.³ This allied criticism contributed significantly to the leadership crisis which resulted in MacArthur's summary dismissal by President Truman in April 1951. MacArthur had previously endured complex personal relations with the British, unwilling to grant a substantial influence in his Japanese occupation regime despite being on good terms with Alvary Gascoigne, the British Political Representative, but sharing the British contempt for previous American incoherency in East Asia, castigating that the United States only went to war "step by hesitant step."⁴

Undoubtedly, MacArthur had some qualities of a brilliant general, as demonstrated by the Inchon gambit of September 15, 1950, but he was also unpredictable and potentially escalatory, once suggesting it would have been valid to lay a field of radioactive waste to sever Korea from Manchuria.⁵ This extreme example typifies the approach of the United Nations Commander-in-Chief, who interpreted his mandate as to take whatever measures were necessary to unify Korea under anti-Communist control. In contrast, the British professed unease with strategic policies which could lead to escalation into wider war, such as MacArthur's suggestion for pre-

2 Telegram from Vice-Admiral William Andrewes, Flag Officer Second-in-Command, Royal Navy Far East Station, to Admiral Sir Patrick Brind, Commander-in-Chief, Far East Station, 'Report of Proceedings, February 2-15, 1951', March 9, 1951, Kew, The National Archives: Public Record Office [TNA: PRO], ADM 116/6211; Admiral Alan Scott-Moncrieff, Flag Officer Second-in-Command, Far East Station, 'Report of Experience in Korean Operations, January-July 1951', Part 3: Operational, Section 1: Air, Kew, TNA: PRO, ADM 116/6230.

3 The institutional title "Chiefs of Staff" is used in this paper in reference to the British military leadership, as distinct from the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff.

4 Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (London: Heinemann, 1964), 331.

5 *Ibid.*, 384.

ventive airstrikes against Chinese airfields in Manchuria, and proved more willing to accept a permanent division of Korea if this enabled the southern Republic to survive. This strategic crisis culminated in a situation whereby, in the words of one senior British diplomat, the junior partner felt that “we have just about had it.”⁶

This strategic crisis is well narrated by the historian Peter Lowe, arguing that British criticism of MacArthur was an influential – if not the main determining – factor in provoking President Truman’s decision.⁷ Lowe correctly identifies Slessor as one of MacArthur’s staunchest critics, interpreting this crisis as evidence of the poor state of Anglo-American coordination, noting that “relations between Great Britain were marked by a bitter-sweet quality on the eve of the Korean War,” and that as a result of such disagreements, “the former quality rather than the latter was to become more pronounced in the course of the conflict.”⁸ Lowe’s research conforms to a dominant revisionist paradigm, moving away from the rose-tinted views of contemporary claims, such as that of British Prime Minister Clement Attlee that “[we] were treated as partners, unequal no doubt in power but still equal in counsel.”⁹

More recently, Thomas Hennessey’s research into diplomatic relations during the Korean War has signaled the possibilities for an emerging post-revisionist, or neo-traditionalist interpretation, greater reflecting the contemporary optimism of decision-makers.¹⁰ Although meritorious for reversing the revisionist trend, Hennessey’s study is limited by its overt focus on the diplomatic aspects of the conflict to the expense of more detailed analysis of military issues. This post-revisionist agenda entails opportunities to recast the Anglo-American relationship in order to reflect levels of British influence over strategic decision-making which exceed Lowe’s bleak outlook on the state of relations. Applied to the strategic problem, this approach, whilst

6 Telegram from Jebb (New York) to William Strang, Foreign Office Permanent Under-Secretary, April 6, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/92061, F 1017/11G.

7 Peter Lowe, “An Ally and a Recalcitrant General: Great Britain, Douglas MacArthur and the Korean War, 1950-1,” *English Historical Review* 105, no. 416 (1990): 624-653 (652). See also: Michael L. Dockrill, “The Foreign Office, Anglo-American Relations and the Korean War, June 1950-June 1951,” *International Affairs* 62, no. 3 (1986): 459-476; William Whitney Stueck, “The Limits of Influence: British Policy and American Expansion of the War in Korea,” *Pacific Historical Review* 55, no. 1 (1986): 65-95.

8 Peter Lowe, “The Frustrations of Alliance: Britain, the United States, and the Korean War, 1950-51,” in *The Korean War in History*, ed. James Cotton and Ian Neary (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 80.

9 Telegram from Attlee (Ottawa) to Bevin (London), December 10, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, PREM 8/1200, telegram 1297.

10 Thomas Hennessey, *Britain’s Korean War: Cold War Diplomacy, Strategy and Security, 1950-53* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 3-4.

acknowledging the existence of strong divisions of policy, suggests that relations were not permanently or significantly undermined.

This paper seeks to revise the prevailing revisionist understanding to provide a more nuanced, post-revisionist analysis of the strategic debate, in order to form conclusions as to the extent of British influence over United States military policy. Examining British decision-making on a non-unitary basis, it is possible to determine both the effectiveness of individual British actors in reacting to strategic divergence, in addition to the ultimate impact of British criticism in bringing about the downfall of MacArthur. To properly evaluate this critical strain upon the alliance, a sound understanding of the respective British and American war aims is first required. By utilizing previously absent sources including the private papers of Jack Slessor, contained within the Air Ministry records at the British National Archives, it becomes apparent that a major gulf existed between the Foreign Office and military lobby over the appropriate response to MacArthur's brinkmanship. Under the leadership of the Atlanticist Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, the former was much more reluctant to engage in a challenge to United States Department of Defense supremacy in strategic decision-making. As a crucial architect of the NATO alliance in Europe, Bevin's prioritization of transatlantic unity was sacrosanct; only after diplomatic relations had been cemented by the Truman-Attlee summit of December 1950 did the Foreign Office feel sufficiently secure to attack the escalatory policies which General MacArthur had been following since crossing the 38th Parallel.

Slessor was possibly MacArthur's strongest consistent critic, but it required pressure from his more reserved diplomatic colleagues before actors in Washington became responsive to British concerns. Through Foreign Office intervention in the strategic debate, something akin to Attlee's equality of counsel was finally achieved. It is therefore apparent that, during the first year of the Korean War, the power dynamics and priorities within the British decision-making establishment were vital in determining war strategy, necessitating this move beyond the traditional Anglo-American historical framework. Slessor's personal records reveal intense frustration with the Foreign Office agenda, but, as will be demonstrated, through diplomatic engagement as well as military criticism, British actors would ultimately play a decisive role in persuading President Truman to relieve MacArthur of his command in April 1951, to a greater extent than acknowledged hitherto.

