Britain in 1950. Between Europe and the Wider World

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he British twentieth century was often presented as a time of implacable decline and retrenchment. The debate on British competitiveness[1] – political as well as economical – started well before the First World War mainly because of the German bid for world power, but reached its climax only after the two world wars. By then the United Kingdom had become "the world's greatest debtor", incapable or lacking the will to deal with the remnants of the *Pax Britannica.* In fact, this entire debate concerning relative decline, eroding competitiveness, lack of will to rule, overstretched resources was concentrated in a single question: could we have done better?[2]

By then, in the middle 1960s, most of the options in external policy were already closed. Financial problems resulting mainly from the highly unstable balance of payments as a consequence of a booming internal market and of the losses in export markets (one could add the high level of investment abroad), the willingness to maintain the pound as a reserve currency for the international financial system, the never-ending stop-and-go economic cycle materialised in periodical inflation and overheating of the economy, all these made Britain an unique case among the highly industrialised nations of the West and underlined the continuous "retreat from power" of the Western World's "sick man".[3]

Today it is easy to overlook Britain as an extremely important factor in international relations, but this was not the case during the first post-war decade when it was the second military and economic power of the West, with huge responsibilities in the Far East, Middle East, Africa and Europe.[4] For instance, at the end of 1945 British forces in Germany stood at 488,000 men, while the number of American military was 390,000 and was decreasing fast.[5] Even in the sixties it was the remnants of the British presence in the Middle East and South Asia that made it much easier for the United States to concentrate their resources to solve the problems of Indochina.

This most difficult task of fundamental readjustment in the field of external relations fell on the shoulders of the Attlee Governments and foreign policy was not the only thing that Labour was supposed to reform. There was a powerful feeling in Britain that this government "marked the end of an old phase, as much as it heralded a new beginning".[6] But at the same time the Labour government was essentially a cabinet of veterans, their instincts being largely influenced by their earlier experiences as members of Parliament, union representatives and, finally, as members of the Coalition that won the last war. This was a powerful conservative element which added to their instinctive anti-communism and to the rapid

breakdown of the Great Alliance[7] assured in fact a remarkable degree of continuity with Churchill's principles in foreign policy, much more visible than initially intended and certainly much criticised by Bevan's "Keep Left" group. In fact, foreign policy is certainly the field in which Labour innovated least.

British elite perception of the post-war world was deeply influenced by the experience and history of the twentieth century.[8] Bevin or the officials around him used to go even further and they made often reference to the experience of the two great British peace-makers: Castlereagh in Vienna and Lord Curzon in Paris, each of them architect of a new Europe.

A vital part of this historical legacy was undoubtedly the experience of the recent world war with its two "sub-experiences": that of social cohesion and that of a bankrupt victor. As Hall-Patch put it: "we are the world's greatest debtor nation and we are committed to a policy of full employment. These are both factors with wide implications."[9] Economic weakness and socialist transformation of the society were indeed vital domestic factors with wide external implications as they put a heavy strain on UK's resources and demanded a high level of state control.

The attempt to study the British perceptions and policy at the end of the 1940s on the European role that the United Kingdom ought to play is without doubt a distortion upon history. We should always keep in mind that the same years witnessed the existence of British interests and responsibilities in every continent and consequently the impossibility for Britain to give Europe the primacy that might appear normal today.[10] One should not forget the Middle East and especially the consequences of the Palestine mandate, the Iranian problem and the giant investments in Abadan[11], the restless efforts to keep India inside the Commonwealth and the Colombo Conference which apparently gave substance to the concept of Commonwealth, the attempts to keep Malaya or Burma out of Communist hands, the numerous tentative to reach an agreement with Egypt about what was still the biggest military base in the world: the Suez[12], the

problem of the sterling balances, and above all the consensus which dominated the British elite regarding the world role which Britain must play[13] and regarding the implications of retreat, although in this there were nuances.

To ask from the British policy-maker of 1950 to foresee all the implications of the European integration process and to take into account the consequences of economic decline at a time when Britain enjoyed the status of a second best only to the Unites States means to abuse the advantage of perspective which the historians enjoys. Nevertheless, "the sense of a lost opportunity remains".[14]

The very same first postwar decade saw the establishing of the priorities of the British external policy whose traits are still recognisable today: "reluctant Europeans", a "special relationship" with the other great Atlantic power, together forming a highly exclusive "Anglo-Saxon" club, a certain consciousness that events worldwide affect British interests and security, although less obvious since the time when Shanghai, for instance, was the greatest concentration of British capital outside the United Kingdom.

