



Andrea Benvenuti, “The British Military Withdrawal from Southeast Asia and its Impact on Australia's Cold War Strategic Interests,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 5, Number 2 (May 2005): 189-210.

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Andrea Benvenuti provides a comprehensive assessment of the Australian response to British moves towards military withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore in the late 1960s. Following in the footsteps of David Goldsworthy, he makes detailed use of British and Australian official archives relating to this issue.[1] The Australian focus on the Malaysia-Singapore area as a linchpin for Australian security has a long history, going back to the days of the Singapore base in the interwar period. In the Cold War era Malaya (as it then was) was the scene of a Communist insurgency from 1948 to 1960. Australian forces fought alongside British, New Zealand and Malayan troops in combating that insurgency. As a Communist insurgency, it was easy for Australian governments to place the conflict in a Cold War context. However developments in the Malaysia-Singapore area were also part of the process of decolonization that was occurring more generally at this time. The proclamation of the Malaysian federation in September 1963 was the outcome of a British scheme to achieve the decolonization of Singapore and the British territories in north Borneo (Sarawak and British North Borneo, or Sabah as it subsequently became); Brunei was excluded after the Azahari revolt of December 1962. A federation of Malaya and Singapore alone would have put the Malays in a minority position; bringing the north Borneo territories in kept the Chinese in a minority and helped to preserve Malay political predominance. Indonesia under Sukarno portrayed Malaysia as a creature of British neocolonialism; hence the launching of Konfrontasi (Confrontation) designed to “crush” the federation at birth. With Confrontation effectively ending after the failure of the attempted coup in Indonesia on 30 September 1965, it became much easier for Britain to think in terms of reducing and even withdrawing its military forces from Malaysia-Singapore.

Benvenuti’s article takes us through the various phases in the Australian response to British decisions about withdrawal from “east of Suez”, and Malaysia and Singapore in particular. He shows how the Australian approach was influenced by the “forward defense” strategy: Australia was best protected by having Western forces (American and British) stationed in Southeast Asia, with Australian forces playing a supporting role. In addition, the article highlights the value the Australian government placed on the British presence as a stabilizing influence for Malaysia and Singapore.

Benvenuti suggests that from the early 1960s there were doubts in Australia about Britain retaining its military presence. The election of the Wilson government in Britain in October 1964 was a crucial development. As early as June 1965 (i.e. before the end of Confrontation) plans were being drawn up for British withdrawal, and the issue was discussed at quadripartite talks (UK, US, Australia, New Zealand) in September 1965. Uncertainty had also been exacerbated by Singapore’s separation from Malaysia in August 1965. Benvenuti reports the diary observation

of Peter Howson (Minister for Air in the Menzies government at this time) that there were three views as to how Australia should respond. The view of Menzies was that Australia should assist Britain to stay in the area; Harold Holt and William McMahon (both future prime ministers) believed Britain was bluffing and Australia should adopt a “tough” stance; John Gorton (also a future prime minister) believed British withdrawal was inevitable and Australia had to decide whether to stay in Southeast Asia alongside the US or to withdraw to “Fortress Australia.”

With Menzies’s retirement in January 1966 (being replaced by Holt), the likelihood of Britain receiving a more generous hearing from Australia became less. In preparing for withdrawal the British approach was to show some flexibility about timing, but not about the ultimate goal. The Australian approach was to argue for strategic planning on a quadripartite basis in the hope that this would lock Britain into making some significant contribution on a continuing basis. When Denis Healey visited Australia in January 1966 in his capacity as Secretary of State for Defence, he proposed the establishment of alternative defense facilities for Britain in Australia. Holt was cautious about this but did consent to the possibility being investigated.

The formal ending of Confrontation in 1966 added momentum to British plans for withdrawal; more important, however, was the sterling crisis of that year that added a powerful economic argument to the case for Britain readjusting its role to suit its circumstances. A preliminary decision in favor of withdrawal had been reached by March 1967. Australian strategy at this point relied on enlisting the support of the US, while also cooperating with New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore to try to dissuade the British government from going ahead with its plans. This strategy clearly failed, with the Wilson government announcing in July 1967 its intention to withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore by the mid-1970s. Following the devaluation of sterling in November 1967, the British government decided in January 1968 that withdrawal would be completed by March 1971. Lobbying by the US, Australia and the other affected states succeeded in having this withdrawal delayed, but only until December 1971.

