

Briefing Memo

Britain and the Dissolution of the Mediterranean Fleet: Convergence of the End of Empire and Alliance Management

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Introduction

In the modern world of various multi-layered elements, such as interdependence for security issues and multilateral cooperation including alliances, the presence of military forces stationed overseas by a state with superior military power has greatly influenced the international relations of the region. If these forces are reduced in scale or dismantled altogether, there have been frequent incidents of turbulence involving related countries or various regional actors. In particular, in the case of withdrawal of a nation that had fulfilled the main role of security in the region, it could induce issues such as a “power vacuum” or disturbance in the broader regional order.

Today, the United States immediately comes to mind when thinking of nations with military forces stationed in various countries around the world including Japan. Looking at the modern era, however, there are similar examples involving other countries as well. Britain, which built the largest empire in the modern world, is first on this list. Some of its overseas bases are still in existence even today. Furthermore, in the late 20th century, Britain also experienced the withdrawal from its military involvement around the world as the empire was dismantled following the decline of its national power. Examining this background and impacts from the historical perspective provides a reference point for discussions of security issues today when the United States’ military commitment worldwide is shaking up.

As an example of Britain’s naval force, the Royal Navy, this paper will explore the process of the dissolution of the Mediterranean Fleet in the middle of 1960s. There have been few in-depth discussions of this event and most have merely touched upon it as an episode within broader historical research.¹ Rather than verifying the circumstances behind the policy-making process in Britain that led to the dismantling of the Mediterranean Fleet, this paper will focus on the context of events while looking at the issues concerning domestic politics and international relations Britain faced at that time. Then, it will argue the impacts caused by the disappearance of the Mediterranean Fleet and its historical implications.

¹ As main reference works, see C.J. Bartlett, *The Long Retreat: A Short History of British Defence Policy, 1945-70* (London: Macmillan, 1972); Eric J. Grove, *Vanguard to Trident: British Naval Policy since World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987); Robert Holland, *Blue-Water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean since 1800* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

1. The British Empire and the Mediterranean Fleet

(1) Britain's Naval Hegemony in the Mediterranean

Britain began to make inroads into the Mediterranean as far back as the 18th century. Later, in the 19th century, when the British Empire reached its apex as encapsulated by the phrase “Pax Britannica,” its presence in the Mediterranean also increased in lockstep. Britain’s powerful naval presence was the underpinning of its imperial interests spreading around the world.² Furthermore, in the late 19th century, when the “Empire Route” to India, British largest colony, was established after the opening of the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean came to occupy an even greater strategic importance for Britain.

In the Mediterranean, not only securing commercial and trade interests, Britain also formed a network of military bases under its control placed in strategic positions throughout the region. These bases such as Gibraltar, Malta and Cyprus became elements embodying British military involvement for a long time. Although not integrated into the formal empire, there were many areas as well where Britain wielded its influence either directly or indirectly. In this sense, the Mediterranean was an archetypical sphere of influence for Britain.

The Mediterranean Fleet was tasked with the mission of maintaining British hegemony in the region and securing control of the sea along the Empire Route. The fleet’s importance was second only to the Home Fleet, and its Commander-in-Chief was considered among the most honoured and prestigious posts in the Royal Navy.³ Also, when the competition for influence among major powers in the Mediterranean intensified in the 19th century, Britain was always at the focal point of these issues. Whether it be confrontations with the traditional competitor namely France, the Great Game with Russia, or the Eastern Question involving the Ottoman Empire, Britain was consistently the most important actor in international relations involving the Mediterranean.

In the first half of the 20th century, Britain’s national strength gradually weakened, but the importance of the Mediterranean did not change. As the focal point of two world wars, the Mediterranean during this era also set the stage for Britain to defend its empire. However, greatly exhausted by the Second World War in particular, Britain would be swallowed up in the trend of post-war decolonisation, with the Mediterranean being no exception.

(2) The Mediterranean Fleet with Decolonisation, the Cold War and Alliances

India’s independence held significant meaning in the dissolution of the British Empire in the early post-war period. In other words, the standing of the Mediterranean, which was clearly viewed as a key component of the Empire Route, was greatly shaken. On the other hand, the international situation at the time also included such factors as the formation of the Cold War, which extended the life of the British Empire. The Western Bloc including the United States preferred that British military bases around the world should be retained where they overlapped with hotspots of the Cold

² Among numerous research on the history of the British Empire at sea, as a classic work, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Penguin, 2017).