During the first postwar years UK's external policy was based on what would be theorised in the fifties by Churchill as the theory of the three concentric circles: United States, the Commonwealth and Europe (the importance in this order), a direct legacy of the last war. The Second World War proved in fact the importance of the American alliance, the importance of the ability to shape the decisions in Washington, even to a small degree, the opportunities that the Commonwealth offered for promoting Britain's status in the world, but also the centrality of Europe in the global balance of power.

The three concentric circles (or "pillars" if we follow Bevin's terminology) theory was also a very convenient one because it allowed Britain to delay an option which became inevitable with the shrinking resources available for the implementation of its great power foreign policy. This order in priorities was certainly not generally acknowledged by all British officials and even less so the methods to implement them. Churchill's

wartime administration had not done much to encourage the creation of an organism of rational policy planning (although the American administration is a much more appropriate example) and at the end of the war the Foreign Office, the Treasury and the military found themselves at odds in many fields and especially in Europe and the Middle East with no authority able or willing to co-ordinate their efforts beyond the day-to-day business and emergencies. The Prime Minister's personality[15] and reluctance – not unlike Roosevelt's – regarding premature planning, combined with the tensed relations with De Gaulle, the obvious primacy of the military matters, and an intense scepticism regarding the future of the defeated continental Western Europe combined to turn Churchill into an inveterate enemy (at least until the final months of the conflict) of the idea of a British-lead Western Bloc.[16]

The three pillars were at the same time a re-affirmation of the global status of the British power and a way to attain it. At the end of the war "most British policy-makers tended to view this relative decline as transient... their central preoccupation was to restore Britain's credentials as a world power".[17] This global dimension was underlined by the prodigious participation to the deliberations of the Council of Foreign Ministers, by the subscription to the world financial system established at Bretton Woods[18] (this adherence to the principles of an essentially multilateral economy would prove a great impediment to the British participation to any Western European economic arrangement which could turn protectionist – as the French certainly wished).

Anyway, to simply present this theory would be an oversimplification because these three circles were strictly bound together by immensely numerous connections of various natures that required from the British diplomacy a constant balancing and a constant reviewing of modalities for using its influence. The three circles theory had other disadvantages as well, because it made impossible a high degree of rationalisation at the practical level and the long-term planning. It was an important factor in making

Britain an object of international relations rather than a subject. The other was the obvious economic impossibility of sustaining all the existing commitments even on a medium-term, a situation that meant that the allocation of new resources to some of them could dislocate the fragile equilibrium on which rested the British "superpower".

Even Britain's debts were global in character. Of the 4.7 billion pounds accumulated as an external debt at the end of the war, 3.5 billion were owed inside the sterling area (mainly to India, Pakistan, Egypt, Argentina, and the Dominions). The American-Canadian loan of December 1945, the convertibility crisis of July-August 1947 (in which the Belgians played a most unfortunate role by selling a huge amount of sterlings, a situation that brings to mind their role together with the Swiss and the Dutch in August 1931) and the devaluation of September 1949 underlined once more UK's global commitments (even more so when we think that the devaluation of the pound which caught the Europeans by surprise was discussed in advance with the United States and Canada[19]) but also the dangers they carried when you try to sustain them from a position of weakness and the inability to build a Western European economic bloc in which Britain would necessarily take the lead. This evolution was magistraly described by Alan Milward who concluded: "In 1947, a Western European customs union without Britain seemed economically pointless, dangerous, even impossible. In spring 1948, as the payments situation and the reserves improved it still seemed in London that in spite of the 1947 setback the United Kingdom would achieve its objective in setting the timing for a return to multilateralism and convertibility in Western Europe. By autumn 1949 none of these hopes were realisable. British dollar earnings and the dollar position of the sterling area reserves were severely damaged by the American recession of that year...".[20]

Alternative courses were considered, but never seriously enough and in any case the stakes and the risks were too high, for Britain and even for the world: "it was pointed out that the policy of insulating ourselves

completely from the dollar world had some popular appeal and might in some ways be tempting... It might be better to avoid discussions on any long-term solution and merely attempt to find temporary remedies for the immediate difficulties of the non-dollar world. After full discussion, however, it was agreed that we should enter into negotiations with a view of finding some compromise on the long-term problem that would be acceptable to American and Canadian opinion as well as to ourselves. Political and economic chaos would result if we tried to cut ourselves entirely off from the dollar world, and a satisfactory agreement would avoid a great deal of hardship."[21] In 1950, as in 1945 the options were essentially the same and in the last instance the Cabinet had to choose between two equally dangerous courses: they could refuse to dismantle the defensive mechanisms of the sterling area and they thus they would get the independence they wanted, even if it was a very austere one, or they could accept the principle of multilateralism with the implicit danger of American competition on British traditional markets, but sweetened by substantial US financial backing for Labour's ambitious policies at home and abroad.[22] Despite the American loan, both courses seemed open in 1950, but equally important was the believe that co-operation with Western Europe could not replace the US financial assistance.