Therefore, this discussion moves beyond more orthodox diplomatic histories to analyze how the domestic interactions of the different organs of the British decision-making establishment impacted upon alliance war policy.

Whilst it is somewhat true that, as put by the outspoken Chief of the Air Staff, “Anglo-American relations tend to suffer from being talked about too much,” given the subsequent history of the alliance in the Asian Cold War, it is important to note that the situation in Korea was very different to that in Vietnam, characterized by the poor personal relationship of President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson.¹¹ If Korea can be said to form a historical precedent for Anglo-American intervention in local conflicts on behalf of the international community in the post-1991 world order, then a proper understanding of the process of military decision-making within the coalition is far from irrelevant to the world today.

With Equal Promptitude: Decisions for War and Strategic War Aims

The outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950 and subsequent United Nations resolution two days later provoked quick, determined reactions by both Britain and the United States. Speaking before the House of Commons, Prime Minister Attlee declared that “the world is indebted to the Government of the United States for its prompt action. With equal promptitude, His Majesty’s Government resolved to support this action.”¹²

In determining intervention, the two key members of the Western alliance shared a general framework of motivations, suggesting that the subsequent strategic dispute was not the inevitable result of previous divergence in East Asian policy. Rather, relations were strained as a specific consequence of MacArthur’s drive for Korean unity at any cost and proposals for escalatory action against Chinese mainland targets. Following lengthy disagreement over the line to be taken towards the People’s Republic of China during 1949-50, the Korean War appeared to provide for a renaissance in alliance cooperation.¹³ This expectation was immediately fulfilled on the battlefield,

11 Letter from Slessor to Lord De L’Isle and Dudley (Secretary of State for Air), December 19, 1952, Kew, TNA: PRO, AIR 75/107 (Slessor Papers XXXIV). Anglo-American relations during the Vietnam War are dealt with well in: Sylvia Ellis, *Britain, America and the Vietnam War* (Westport: Praeger, 2004).

12 Statement by Clement Attlee, July 5, 1950, Hansard House of Commons, Volume 477, 491-492, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1950/jul/05/korea#S5CVO477PO_19500705_HOC_286, (accessed October 16, 2014).

13 The China dispute has generated considerable historiographical controversy. For negative interpretations of the state of Anglo-American relations, see: Robert Emmerson Watson, “The Foreign Office and Policy-Making in China 1945-1950: Anglo-American Relations and the Recognition of Communist China” (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 1996), 1; Gordon H. Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948-1972* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 42-43. This position has been challenged by authors claiming, more persuasively that the high degree of consultation represented a prevailing unity, see: James Tuck-Hong Tang,

with the British aircraft carrier *HMS Triumph* working in partnership with its United States counterpart *USS Valley Forge* – the first two carriers in Korean waters – to conduct coordinated airstrikes against Communist airstrips on July 3, 1950.¹⁴ Thus from the very outset of the war, the transatlantic allies appeared to be united in their response, although this unity would ultimately provide the genesis of the strategic debate.

To the Communist leaderships in Pyongyang and Moscow, the vivacity of the Anglo-American response was greatly unexpected. Previously, neither Western power had regarded the peninsula as an area of vital strategic importance: the United States Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, had infamously omitted South Korea from the defensive perimeter in his National Press Club speech of January 1950, whilst the Attlee government had demonstrated no discontent at their lack of influence in the preceding postwar period.¹⁵ To some extent, this attachment of little inherent importance to Korea continued: in a statement anachronistic with the intense concern over the military setbacks in Korea, the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Slim, succeeded in July 1950 in persuading the Australian Prime Minister that the Malayan Emergency – to which Australia was committing strategic bombers – had “first priority in the Cold War.”¹⁶

Yet this imperial preoccupation is not unsurprising. As Michael Schaller has demonstrated with regards to the position of Japan in United States strategic calculations, the importance of territorial possessions in Asia conditioned British decision-makers in favor of a strong reaction to the blatant aggression in Korea.¹⁷ James Griffiths, the British Colonial Secretary, explained that “a United Nations defeat in Korea would have had the most se-

Britain's Encounter with Revolutionary China, 1949-54 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 67; Qiang Zhai, *The Dragon, the Lion, and the Eagle: Chinese-British-American Relations, 1949-1958* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1994), 2. Other noteworthy articles or monographs on this well-analyzed topic include: Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Patterns in the Dust: Chinese-American Relations and the Recognition Controversy, 1949-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Ritchie Owendale, “Britain, the United States, and the Recognition of Communist China,” *Historical Journal* 26, no. 1 (1983): 139-158; Xiang, Lanxin, “The Recognition Controversy: Anglo-American Relations in China, 1949,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 2 (1992): 319-343.

14 Telegram from Andrewes to Brind, July 4, 1950, Kew, TNA:PRO, FO 371/84058, FK 1015/71.

15 Acheson's statement to the National Press Club, January 12, 1950, *Documentary History of the Truman Presidency: Volume 22: The Emergence of an Asian Pacific Rim in American Foreign Policy: Korea, Japan, and Formosa*, ed. Dennis Merrill (Bethesda: University Publications of America, 1998), 96-97. On British disinterest, see: Ra Jong-yil, “Political Settlement in Korea: British Views and Policies, Autumn 1950,” in *The Korean War in History*, ed. Cotton and Neary, 51.

16 Cabinet conclusions, July 17, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, CAB 128/18/6, CM (50) 46.

17 Michael Schaller, *The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 233, 293.

rious results [in Malaya] and the consequences of the involvement of China in the Korean War would of course be grave."¹⁸

The Malayan Emergency was a counterinsurgency campaign against Communist guerrillas hiding their Marxism behind national liberationist rhetoric, therefore interpreted by British policy-makers as comparable with the containment action against North Korea. Intervention in Korea was an expression of a preference to fight a hot war on the periphery of these adjacent interests, rather than wait until the conflict moved much closer to their doorstep. This was certainly a powerful argument given the Cold War struggle simultaneously being waged in the jungles of Malaya, and the fears shared by both Foreign and Colonial Office as to the possibility of a Chinese attack on Hong Kong. From May-September 1949, Britain had significantly augmented its forces in the latter, but remained under no illusions as to their inability to survive should the Korean War expand into wider regional conflict.¹⁹

With Hong Kong and Malaya thus hanging on a knife-edge, it appeared prudent to fight a localized war in Korea to prevent a more general Asian-Pacific war which could lead to the loss of Britain's colonial possessions just as easily as United States strategic interests in Japan or Taiwan. It is by no accident that Dean Acheson reminisces that the North Korean invasion "was an open, undisguised challenge to our internationally-accepted position as the protector of South Korea, an area of great importance of the security of American-occupied Japan."²⁰ Likewise, for Britain, the importance of Korea was to some extent predicated upon the more crucial importance of Malaya, as implicit in Field Marshal Slim's statement.