³ Bartlett, *The Long Retreat*, p. 219; Holland, *Blue-Water Empire*, p. 334.

War.⁴ Particularly, the Eastern Mediterranean became a focal point and the Truman Doctrine, one of the most famous statements in the early Cold War, originated in Britain's request for American assistance because the former could not contribute to the defence of Greece.

Stability of the Mediterranean was also a critically important to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Due to a wealth of its historical experience in the region, Britain's potential influence as a major power in the West could not be ignored. In addition, from the late 1940s to early 1950s, when the struggle for leadership among allies over the defence of the Mediterranean grew in intensity, it also became an issue of national prestige for Britain. Then, discussions within NATO on the creation of a naval force responsible for the region let the Royal Navy find a new role for the Mediterranean Fleet. In December 1952, an agreement was reached on the establishment of the NATO Mediterranean Command and its commander would be an officer from the Royal Navy, namely Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean Fleet. Headquarter of the command was set up in Malta, British crown colony at that time, and naval and air bases operated by Britain in the Mediterranean were also provided to its allies.⁵

At the same time, Britain still held interests around the world including in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Fleet secured these interests.⁶ However, the torrent of decolonisation and dismantling of the empire could not be stopped. Following the Suez Crisis of 1956, which symbolised the fall of imperialism, British influence in the Mediterranean declined sharply. Independence movements erupted in Cyprus and Malta, where Britain had military bases, forcing Britain to make difficult decisions in response. Combined with upheaval in these places, the existential meaning of the Mediterranean Fleet was also greatly shaken.

As the worldwide trend of decolonisation accelerated, British military involvement overseas diminished more and more. At this point, Britain faced a difficult economic situation ever since the Second World War, and then cutting expenditure including the military had been an urgent issue. With the birth of the Labour government led by Harold Wilson in 1964, from the combination of fiscal policy and social welfare, Britain's worldwide military presence became a crucial point, regarding not only its scale but its very need. In this context, the Mediterranean Fleet would head toward its eventual ending.

2. Aspects of the Dissolution of the Mediterranean Fleet

(1) Reconsideration of Military Commitment in the Mediterranean

A certain consensus was formed within the Labour government around 1965 over the reduction of

⁴ Wm. Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Decolonization," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22:3 (1994), pp. 462-511.

⁵ However, there were significant operational restrictions, such as the Sixth Fleet of the US Navy not being in the charge of the command. MC 0038/3, Report by the Standing Group to the North Atlantic Military Committee, "Command Organization for the Mediterranean," 5 December 1952, NATO Archives, Brussels. Also see Dionysios Chourchoulis, "High Hopes, Bold Aims, Limited Results: Britain and the Establishment of the NATO Mediterranean Command, 1950-1953," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 20:3 (2009), pp. 434-452.

⁶ COS (55) 10, "'Defence Questions in the Middle East Area': COS Committee Memorandum Revising JP (54) 101," 7 January 1955, *British Documents on the End of Empire, Series B, Volume 4: Egypt and the Defence of the Middle East, Part III, 1953-1956*, no. 566.

defence force in the Mediterranean. The possibility of conflict occurring in this region had declined and the presence of NATO's naval force became a major basis for Britain to trim down its defence spending.⁷ When the Wilson government established the *Statement on the Defence Estimates* in the same year, Britain's total military force was around 400,000 including the homelands. Among the units deployed overseas, forces stationed east of the Suez and army in Germany including Berlin accounted for a majority. On the other hand, the number of personnel allocated to the Mediterranean totaled 23,000 and the naval force was only small in scale comprising escort ships and several minesweepers.⁸

In January 1966, discussions between Britain and the United States took place on the white paper called the *Defence Review* prepared by the Wilson government. Denis Healey, British Defence Secretary, attended these talks and presented a rough sketch for significantly reducing Britain's naval forces deployed in the Mediterranean. American counterparts asked that Britain should maintain its worldwide role and military presence while showing understanding of British fiscal situation.⁹ Nonetheless, British policy plan to attempt to shrink its military involvement worldwide did not change, and the same can be said for the Mediterranean. In February the following year, Healey submitted a memorandum to the Cabinet on the future composition of the military force overseas. This memorandum specified that Britain would completely withdraw naval forces permanently stationed in the Mediterranean including naval reconnaissance aircraft. It also indicated that the relationship between the Royal Navy and NATO in this region would be renegotiated.¹⁰