New alternatives found themselves disadvantaged by a certain immobilism promoted by the victory in the second world war and by a "fifty-year inflation of the national ego" that followed which brought Britain in a half-world of illusion[23], certainly not one to encourage changes despite a painful awareness of the precarity of the UK's position.

The same new alternatives (and we mean by that closer co-operation with Western Europe, possibly through economic integration) pointed straightly to a fundamental contradiction in Labour's economic policy, internal and international. The expressed intention to establish some form of international economic planning was clearly at odds with the internal policy of the

Labour Governments of extending the state control over the British economy. International planning certainly meant surrender of sovereignty, while nationalization brought national sovereign control over the economy to new heights. It is contradictory to seek to strengthen control of all aspects of one's own national economy whilst at the same time working to eliminate <<economic nationalism>> worldwide.[24]

A certain weight in an attempt at an overall explanation of the British foreign policy must be attributed to the institutional infighting, to the reform or lack of reform in the British foreign policy-making machinery. It was correctly noted that in 1949 the Foreign Office received thrice as much telegrams than it did at the time of Munich, eleven years earlier[25] and the Office had to deal with all these incoming information while maintaining largely the same structure. "The urgent drove out the important" and equally significant there was no professional body able to give a sense of direction at this time of challenge (until the creation in 1949 of the Permanent Under-Secretary Committee) and the only person who could do it was the much-praised Bevin who was nevertheless ill-fitted for this type of long-term planning activities. Although accused by his party colleagues that he was a prisoner of the officials, Bevin made most of the running in the Foreign Office.[26] His pragmatism, although very often a considerable advantage for Britain, was, however, helpful only when it came to deal with the "urgent".

The new complexities of the international situation whose main characteristics seemed to be the fever of reconstruction and an ever-increasing worldwide menace to the very existence of the Western world were bound to develop a competition for the formulation of foreign policy between the diplomatic, economic and military institutions inside the British government. The lack of policy-planning institutions inside the FO signified in fact its inability to impose a certain vision of foreign policy to the government as a whole while benefitting from the fluid situation caused by the end of the war. [27]

As we mentioned earlier, some historians tend to see the British refusal to participate in the Schuman Plan as a huge lost opportunity,[28] and not necessarily as a decision which the circumstances forced more or less upon the British officials. Others, more reserved, view the same moment as the logical consequence of the evolution of the British foreign policy during the first postwar years while acknowledging its importance for the decline of the British influence in Europe. More recently others have attempted to reveal the motives for the English reluctance to refuse altogether any connections with the Plan Monnet.[29] In fact, the same causes that lead to the refusal of the French proposal, forced the British to find some methods of influencing from outside the emerging Community.

In this paper we intend to draw the attention towards the moment immediately preceding the Schuman Plan debate, the London Conference of the North Atlantic treaty powers. We are going to focus here not on the London Conference itself but essentially on the Whitehall's preparations for it which appear essential if we try to understand the British reaction to the Schuman Plan. In this we shall follow the British documentation which rather contradicts some of the conclusions other historians drew from the conversations.[30] In some cases we shall compare them with the documents produced as a reaction to the Schuman Plan itself.

London was supposed to host in the spring of 1950 a series of Anglo-American discussions, that would later be joined by the French and then by all the representatives of the NAT countries. Of course, the trilateral talks would be preceded by the tête-à-tête secret discussions between the Anglo-Saxons, their main purpose being a clear definition of roles to play in the cold war strategy.[31] The Secretary of State Acheson's intentions were obvious to Oliver Franks, the British ambassador in Washington: "It was clear to me that Acheson did not think that major policies of this kind [necessary to counteract the increasing Soviet advantage on the international scene] could be

formulated or made effective except in partnership with Britain. As regards Europe, he feels that unless we are able and willing to lead nothing whatever can happen... He said explicitly that he did not think that the correct approach to what was called the integration of Europe could be by documents or constitutions or definite political acts. It had to be by a much gradual process, more on the lines of the British Commonwealth."[32]

The discussion has, I think, three important aspects which were to determine in good part the British foreign policy for years to come: first, the weakness of the American strategy of forcing Britain into Europe while simultaneously acknowledging the increasingly important role of the Commonwealth connection, the importance of the existence of the sterling area for the stability of the non-communist world and encouraging London's strong belief that Europe does not mean much without the British lead[33]; secondly, the very weakness and strength at the same time in London's position which convinced Washington that something must be done to support the British commitments world-wide. The third aspect is represented by the Franks-Acheson relationship itself which by its largely informal base (with all the elements that this involves) came to symbolize the very nature of the Anglo-American relations at the beginning of the fifties.[34]

Given the American initiative, the British were decided to make the most of it. Their main objective seemed to be, if we follow Franks' words: "We need a full recognition of this position [America's closest partner] and its application in practice by the Americans, given they want our active partnership in the world, they must be prepared to make changes which will give us in the long term economic strength".[35] The American objectives, as London saw them, were far more extensive: defining the best form to organise the Western world, the association of Germany and Japan to the destinies of the free world, finding the best way to resist the communist offensive.[36] In accomplishing each one of them Britain's role could be extremely important.