This geopolitical mentality resulted from the Domino Theory formulated by Malcolm MacDonald, the British Commissioner-General for South-East Asia. Reporting on the situation in Indochina, MacDonald argued that "if Indo-China is lost, then Siam and Burma will probably go the same way shortly afterwards. That will bring the power of international Communism to the border of Malaya."²¹ Korea represented another link in this chain, heightening

18 Memorandum by Griffiths for the Cabinet Defence Committee, November 15, 1950, *British Documents on the End of Empire: Series B, Volume 3: Malaya: Part II, The Communist Insurrection, 1948-1953*, ed. A. J. Stockwell (London: HMSO, 1995), 264.

19 Memorandum by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 'Hong Kong Policy in War', October 10 1949, Kew, TNA: PRO, DEFE 6/10, JP (49) 118(0).

20 Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), 405.

21 Telegram from Murray (Singapore) to Foreign Office on behalf of Malcolm MacDonald, December 19, 1949, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/75983, F 19106/1055/86.

fears as to the long-term impact of Communist ascendancy upon Britain's imperial position. Consequently, these geopolitical motivations strongly conditioned both London and Washington in favor of sticking out the Korean War even during the bleak winter of 1950-51: by perceiving direct stakes which both powers stood to lose, retreat was not an option. Korea may not have been important to Britain and the United States in itself, but as a line in the sand, it was to be held at all costs.

However, whilst in the case of the White House this produced certain acquiescence to some of General MacArthur's strategic idiosyncrasies, demonstrated through consideration of his Manchurian airstrike proposals as a possible last resort, Britain's geopolitical goals influenced a starkly different attitude. Because of the shared belief in the domino effect, the Attlee government became reticent at taking action in Korea which could provoke a widening of Communist intervention to areas such as Hong Kong. Thus Anglo-American involvement in Korea threatened to bring about the very ends it had been designed to prevent. Given Britain's greater geopolitical stake in East and South-East Asia, this was an understandable cause for concern.

In addition to the perceived direct consequences of unchecked Communist aggression, the partners in the 'special relationship' were equally worried by the broader implications of isolationism. In his memoirs, President Truman, at home in Missouri when Dean Acheson informed him of the attack, commented that "Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen and twenty years earlier."²² This indicates the importance attached to historical memories of the 1930s, illustrating a psychological motivation for involvement in the defense of a state so recently condemned as peripheral. As the historian Peter Farrar has noted, for Britain in particular, Munich remained a haunting memory; to follow a course of appeasement would endanger the credibility of the collective security system of the United Nations just as the crises of the 1930s from Manchuria to the Rhineland had destroyed that of the League of Nations.²³ Whilst the transatlantic allies had already demonstrated strength in resisting more subtle Soviet aggression in crises over the Dardanelles Straits in 1946 and Berlin in 1948, the unambiguous inter-state invasion challenged

22 Harry S. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope, 1946-1953* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956), 351.

23 Peter N. Farrar, "Britain's Proposal for a Buffer Zone South of the Yalu in November 1950: Was it a Neglected Opportunity to End the Fighting in Korea?," *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 2 (1983): 327-351 (327).

not only Western resolve but also hopes for the new international order, thus requiring a more belligerent response.

Whilst these concerns were not unimportant, on both sides of the Atlantic, Cold War perceptions were of far greater consequence, particularly in translating somewhat abstract *casus belli* into strategic policy. The Anglo-Americans were convinced of Soviet instigation behind the North Korean attack, making the war the latest but also the most serious crisis to emerge between the opposing blocs. The day following the invasion, the British Joint Intelligence Staff (JIS) noted that although there was no direct evidence of Soviet involvement, given the nature of the Soviet-North Korean relationship “it would appear unlikely that this invasion could have been undertaken without the approval of the Soviet leaders.”²⁴ This presumption was based upon the prevailing mentality in 1950 that all Communist movements were to greater or lesser extent subservient to Stalin. Of course, this is not to say that contemporary decision-makers were blind to the differences between various Communist groups, but that they chose to apply conscious ‘constructions’ which universalized their public policies, as suggested by Mark Lawrence with regards to the Indochina debacle.²⁵

The JIS also theorized “it is possible that the invasion has been provoked with Soviet connivance to exert pressure on the Western Powers in order to test their reactions” or “to divert attention from some other area, such as Formosa.”²⁶ In meeting this threat, it was somberly concluded that arms supplies alone would be insufficient to save the South Korean regime, proving that even before the crucial Security Council resolution of June 27, the British establishment was already preparing to make a direct military commitment without waiting to consult Washington. Britain was, as this document proves, an actor in Korea of its own volition, joining the United States war effort as the result of shared conclusions independently arrived at, not merely bandwagoning due to alliance pressure. Britain’s Chiefs of Staff agreed with the JIS assessment, believing that, despite the lack of solid evidence of Soviet instigation, the North Korean action was most probably a deliberate proxy war to offset the lack of Communist success in South-East Asia, test western resolve, and to divert Anglo-American resources from more vital theatres of the Cold War.²⁷

24 Note by the Joint Intelligence Staff, June 26, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, DEFE 11/193.

25 Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3-9.

26 Note by the Joint Intelligence Staff, June 26, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, DEFE 11/193.

27 Circular telegram from the Chiefs of Staff to various military commands, July 10, 1950, Kew, TNA:

Subsequent evidence available to decision-makers apparently confirmed these preconceptions. On July 3, 1950, a telegram from the British Political Representative in Japan, Sir Alvary Gascoigne, detailed intelligence confirming aircraft types used by the North Korean air force, ranging from obsolete Second World War dive-bombers to modern (if poor-performing) Yak-15 jet fighters.²⁸ Superficially, this intelligence seems insignificant, as North Korea was known to be a Soviet military-industrial client. But the appearance of Yak-15s supported the inference that Moscow had escalated support for its satellite due to foreknowledge of the invasion. Given the pervasive Cold War mentality, coupled with the initial JIS inclination to treat Stalin as guilty until proven innocent, foreknowledge implied responsibility.