An important part of the Australian response to this issue concerned policy on Australia’s future security role in Southeast Asia. At the time of the “east of Suez” debate, Australian forces were engaged alongside the US in Vietnam. There was no question of Australian forces remaining in Vietnam should the US withdraw. In the case of Malaysia and Singapore the question was more open. Benvenuti examines the discussion of Australia’s defense role in late 1967 when it was decided that Australian forces would remain in Malaysia and Singapore but only on a provisional basis. The final decision would be dependent on the outcome of the Vietnam war; US disengagement there would lead to the withdrawal of all Australian forces from Southeast Asia. Although not discussed in this article, Australia’s decision to participate in the Five Power Defence Arrangements in 1971 did involve a modification in this approach.

One of the striking features of this episode in British-Australian relations is the mismatch between British and Australian perceptions. Australia was very much focused on the Cold War context in Asia. From the Australian perspective, forward defense was a strategy for keeping “Communist expansionism” as far from Australia’s shores as possible; China was viewed as the ultimate force behind this expansionism. Indonesia was an issue because of concerns about instability there and the way in which Sukarno had linked the country to the more radical forces in international politics, including at least some of the significant Communist states. Forward

defense was not a strategy that Australia could pursue on its own; it required the U.S. and Britain to have forces in the region, with Australia then making a commitment alongside its allies. This approach helps to explain the strong backing Australia gave to the U.S. commitment in Vietnam, as well as its support for the British presence in Malaysia and Singapore. When we turn to the British perspective we find that the emphasis is very much on Britain's post-imperial role. Quite apart from the economic difficulties being experienced by Britain in the late 1960s, there was a widespread view that the "east of Suez" role was redundant in the aftermath of decolonization. Once the Confrontation issue had been resolved there was no compelling reason for maintaining British forces in the region. These forces should be withdrawn or at least phased out. British perceptions placed little emphasis on the contribution British forces in Malaysia and Singapore made towards the Cold War strategy of containing Communist power (and specifically Chinese power) in this region; Wilson's refusal to commit British forces in Vietnam was of the same ilk.

Given this mismatch in perceptions it is interesting to evaluate the effectiveness of the Australian strategy for modifying British policy. The major emphasis was on developing a coordinated approach with Australian allies and partners, specifically the U.S., New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore, as a means of pressuring Britain. The preferred approach was to develop a common strategic concept. If all the parties, including Britain, agreed on the strategic approach, then one could move to consider the contribution that each state should make. The problem was that the mismatch between the British approach and that of the other parties was so great that it could not be bridged. Even the Wilson-Healey forces were only prepared to go as far as extending the withdrawal over a longer period of time;^[2] the pro-Europeans and the left in the British government wanted to accelerate the process. Even the U.S., with its much greater leverage than Australia could bring to bear, was unable to modify British policy. Australia, with much less bargaining power, had little impact. It is difficult to judge whether the situation would have been different if Menzies had not retired as Australian prime minister in January 1966. He had been more inclined to assist Britain as a means of retaining some element of the British presence in the region. Presumably, therefore, Healey's proposal to examine the possibility of establishing British defense facilities in Australia would have received a better hearing. This might have locked Britain into maintaining some kind of presence based in Australia rather than in Malaysia and Singapore. On the other hand, given the subsequent development of events, it is unlikely that the trajectory of British withdrawal would have been significantly modified. This scenario would also have involved an increase in Australia's defense spending. As Clark Clifford discovered when he toured the Pacific countries in 1967 to canvass the prospects for increased support for the U.S. in Vietnam, this was not something that Australia was prepared to do. Australia therefore had to adjust to looming British withdrawal on the basis of what it was prepared to do, given also its perceptions of the various contending forces in the region.

With the benefit of hindsight it is useful to reflect on the long term significance of British withdrawal for Australia. Arguably one consequence was that Australian governments subsequently placed an even stronger emphasis on the American alliance than had previously been the case. With a dual emphasis on the US and Britain as Australia's "great and powerful friends" (to use Menzies's phrase from the 1950s), there were more possibilities for Australian diplomacy. If there were differences of emphasis as between the US and Britain, Australia was in a position where it could support one power rather than the other or adopt an intermediate position, while still remaining within the Western alliance; Indochina in 1954 and Suez in 1956

provide good examples, as do the differences of emphasis in relation to China. Subsequent Labor governments (1972-75, 1983-96) and indeed the Coalition government of 1975-83 liked to emphasize their “independence” but it was within a context where the American alliance nevertheless remained of central importance; the British relationship could not act as a mitigating factor as it had done on occasions in the past.