In the *Defence Review* published in the same month, the government's view was once again confirmed to be that core policy issues for Britain were with Europe and NATO, while the Mediterranean was mentioned in clear distinction from these, indicating just how low of a priority it had become. Specifically, the military responsibilities of each base and treaty obligations were listed, and while there were examples such as Gibraltar where the case to maintain units and military facilities was clear, a plan was presented to reduce forces in Malta and Cyprus.¹¹ With the government looking for spending cuts across all domains, reconsidering defence spending cuts and military commitment in regions outside Europe including the Mediterranean became unavoidable to maintain Britain's military presence in NATO and Europe as the focal point of its defence policy.

⁷ SHIBAZAKI Yusuke, "Sekaiteki Eikyoryoku Iji no Kokoromi: Suez Ito kara no Tettai to Igrisu no Chuto Seisaku [Attempts to Maintain Global Influence: Withdrawal from East of Suez and British Policy towards the Middle East]," in KIBATA Yoichi and GOTO Harumi (eds), *Teikoku no Nagai Kage: 20 Seiki Kokusai Chitsujo no Henyo [Long Shadow of Empire: The Transformation of International Order in the Twentieth Century]* (Kyoto: Mineruva Shobo, 2010), p. 73.

⁸ Parliamentary Command Paper, Cmnd. 2592, *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1965*, February 1965, pp. 15-16.

⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, January 27, 1966, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XII: Western Europe*, doc. 255.

¹⁰ Annex A, "The Revised Force Structure," attached to C (66) 34, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Defence, "Defence Review: Future Force Structure," 11 February 1966, CAB 129/124, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, London [hereafter cited as TNA].

¹¹ Cmnd. 2901, *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1966, Part I: The Defence Review*, February 1966, pp. 5-6, 7-8. With regard to references to the Mediterranean, while it can simply be read as Britain was to "fulfill" (discharge) responsibilities and obligations in the Mediterranean, at the same time, it also gives the impression of a deeper meaning of the verb, which is to "relinquish" (discharge) such responsibilities and obligations. In any case, the conscious choice to express the idea with a verb that carries more than one meaning in a sentence is suggestive considering the context at that time and the circumstances after that.

The *Statement on the Defence Estimates* of 1966, announced at the same time as the *Defence Review*, presented a policy to provide other units “from time to time” to supplement the naval forces of the Mediterranean composed mainly of destroyers, frigates and minesweepers. In addition, the more than 20,000 military personnel stationed in this region mostly belonged to the army and air force, with only 2,200 from the navy.¹² Furthermore, a target was established through the *Defence Review* to reduce military spending in the Mediterranean budgeted to be £38 million all the way to £23.5 million.¹³ The weighting of commitment in the Mediterranean through naval forces was being greatly reduced in British defence policy. Over the medium to long term, the plan was to end the stationing of Royal Navy forces in the Mediterranean by around the early 1970s and to have the duties of the Commander-in-Chief carried over by the Commodore of the Home Fleet.¹⁴

(2) Last Days of the Mediterranean Fleet

Under such a situation, the *Statement on the Defence Estimates* of 1967 published in February provided a clearer picture than the *Defence Review* of the previous year. While many carefully thought out statements were used because of consideration toward allies, and the document indicated that British forces would remain stationed in each region for some time, there was no change in the policy of further reducing military commitment outside Europe. In the Mediterranean, where Britain was moving ahead with the removal of units and closure of facilities in Cyprus and Malta, this trend was even clearer. Regarding the naval forces, there was an increasing number of cases where ships assigned to the Mediterranean Fleet were despatched to Southeast Asia, Africa, and the West Indies. For example, there was a period when a small escort squadron of the fleet up to four destroyers and frigates were all deployed from the Mediterranean to increase assistance for the naval blockade associated with the Rhodesia crisis of 1966, along with two of the six minesweepers. To balance this shortage, “units of the Home Fleet were detached to the station for visits” only “when opportunity occurred.”¹⁵ The Mediterranean Fleet, which had once been a major force, gradually saw its existential meaning decline.