More explicitly, Gascoigne's message conveys a G-2 intelligence summary of the interrogation of a North Korean Air Force major shot down near Suwon. The unnamed major ominously confirms that a Soviet colonel assumed operational command of the DPRK Air Force on June 27, with fifteen Soviet officers serving as "advisers".²⁹ This intelligence is highly important because, although Britain had committed naval forces on June 27, the decision to send ground troops was not made until July 25, 1950. Consequently, this seeming confirmation of pre-existing Cold War assumptions affected the background mentality from which the Cabinet decided to escalate their commitment. Later conversations with the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry revealed that Moscow had seriously considered sending a Spanish Civil War-style International Brigade from their Eastern European satellites, further justifying Western concern.³⁰ Whilst the accuracy of this information is dubious given the deep rift between Tito's Yugoslavia and Stalin's Soviet Union, this does not diminish the importance of such reports in influencing the psychological parameters of decision-making.

These motivations for involvement in the Korean War are vitally important in understanding the evolution of war aims on both sides of the Atlantic, therefore having a direct influence upon subsequent strategic perceptions. Although in complete agreement as to the necessity for involvement in the peninsula from a Cold War perspective, as well as from more tangible ge-

PRO, AIR 75/108 (Slessor Papers XXXV).

28 Telegram from Gascoigne (Tokyo) to Foreign Office, July 3, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/84059, FK 1015/82G.

29 Ibid.

30 Telegram from Peake (Belgrade) to Foreign Office, December 2, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/84121, FK 1023/218.

opolitical and international considerations, ultimately this unity of motive would be a major factor in explaining the growing strategic disunity.

To borrow words from British Major Ellery Anderson, the conflict in Korea had the potential to erupt “into a third Great War or first Nuclear War, and the end of civilization as we knew it,” as a result of its position in the Cold War struggle.³¹ In 1950, Britain was within reach of the Soviet atomic bomber fleet, unlike the United States mainland, thus accentuating fears as to the eruption of such a situation as Anderson envisaged. Accordingly, pre-occupation with Korea’s position in the Cold War, rather than in any intrinsic importance attached to the Seoul regime, produced in Britain a more cautious strategic outlook than the all-or-nothing gamble advocated by General MacArthur. Unlike Britain, United States decision-makers could afford the luxury of treating the Korean War as a zero-sum game. Consequently, it was in the direct interest of the British military lobby to engender caution upon their more bellicose allies.

There is Little Hope of Restoring Sanity: The Anglo-American Strategic Dispute

Phase I: The 38th Parallel Decision

Initially, Britain and the United States were in reasonable concurrence over the prosecution of the war, mirroring their strong alignment of motivations. Peter Lowe correctly notes that containment, previously envisaged in more defensive terms, evolved into a doctrine of “rollback,” with both partners supporting the decision to advance beyond the 38th Parallel in late-September 1950.³² Underneath the agreement of the decision-making establishments, however, lay deep reservation from the British Chiefs of Staff, particularly Sir John Slessor, who would become the most outspoken transatlantic critic of MacArthur’s inflammatory policies. Slessor, an experienced wartime commander and strong proponent of the decisive role of air warfare, argued persuasively that crossing the Parallel would be too great a military commitment. Such action would produce a prolonged occupation or “another Malaya” of irregular, counterinsurgency warfare, and was unnecessary given that the political objective of throwing back Communist aggression had

31 Ellery Anderson, *Banner Over Pusan* (London: Evans Brothers, 1960), 112. Anderson was a special operations expert who led joint US-UK-ROK teams behind enemy lines to inflict sabotage and train guerrillas.

32 Peter Lowe, “An Ally and a Recalcitrant General,” 631. On Britain’s support for this decision, see: Cabinet Conclusions, September 26, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, CAB 128/18/21, CM (50) 61.

already been achieved.³³ But despite his position at the top of the British military establishment, as *primus inter pares* of the three Chiefs of Staff, Slessor lacked the political capital to achieve dividends on his reservations.

By October 1950, isolated Foreign Office officials were also beginning to question MacArthur, representing the start of an alliance crisis which would not abate until the President took the momentous decision to remove the General of his command. Sir Roger Makins, Deputy Under-Secretary of State to Bevin, and a future Ambassador to Washington, noted on October 6 that the Chiefs of Staff were highly concerned about the potential for escalation. Britain's principal objectives in Korea were enunciated as being to restrain China from intervention and to localize the fighting. But Makins and the Foreign Office were not prepared to risk the global relationship they had been nurturing since 1945, stating that "we have no desire to take the very heavy responsibility of pressing the Americans to abandon any operations which may be contemplated north of the Parallel."³⁴ Merely the suggestion was made that North Korea be given time to consider UN calls for peace before proceeding with the advance.

Instead of heeding Slessor's warnings over the actual operation under planning, Makins articulated greater concern with the perennial British fear of the hypothetical scenario in which MacArthur might contemplate strikes against Chinese airbases in Manchuria, threatening to spark general war.³⁵ By focusing on the worst case scenario rather than the situation at hand, the expert opinion of Britain's military leaders was sidelined in favor of blind faith in the political benefits of maintaining the Anglo-American alliance. This, however, does not indicate a high degree of confidence by the Foreign Office in the integrity of the transatlantic relationship, which would ultimately prove far more durable than Makins feared by surviving the strategic dispute to emerge stronger than ever before.

In response to these much diluted concerns, Oliver Franks, the influential British Ambassador to the United States, extracted from the State Department reassurances that MacArthur's instructions debarred him from conducting military operations outside Korea. Further, Washington granted the modest concession of allowing a small gap between the UN resolution authorizing the advance beyond the 38th Parallel and its implementation.³⁶

33 Memorandum by Slessor, October 2, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, AIR 75/108.

34 Minute by Roger Makins (Foreign Office), October 6, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/84100, FK 1022/401G.