Another way of looking at the British withdrawal episode is as part of the process of Australia adjusting to the “end of empire”. From this perspective it stands alongside the debates about British entry to the Common Market in 1962-63, the concerns about immigration changes in Britain restricting the entry of Australians, and the shift from a “British” Commonwealth to a “multicultural” Commonwealth of Nations (reflected in the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965). While Australia had long been preoccupied with developments in its immediate region, trade patterns were also shifting, with Japan replacing Britain as Australia’s leading export destination in the late 1960s. Whatever the legalities of political independence, Australians had derived a sense of security through their close relationship with Britain in the imperial and Commonwealth context. The events of the 1960s undermined that sense of security.

While David Goldsworthy interprets the events of the 1960s as the end of the influence of “race patriotism” as a motivating force in Australian external policy,[3] it is not so clear to me that cultural factors in a broader sense do not have some influence on the behavior of states. Australia and the UK both supported the US in the Gulf conflict of 1990-91 and subsequently in the Iraq war of 2003 and the continuing campaign in that country. A coincidence in the resolve of the Howard and Blair governments to support the US in Iraq for various political and moral reasons might be more important than the influence of an “Anglosphere” in explaining this latest situation, but to argue that cultural affinity plays no role seems to be going too far. Kim Beazley, leader of the Labor Opposition in Australia, described the bombings in London on 7 July 2005 as an “attack on our family.”[4] While Britain might not think of itself as a global power, it is able to deploy its military forces in a global context; even Australia can do this in a more limited way. Not having fixed bases around the world does not necessarily prevent a state with advanced logistical capacity from deploying its forces in a variety of situations around the world.

British withdrawal might also be viewed as one of a series of changes affecting the international situation in the Asia-Pacific in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Perhaps the most significant of these was the Sino-American rapprochement as symbolized in the Shanghai Communique of February 1972. This had been preceded by Nixon’s announcement of the Guam Doctrine in 1969, presaging moves to end the Vietnam War. Although that war continued for a number of years, the trend away from direct US involvement in ground conflicts in Southeast Asia was clear. The establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 should also be noted, signifying as it did Indonesia’s acceptance within the group of noncommunist states in Southeast Asia. ASEAN also portended a determination by its members to have more influence over Southeast Asian affairs. Countries such as Australia needed to adjust to these new circumstances. There was some suggestion of this in the decision of 1967 to give consideration to maintaining Australian forces in Malaysia and Singapore after British withdrawal. The Five Power Defence Arrangements proposed a more long-term approach, albeit on a small scale compared with the previous British presence. Although Australian ground forces were withdrawn in 1973, the FPDA has endured over succeeding decades as one element in the

security architecture of the region. In relation to Vietnam Australia had no option but to withdraw its forces in response to American policy; this withdrawal was the final step in the demise of forward defense. The Coalition government in Australia was slow in responding to developments in US China policy in 1971-72. Many of the adjustments in Australian policy in response to the more pluralistic and less Cold War centered situation in the Asia-Pacific occurred during the period of the Whitlam Labor government (1972-75).

Readers will find that the article by Andrea Benvenuti provides essential background for understanding the response of the Australian government to British withdrawal. The work on the archival sources in Australia and Britain is exemplary. One area where the research might be extended is in relation to official sources for the US, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. Although such research is unlikely to modify the conclusions reached in the article, it would throw light on how the other governments interacted with Australia in relation to this episode.

Notes:

[1] David Goldsworthy, *Losing the Blanket: Australia and the End of Britain's Empire* (Melbourne, 2002), ch. 8. Previous assessments have used non-archival sources e.g. Derek McDougall, "Australia and the British Military Withdrawal from East of Suez," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (1997), 183-94.

[2] See Matthew Jones, "A Decision Delayed: Britain's Withdrawal from South East Asia Reconsidered," *English Historical Review*, Vol. 117, No. 472 (2002), 569-95.

[3] D. Goldsworthy, op. cit., p. 172.

[4] "Howard condemns London attacks," ABC News Online, 7 July 2005, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200507/s1409553.htm> (accessed 2 November 2005).

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