As before, European allies on the Mediterranean requested that Britain maintain its naval forces there and they had some expectations that Britain would deploy forces withdrawn from other regions around the world to supplement its forces in the Mediterranean. Ultimately, however, Britain’s policy of reducing military involvement was applied without exception to the Mediterranean as well.¹⁶ A memorandum prepared within the Ministry of Defence in March 1967 provided momentum to the trend toward withdrawing forces stationed in Malta and indicated a series of events leading to the reduction of military forces in the Mediterranean. Admiral Sir John Hamilton, who served as Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean Fleet, was to be replaced with the Flag Officer Malta in June

¹² Cmnd. 2902, *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1966, Part II: Defence Estimates 1966-67*, February 1966, pp. 5, 99.

¹³ C (66) 107, Note by the Secretary of the Cabinet, “The Economic Situation,” 18 July 1966, CAB 129/125, TNA.

¹⁴ Annex A to DP 77/66 (Final), Report by the Defence Planning Staff, “Defence Expenditure Study No. 2: Cyprus and CENTO (Short Term),” 26 January 1967, DEFE 6/101, TNA.

¹⁵ Cmnd. 3203, *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1967*, February 1967, pp. 7-8, 20; Grove, *Vanguard to Trident*, pp. 286, 297.

¹⁶ Letter from Hohler (Assistant Under-Secretary, Foreign Office [FO]) to Murray (Athens), “Britain and the Eastern Mediterranean,” 23 February 1967, FCO 9/5, TNA.

1967 and at the same time the Officer would hold his post in NATO. In addition, with the retirement of Admiral Hamilton, the NATO Mediterranean Command was also disestablished and reorganized into a new unit, and Britain once again selected personnel.¹⁷

As a result, there was no meaning in appointing commander of the NATO Mediterranean Command from the Royal Navy, and in May 1967 an announcement was made that this position would be abolished.¹⁸ Ministry of Defence quickly held discussions for establishing a new command post responsible for the Mediterranean and Middle East given the approaching dissolution of the Mediterranean Fleet. On the other hand, there was growing opposition to the removal of forces, especially in Malta, which would be greatly affected by the reduction of British military presence.¹⁹ At that time, the issues surrounding Britain's military involvement in the Mediterranean and surrounding regions remained critical.

In any case, the dismantling of the Mediterranean Fleet was carried out steadily. On 5 June 1967, Admiral Hamilton hauled down his naval ensign as the last Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet. The fleet, which had a decorated history in the Royal Navy for centuries, ended its role here. Afterwards, the few Royal Navy vessels left in the Mediterranean became an outpost unit of the newly organized Western Fleet. Additionally, the position of Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Fleet, too, was changed to a two-star ranking in which the Flag Officer Malta served concurrently as Commander of NATO's Southeast Mediterranean Command. As for the latter, it was under the Allied Forces Southern Europe based in Naples, Italy, with the position subordinate to a commander of the US Navy. Furthermore, the Admiralty House, the residence of successive Commander-in-Chiefs, located in Valletta, the capital of Malta, would later be remodeled into the National Museum of Fine Arts.²⁰ In this manner, once the main force of the Royal Navy quietly disappeared from the Mediterranean which had supported the British naval mastery.

(3) Significance and Impacts: Between Empire and Alliance

Based on the overview of the developments leading up to the dissolution of the Mediterranean Fleet, in this section the author will now relate the series of events in the context of Britain's overall defence policy. To begin with, although it was more stable than in the early period of the Cold War, the Mediterranean was still strategically important yet vulnerable for NATO. In addition, Britain's defence cuts during the period finally led to the decision of withdrawing from East of Suez in January 1968,²¹ which also appeared to be planned and implemented to concentrate military capabilities on Europe and NATO. At the same time, it was clearly recognized as a problem not to be ignored by the British government that the Soviet Navy became more active in the Mediterranean. In that sense, the decision to retreat from East of Suez was also a rational decision for Britain in order to

¹⁷ Ref: 272/1/1, Minute by the Director of Naval Plans, "Malta: Current Position," 13 March 1967, DEFE 24/509, TNA.

¹⁸ Grove, *Vanguard to Trident*, p. 297.

¹⁹ DP 23/67 (Final), Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, "Command Structure in the Mediterranean Area," 9 May 1967, DEFE 25/243, TNA.

²⁰ Peter Elliot, *The Cross and the Ensign: A Naval History of Malta 1798-1979* (London: Granada Publishing, 1982), pp. 224-225.