35 Ibid.

36 Telegram from Franks (Washington) to Foreign Office, October 6, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO

Such an outcome can hardly be regarded as a victory for British sanity over United States impulsiveness given that this was the Truman administration's consistent policy all along. Instead, it represents the lowest common denominator between the shrewd judgments of the Chiefs of Staff, the political calculations of the Foreign Office, and the more cynical appreciation by the State Department of the necessity for a limited degree of strategic accord.

Nevertheless, this appeared to satisfy the upper tier of the Foreign Office, whilst Slessor's colleagues had meanwhile become convinced, on the basis of warnings emanating via India, that China would intervene if UN forces pressed north. The British Chiefs advocated pushing Washington for a two-week breathing period for North Korea to agree terms. This was overruled by the Foreign Office, more politically committed to the Anglo-American alliance and possessed of the erroneous belief that the likelihood of a major Chinese intervention was not an "undue risk."³⁷

This dismissal of the warnings emanating from the professional military and intelligence lobby must stand alongside Neville Chamberlain's Munich euphoria as grave warning to the optimism of future politicians. Disillusioned by this blasé attitude, the British Ministry of Defence instructed their liaison representative in Washington, Lord Tedder, to communicate the Chiefs' anxieties, along with the belief that a crossing of the Parallel was not militarily necessary given the state of near-collapse of the communist armed forces. Tedder, Slessor's predecessor as Chief of the Air Staff, fulfilled a vital role as head of the British Joint Services Mission, allowing for more direct communication between the military leaders in Britain and the Pentagon (the headquarters of the United States Department of Defense), bypassing cumbersome diplomatic channels. This particular directive from his London colleagues was implicitly most critical of the current strategic situation, relaying Slessor's concern lest "the manner in which General MacArthur was taking the bit between his teeth in Korea should lead to a general conflagration in the Far East."³⁸ Such a venting of steam was far in advance of the cynical pragmatism demonstrated by the Foreign Office, but did not achieve any practical outcome.

During this first stage of the strategic debate, it can therefore be surmised that the disunity between the level of concern demonstrated by the British political and military lobbies was of fundamental importance in en-

371/84100, FK 1022/402G.

37 Minute by Roger Makins, October 5, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/84100, FK 1022/416G.

38 Telegram from Ministry of Defence to Tedder (Washington), October 5, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/84100, FK 1022/416G.

suring the lack of any meaningful influence upon allied war policy. Contrary to Attlee's epithet, in the period of September-October 1950, it was the inequality of power rather than any equality of counsel which appeared most striking in this element of the Anglo-American relationship. This would begin to change in response to the more urgent fears generated by Chinese intervention, prompting the Foreign Office to move closer to the Ministry of Defence line.

Phase II: Responding to Chinese Intervention

Following first contact against Chinese forces on November 6, 1950, MacArthur's doubters became more influential in London, producing a vocal response to the perceived hardline of the United States. In Britain, this culminated in the Chiefs of Staff plan on November 13 for a demilitarized buffer zone north of the Hungnam-Chongju line.³⁹ The buffer zone proposal, formulated by the outspoken Slessor, was communicated to the State Department by the more diplomatic Bevin, demonstrating a move on the part of the Foreign Office towards acceptance of the reservations of their military colleagues.

Perhaps unfortunately, given the carnage to be endured in the remaining 32 months of war, this otherwise not unreasonable plan was subsequently rejected because military events had already overtaken such a proposal, with UN forces north of this position and MacArthur planning for his end-the-war offensive of November 24. As related to the French, the United States was anxious "to demonstrate their military strength to the Russians," rendering the British proposal, which would have entailed a withdrawal from the current front line, unacceptable.⁴⁰ Again, linkage can be drawn between this intransigence and the abstract, Cold War calculations which influenced the decisions for war by both the Truman and Attlee governments. Whilst for Britain, Chinese intervention was another step closer towards unacceptable escalation, thus warranting a cautious reaction to forestall the potential Russian blitzkrieg lurking on the psychological horizon, the same understanding of events prompted MacArthur and the Pentagon to follow a policy of strength through brinkmanship. Ultimately, for the United States military, there was potentially far less to lose. Thus MacArthur's reaction to British

39 Minutes of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, November 13, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, DEFE 4/37, COS (50) 178.

40 Minute by R. H. Scott (Foreign Office), November 28, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/84121, FK 1023/239G.

arguments in favor of a negotiated solution was to dismiss them as a retreat to the appeasement mentality of the 1930s, claiming shortly before this particular proposal that his closest ally's policy "finds its historic precedent in the action taken at Munich."⁴¹

For Britain, the dilemma was to either risk a major breach in Anglo-American relations or blindly accept policies which could bring the great powers over the brink of global war. The buffer solution could have allowed time for political measures to forestall either unattractive eventuality. R. H. Scott, Assistant Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign Office, formerly head of the South-East Asian department where he had gained valuable experience in containing Communist power, suggested a more bold line: to bluntly ask the United States, "are they ready for a war in the Far East which might develop into a global war?"⁴² Ultimately, this level of pressure was not applied due to the pervasive timidity with which the Americophile lobby approached alliance relations. Bevin's vision of transatlantic unity remained sacrosanct, debarring any meaningful intervention in the strategic debate.

In the diplomatic sphere, the Truman-Attlee summit of December 4-8, 1950, essentially called to resolve the strategic question over the potential usage of the atomic bomb, is significant in altering Foreign Office perceptions of this decision-making dilemma. British military fears at this time centered upon an ambiguous statement given by the President on November 30, implying active consideration was being given to the use of atomic weapons, before suggesting that the final decision could rest with the commander in the field: General MacArthur. Given MacArthur's role as the fundamental source of the Anglo-American strategic dispute, the extent to which the White House were willing to assuage Attlee's concerns was a key step in establishing a strategic accord directly between the political leaders, over the heads of their warring military advisers. It is therefore apparent that the primary question on the *political* agenda had become the *military* escalation which MacArthur had begun through his refusal to countenance any caution in his drive to the Yalu.

Although producing a fairly anodyne joint declaration, the conference played a vital role in changing the psychology of the Anglo-American alliance. Attlee reported to Bevin that "it was significant that the United States Government implicitly and on occasion explicitly assumed that we are their

41 Telegram from MacArthur (Tokyo) to Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 9, 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1950, Volume VII: Korea* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1976), 1108.

42 Minute by R. H. Scott, November 28, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/84121, FK 1023/224.

principal ally and that we must be prepared in the last resort to continue the struggle together and alone.”⁴³ Whilst little of substance was achieved beyond a very vague assurance on atomic weapons, albeit one which symbolized a major concession to British sensibilities, the discussions were instrumental in creating an atmosphere of trust previously absent between the administrations over East Asian policy. Significantly, this would enable the Foreign Office to go further than before in pressing the Truman administration to exert greater centralized control over war policy.

Further, the leadership summit produced a working understanding on the differences over China. As Attlee explained to the National Press Club:

The objectives of our two countries are the same, but it is inevitable that with our different geographical conditions, and in view of the particular responsibilities which we each carry, there should be some difference of emphasis. We see things from different views, with lights and shadows from one direction and from another.⁴⁴

By recognizing and respecting the way in which their differing interests in East Asia resulted in different policies, the diplomatic transatlantic relationship was finally able to move beyond the stalemate over this topic which had festered since the abortive September 1949 Acheson-Bevin discussions on recognizing Communist China, which had aborted in recognition of their fundamental differences. Consequently, agreement was possible on two questions with direct relevance to the strategic debate.

Firstly, Acheson agreed to give careful considerations to Attlee’s objections to the United States Department of Defense plan for a “limited war” against China, which would thankfully never be accepted by the more restrained State Department.⁴⁵ Of greater immediate importance, in private conversation, Truman gave the Prime Minister the desired assurance on atomic weapons, thus explicitly restraining MacArthur’s influence. Regarding this assurance, the British and American records differ. In Attlee’s official minutes, “the President said that he had reaffirmed to the Prime Minister that the Governments of the United Kingdom and Canada were partners

43 Telegram from Attlee to Bevin, December 10, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, PREM 8/1200, telegram 1297.

44 Speech by the Prime Minister at the National Press Club, December 6, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, PREM 8/1200. This is a theme repeated by Attlee in an article of 1954, see: Clement R. Attlee, “Britain and America: Common Aims, Different Opinions,” *Foreign Affairs* 32, no. 2 (1954): 190-202.

45 British record of fifth Truman-Attlee meeting, December 7, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, PREM 8/1200.

with the United States in the atomic weapon and that the United States would not consider its use without *consulting* the United Kingdom.”⁴⁶ However, this discussion is omitted from the main United States record, instead noted in a separate memorandum in which Truman asserts only that “he would not consider the use of the bomb without *consulting* the United Kingdom,” not pretending to agree to joint ownership, and refusing to put anything in writing because “if a man’s word wasn’t any good it wasn’t made any better by writing it down.”⁴⁷

Further diluted, the public joint communiqué stated that “it was [the President’s] hope that world conditions would never call for use of the atomic bomb... [and] also his desire to keep the Prime Minister *informed* of developments which might bring about a change in the situation.”⁴⁸ It would appear that, owing to the domestic difficulties hounding the Truman administration, the White House was unwilling to reveal that they had pledged full consultation, albeit in an informal agreement only valid whilst Truman was still in office. Nonetheless, this was a considerable concession by the senior partner, indicative of a move towards more genuine compromise, and the British delegation remained “entirely satisfied” with the understanding reached.⁴⁹

This accord opened up the opportunity for a new phase in relations, allowing British strategic concerns to finally influence alliance war policy. The atomic question therefore represents a significant watershed, providing the Foreign Office with the confidence to adopt a more assertive line.

Phase III: Retreat and Dismissal

The strategic dispute culminated in the final controversy surrounding MacArthur’s prosecution of the war in 1951. Criticizing the so-called “big bug out,” the retreat in face of massive Communist advances, Slessor suggested following the precedent of Burma in 1943 – falling back to the best defensive position and holding it at all costs, contrary to the accepted cut-and-run approach.⁵⁰ This marked a deeper phase of disunity: one in which the more

46 Ibid. Emphasis added.

47 Memorandum for the record by Ambassador-at-Large Philip Jessup, December 7, 1950, *FRUS: 1950, Volume VII*, 1462. Emphasis added.

48 Press communiqué issued jointly by the President and Prime Minister, December 8, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, PREM 8/1200. Emphasis added.

49 Cabinet conclusions, December 12, 1950, Kew, TNA: PRO, CAB 128/18/45, CM (50) 85.

50 Draft message for transmission to the United States, January 5, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, AIR 75/108. In this message, Slessor rather audaciously suggests that his prescriptions and criticism could be suitably transmitted directly from Prime Minister Attlee to President Truman, but in the end a more sedate approach was followed via the British military liaison in Washington, see: Telegram from

precise tactics adopted by the United States were under question as equally as their wider strategic gambits. Yet surprisingly, given their previous reluctance, it was the attacks of the Foreign Office upon MacArthur's potential for escalation which proved more decisive in bringing President Truman's decision to a head.

As aforementioned, Foreign Office criticism of strategic policy had its roots in October 1950, with isolated civil servants such as R. H. Scott noting that "until the three figures, MacArthur, Syngman Rhee and Chiang Kai-Shek disappear from the scene, there is little hope of restoring sanity." This theme of despotism was taken up later by Alvary Gascoigne in Tokyo, terming MacArthur "a dictator whose every word was law, even in Washington."⁵¹ Such mounting criticism was not missed by the "dictator," who in a remarkable demonstration of pettiness banned any Americans from visiting Tokyo airport to bid Gascoigne farewell at the end of his tenure in February 1951, which the British had no doubt was intended as a deliberate insult.⁵² However, before the new transatlantic accord established by the Truman-Attlee summit, the Foreign Office had proved unwilling to go as far as the Chiefs of Staff in openly criticizing the Pentagon and its choice of commander, rendering such forthright opinions essentially marginal, unrepresentative of official policy.

Reflecting upon this taut period, Jack Slessor's private papers reveal that the crucial issue behind his disaffection was not only disagreement with MacArthur's decisions – hardly a novel situation for senior commanders in coalition warfare – but at the lack of consultation granted to British military representatives. Writing to a prominent military analyst at the New York Herald Tribune, he noted that "we are prepared loyally to back you in your new world position, as long as you treat us like the Great Power we still are and not (as you sometimes do) as though we were on a level with Portugal."⁵³ Slessor continued to castigate, in this remarkably forthright message, the lack of Pentagon control over their general, the ease with which the UN front line was allowed to capitulate, before stating ominously that "MacArthur's

Ministry of Defence to British Joint Services Mission, January 5, 1951, *DBPO: Korea*, 296-299.