²¹ As a classic monograph on this topic, see Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

contain the expansion of Soviet power in the Mediterranean.

Following the above context, the dissolution of the Mediterranean Fleet can be viewed as an event resulting from Britain's reorganization of its worldwide military commitment in order to allocate limited resources efficiently in an area of core interests under the condition of long-term decline. Another influencing factor could be that Britain was in the transitional period of transforming its essence of naval power from the traditional fleet-power with the expansion of new military technology such as nuclear missiles during this period. In any case, the dissolution of the Mediterranean Fleet can be explained as a necessity for Britain to ensure both the reduction of its defence spending and national security interests, and continued contribution to NATO, as the fleet had already lost its practical function and become a mere shell.

Moreover, the condition of international security around the Mediterranean at the time did not allow Britain to withdraw its military involvement from the area. The Six-Day War, which broke out on 5 June 1967, the very day the Mediterranean Fleet was dismantled, rapidly intensified military tension in the region where the likelihood of conflict would have otherwise diminished. As a result, it was an irony in history that the Royal Navy including an aircraft carrier rushed to the Eastern Mediterranean.²² In addition, although the British military presence became smaller with events such as the dissolution of the Mediterranean Fleet, the reconsideration of its decision was frequently sought after, and actually the British government never intended to completely give up its naval influence in the Mediterranean.²³ Even though its importance may have lessened compared to before, the Mediterranean was still closely connected to the national security of Britain and a region that contained strategic interests with allies. Moreover, even amidst the withdrawal of worldwide military commitment, Britain still emphasized its role of contributing to NATO, with the Mediterranean remaining one of the areas of interest.

As the British military and political presence overseas was significantly reduced, the dissolution of the Mediterranean Fleet was undeniably symbolic of the once-powerful nation now in decline. In fact, since then the security of NATO's military interests in the Mediterranean was further leaning towards the hands of the US Sixth Fleet, as the main power of the alliance. Consequently, there have been some arguments over the "Americanization of the Mediterranean" at that time, both in name and in reality.²⁴ Nevertheless, a closer look at the process of dismantling the Mediterranean Fleet reveals more nuanced history. This event was larger than simply an episode in the period of a declining empire, but also a result of Britain's trial and error, as a state faced with limits of worldwide military commitment, in fulfilling its responsibility within the global issues at the time.

Conclusion

The dissolution of the Mediterranean Fleet definitively symbolised the reduction of British

²² Holland, *Blue-Water Empire*, p. 334.

²³ Despatch No. 19, Shuckburgh (Rome) to Brown (Foreign Secretary), 16 June 1967, FCO 46/2, TNA; PUS/67/1067, 55/10, Letter from Dunnett (Ministry of Defence) to Gore-Booth (Permanent Under-Secretary, FO), 30 June 1967, FCO 46/2, TNA.

²⁴ Ennio Di Nolfò, "The transformation of the Mediterranean, 1960-1975," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume II: Crises and Détente* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 256-257.

military presence overseas. Following ups and downs, however, Britain would maintain its military force albeit small in scale in regions around the world and has played a decisive role as an important actor second only to the United States during various incidents from the Cold War to the post-Cold War. The events explored in this paper can be viewed as shedding light on the historical background that established Britain's standing in the contemporary world from the perspective of security.

Today, Britain is expanding its worldwide role once again, including in the Indo-Pacific region. With this garnering a certain level of attention, new light is being shown on the history of British military commitment.²⁵ In addition, Britain's policy making process in dismantling the Mediterranean Fleet can provide an additional line when reviewing more general issues, such as exploring the roles of a state in the international community while acknowledging various constraints. In this sense, exploring British historical experiences again can perhaps shed light on several issues of significance.

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²⁵ SHINOZAKI Masao, *Hikitomerareta Teikoku: Sengo Igrisu Taigai Seisaku ni okeru Yoroppa Ikigai Kanyo, 1968-82 Nen [Empire Detained: Britain's Commitment outside Europe in Post-War British External Policy, 1968-82]* (Tokyo: Yoshida Shoten, 2019), as an example. For British movements in recent years, also see TANAKA Ryosuke, "The UK's Military Commitment to the Indo-Pacific," National Institute for Defense Studies, *Briefing Memo* (March 2020).