51 Minute by R. H. Scott, 'General MacArthur's Policy in Korea', October 19, 1950, Kew, TNA:PRO, FO 371/84108, FK 1022/581G; Memorandum by Gascoigne, February 6, 1951, Kew, TNA:PRO, FO 371/92061, F 1017/5.

52 Minute by R. H. Scott, February 17, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/92706, FJ 1891/4.

53 Letter from Slessor to Major George Fielding Eliot, October 18, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, AIR 75/107.

'leadership' in Korea... shook us to the core... We are in the atomic front line and you are still the hell of a long way from it."⁵⁴

This final comment cuts to the heart of this difference on strategic opinion. Because Korea was part of the wider Cold War framework, the strategic vulnerability of Britain to Soviet atomic attack could not be ignored as a decision-making factor. In addition to concerns over the potential impact escalation could have upon Hong Kong, to some extent the survival of the British state hinged upon military action taken on the other side of the world in the defense of a nation previously dismissed as insignificant. MacArthur was just too much of a risk for this fragile balance to endure.

The Chief of the Air Staff personally visited Washington as head of a military envoy in January 1951 to follow up on the Truman-Attlee summit, where his private preparatory notes reveal he was committed to persuade the United States to grant greater consultation to the British *military* lobby, rather than the previously ineffective Foreign Office. Consequently, it appears from study of his personal papers that, by this time, Slessor was no longer content to allow the Foreign Office to dilute his opinions and was ready to take matters into his own hands. With interesting candor, Britain's air force leader bitterly recalled, in this highly personal document, that he had opposed crossing the 38th Parallel but was overruled by the political establishment, following blindly in MacArthur's wake, and leaving the disillusioned Chiefs of Staff "hanging on to the Cabinet's coat-tails."⁵⁵ During these talks, the respected air marshal met with mixed success, reaching agreement with General Bradley on the point that refraining from bombing Manchurian airbases forestalled greater Communist intervention and enabled the UN to maintain their vital air superiority, but crucially failed to persuade the Pentagon to give up their defense of MacArthur.⁵⁶

Following unapproved, unilateral action, such as his ultimatum to the Communists on March 24, 1951, the Foreign Office finally increased their pressure upon the comparably sane State Department to have MacArthur rebuked. Even Gladwyn Jebb, British representative at the United Nations, joined the military in outright criticism, characterizing the situation as "a classic instance of the tail wagging the dog."⁵⁷ The separate organs of the British decision-making establishment had emerged in unity, with the depth of feeling now so strong that, as ranted by Jebb, "unless [MacArthur] is

54 Ibid.

55 Preparatory note for Anglo-American staff talks, January 15, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, AIR 75/108.

56 British record of a meeting in the Pentagon, January 15, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, AIR 75/108.

57 Telegram from Jebb to Strang, March 26, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/92061, F 1017/10G.

shortly repudiated publicly, we have just about had it.”⁵⁸ The situation had reached a climax so desperate that the previously paramount anxiety of upsetting the United States, in light of the strengthening of political relations since December 1950, now appeared less urgent than the need to restore order to proceedings. Fortunately for Britain, the State Department was responsive to their anxieties, admitting in March 1951 that they were struggling to restrain MacArthur.⁵⁹ This candor implies a fundamental shift in the Washington balance of power: through pressure, the Foreign Office had reinforced the anti-MacArthur lobby in the State Department which remained highly sympathetic to British views.

Whilst Truman’s decision to remove MacArthur was precipitated in the short-term by his exchange of condemnatory letters with a leading Republican, challenging the collective face of foreign policy, in the longer-term it was not United States but British concerns which provide the most important cause of this watershed. By applying consistent indirect pressure through their military channels, Slessor and his colleagues had done little to influence Washington policy. However, by eventually persuading the Foreign Office to relay their concerns directly to State Department officials and through direct contacts including the January 1951 Pentagon talks, Slessor’s criticisms created a background of mistrust which the President could not ignore. As a consequence of British interference, the balance within the United States administration was tipped against the escalatory MacArthur, in part due to the strong personal sympathies of Truman and Acheson for their British counterparts.

Provoking strategic crises with Britain provided many of the nails in MacArthur’s coffin, for it was unacceptable to Truman that his closest ally was questioning the extent to which he was in control of his own governmental policy.⁶⁰ For Attlee, it had always seemed a suspicious situation in which, during the Wake Island Conference of October 1950, it was the head of state that had to fly out to visit his subordinate general and not the other way round.⁶¹ Certainly by spring 1951, the Truman administration had also realized the many abnormalities in this relationship, emerging in full accord with MacArthur’s critics in the Foreign Office and Chiefs of Staff. In achieving this transformation in strategic policy, the influence of British actors in tipping the balance within the United States administration cannot be over-stated.

58 Telegram from Jebb to Strang, April 6, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/92061, F 1017/11G.

59 Minute by R. H. Scott, March 10, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, FO 371/92061, F 1017/9G.

60 Lowe, “An Ally and a Recalcitrant General,” 652; Truman, 375-376.

61 Clement R. Attlee, *As It Happened* (London: William Heinemann, 1954), 199-200.

It is noteworthy that this otherwise surprising level of British influence was not achieved in isolation. Similarly, in the diplomatic discussions over whether to brand China an aggressor and impose sanctions through the United Nations, shortly after the Slessor-Pentagon talks of January 1951, British doubts had decisively altered United States policy. On January 22, the British Cabinet had voted to oppose the United States resolution unless revisions were implemented delaying the sanctions question until after a final mediatory attempt by the United Nations Good Offices Committee. Representatives of the State Department met with British Ambassador Oliver Franks to reach a compromise ultimately favoring the Foreign Office line, leading to the Cabinet conclusion that their "patience and firmness" had less to "considerable modification" of their senior ally's diplomatic policy.⁶² Although separate from the MacArthur debate, this evidence would suggest that, in the period following the direct political and military summits of December-January 1951, the United States was increasingly willing to sacrifice their decision-making sovereignty, following the British lead in order to maintain alliance unity. In a war fought in the name of an international coalition, such unity was a vital consideration for the Truman administration, even if this entailed challenging the wisdom of the Pentagon over its support for General MacArthur.

Truman's momentous decision was treated with undisguised approval from Slessor, exclaiming in a letter to the Princeton military guru Edward Mead Earle that "thank God the President has grasped the nettle."⁶³ Not only had the former hero of the Pacific alienated the British by risking general war, but he had seriously shaken NATO confidence in United States leadership, threatening to undermine the cornerstone of Western defense. Because NATO was still very much in its infancy, trust between its leading partners was still of paramount importance.

Following MacArthur's removal, the ongoing Anglo-American strategic dispute was not entirely resolved, but division never again reached the proportions of 1950-51. Even in 1952, Slessor continued to disagree with his Pentagon counterparts over issues including the military efficacy of bombing mainland China (Slessor opposed such action not on moral grounds but because it would likely solidify the Sino-Soviet alliance and invite an escalation of the war), and the propaganda gift to the communists of indis-

62 Cabinet conclusions, 22 January 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, CAB 128/19/5, CM (51) 5; Cabinet conclusions, 29 January 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, CAB 128/19/10, CM (51) 10.

63 Letter from Slessor to Professor Edward Mead Earle, April 12, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, AIR 75/108.

criminate blind bombing.⁶⁴ But with the absence of the particularly divisive personality of Douglas MacArthur, these concerns were more easily ameliorated: the alliance had learned its lessons from the first year of war, and the United States would prove willing to grant Britain greater consultation rights through the eventual appointment of a British deputy to General Mark Clark.

Conclusion: British Governmental Politics and Strategic Policy

Whilst the allies were never entirely in agreement over the higher prosecution of the war, the efforts of the Foreign Office and State Department to preserve unity over the heads of their more belligerent military colleagues clearly represent the dynamics of an alliance much solidified since the China dispute of 1949-50. Over the issue of recognizing Communist China, it was sufficient for the political establishments in London and Washington to agree to differ, but by late 1950, a public face of unity was a vital concern for both parties.

As a logical conclusion from the shared Anglo-American perception of Korea as a vital Cold War battleground, the conflict contained an inherent risk of escalation which could damage both British and United States interests in East Asia. Nevertheless, despite this agreement over motivations, the more formal, long-term control exerted by Britain over its Asian colonies than the United States occupation regime in Japan, made it clear to British policy-makers that they stood to lose far more than their allies from an expansion of the war. This perennial fear received reinforcement from the sobering acknowledgement of the strategic vulnerability of the British homeland to Soviet attack. Thus the disagreement over strategic policy had its roots in the very high level of agreement between the two powers upon the origins of the war.

This analysis of records from both the Foreign Office and the personal papers of Jack Slessor reveals the disunity with which the British decision-making establishment approached General MacArthur's war prosecution. Slessor and his colleagues were entirely justified in their military judgments, but Bevin's Foreign Office was also vindicated in its hesitant approach, withholding from overt criticism until it was certain that the alliance could survive such dissension. Because of this delay, diplomatic relations were built to a new peak by displays of unity typified by the rhetoric of the Truman-At-

64 Letter from Slessor to Brigadier Ewbank, March 13, 1952, Kew, TNA: PRO, AIR 75/108; Letter from Slessor to Sir Kenneth McLean, Chief Staff Officer at the Ministry of Defence, August 2, 1951, Kew, TNA: PRO, AIR 75/108.

tee summit. Consequently, when Bevin's diplomats emerged in unequivocal support of Slessor's ardent position by 1951, the dynamics of the alliance enabled an accord to be reached and unity maintained. Accordingly, it is evident that the differing priorities of British decision-makers played a decisive role in determining the strategies adopted by the senior member of the alliance in a conflict zone on the other side of the world.

The greatest significance of this new understanding is found in the implication of these internal British divisions upon President Truman's decision to remove MacArthur from his command. Whilst Slessor's opinions were more vocal, their indirect transmission via the British Joint Services Mission and the opposition of the Foreign Office significantly diluted his potential to influence his counterparts in the Pentagon before the face-to-face meetings of January 1951. In contrast, because of the less confrontational approach adopted by the Foreign Office, Bevin was able to cultivate opinion within the State Department – itself much more influential than the Pentagon with the White House – against MacArthur's escalatory brinkmanship. Overall, the dynamics of this political dichotomy produced sustained pressure upon the Washington establishment. Once united, MacArthur's British doubters were therefore able to capitalize on this legacy to ensure their voices were both heard and acted upon. Throughout this process, British and United States decision-makers had come to better understand their points of agreement as well as their differences, as best exemplified by the consensus reached during the Truman-Attlee summit, thus enabling a new degree of consultation to arise from the ashes left by General MacArthur.

Anglo-American relations survived the strategic crisis much solidified, in great part the result of the cautious policy implemented by the Foreign Office. In this sense, strategic divisions actually contributed to a strengthening of the "special relationship," by providing for the necessity of greater diplomatic unity. Because British detractors successfully persuaded their United States counterparts of the validity of their reservations, the removal of MacArthur was thus symbolic of the start of a new period, not necessarily of strategic agreement, but of greater strategic compromise. The astounding level of coordination between British and United States units on the operational level further facilitated this surprisingly smooth transition from confrontation to cooperation.

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that British opinions were the vital long-term factor in forcing President Truman's hand, in addition to providing an important short-term impetus during the more assertive period of January-April 1951. Although, as Peter Lowe suggests, it was the military estab-

lishment under the leadership of Jack Slessor which provided the strongest consistent criticism, Slessor's private papers reveal the extent to which his opinions were marginalized during the period preceding the military summit of January 1951. It would thus appear that the calculated approach of the Foreign Office paid off in both laying the groundwork for British influence and in executing it. It is by no accident that Dean Acheson, in the interim between the President's fateful decision and its announcement, warned the Foreign Office against further public criticism of MacArthur.⁶⁵ The State Department feared creating the impression that the British had played a major role in MacArthur's downfall, thus playing a determining role in United States military policy. But from the records contained within the British National Archives, this interpretation would appear very close to the truth.

Such a conclusion is of more than mere historical interest. With extensive Anglo-American military commitments to the Middle East in the current century, which themselves have generated considerable tactical and strategic debate, it is important to understand the genuine equality of counsel that has at times characterized this relationship. The enduring lesson of the MacArthur crisis would appear to be that British policy-makers can best achieve transatlantic influence through caution and persistence, not outright criticism. Through proving their worth as loyal allies during the Korean War, Britain was successful in exerting a restraining influence, indicating that transatlantic military relations can be far more than just a one-way street. **Y**

65 Hennessey, 185.