The approaching talks generated a high degree of activity at the Whitehall. Britain had to have a different role from that of Europe. A new concept to define the United Kingdom's relations with Europe which would replace the "Western Union"[37] was required. A series of fascinating documents were produced before and during the Conference regarding all these subjects. We shall focus on the London's vision of its own role in the world.

The "Western Union" concept was initially connected to Bevin's projects to organise the "middle of the planet". Its abandonment was determined mainly by the difficulties London encountered in sustaining its worldwide obligations solely or with Western European support. There could be no Third World Power and that is why continental Europe could not be the British foreign policy's priority. Any combination involving only the Commonwealth and Western Europe as a way forward in consolidating the non-Communist world would only confront the Commonwealth members "with a direct choice between London and Washington, and though the sentiment might point one way, the interest would certainly lead the other." This was the true measure of the British decline. More, the Commonwealth could not be united. There were no internal forces likely to impose such a trend and, equally important, "it has no central authority and is unlikely to create one...".[38]

As for the co-operation with continental Europe which could lead even to a limited loss of sovereignty for His Majesty's Government, this was an unacceptable option for the moment. "Whatever the tendencies might be [on the continent] the fact remains that the military and economic situation of the Western European nations is now such that there can be no immediate prospect of wedding them into a prosperous and secure entity without American help; and even with American help it is uncertain whether this can be achieved for some time to come...the situation is that even with American help there is nothing at present to stop the Russians occupying the entire Atlantic coast of Europe."[39] In other words: if there is a risk, we cannot take it,

especially when a military viable Western Europe involves either Germany's militarization[40] or a considerable lowering of life standards thanks the inevitable extra-spendings necessary to give substance to such a commitment. European integration, political or economic, is analysed through the costs and there are practically no direct advantages for Britain which could not be obtained otherwise.[41] It is therefore not a very cost-effective strategy which would have as a main consequence an excessive spending of British resources much needed to sustain other obligations more important economically, if not strategically.[42] Western European unity, as opposed to the "union" launched by Bevin in January 1948, would only solve the balance of power problems within the strict boundaries of Western Europe, respectively would adress the question of Franco-German relations while leaving unopposed the Russian threat.[43]

It is very ironic that this option was expressed as clearly as possible in the Cabinet discussions one day before the announcement of the Schuman Plan and in terms which would practically anticipate a decision on that subject: "In all matters of foreign policy and defence policy there could be no doubt that our interests would best be served by the closest co-operation with the United States and Canada. It was clear that, even with the support of the Commonwealth, Western Europe was not strong enough to contend with the military dangers confronting it from the East... *for the original conce tion of the Western Union we must now begin to substitute the wider conce tion of the Atlantic Community.*"[44] The conclusion of the Cabinet in the aftermath of the Schuman's press conference was only the logical outcome: "It was agreed that it [Schuman's proposal] showed a regrettable tendency to move away from the conception of the Atlantic Community in the direction of European federation". In the days to come, supporting the Atlantic Community would become the only practicable method of opposing the Schuman Plan.[45]

There was only one option left open, a special partnership with the United States, though it was far from being an uncontested

one.[46] From the start, the American informal suggestion at the beginning of March 1950 that the two countries should define the basis of their relationship sounded like music for many British ears: "It is the first time since the war that they approach us as partners on the most general issues of policy."[47] In spite of what historians later wrote, for the Whitehall officials the prospects of strucking a deal with the Americans appeared extremely encouraging. In the economic field there were fundamental differences (e.g. commercial and monetary policy, East-West trade, economic policy towards Germany) – they admitted, but "we have nothing really to complain about" and "the general picture is that our present relationship [with the United States]... in the economic field is good...".[48] There were no grounds for fearing American preponderence which was inevitable given the economic situation. And there was more than this: integrating Britain in Western Europe would in fact diminish London's opportunities "to apply a brake on American policies if necessary". Necessity for such an action was recognized to be quite small for such an unequal relationship was unlikely to turn dangerous. The same thing could not be said about an eventual "special relationship" with Europe[49] which was likely to involve London in Europe "beyond the point of no return". The latter formula represents a constant theme of the British thinking on Europe.[50] There was no "sufficient kinship of ideas" with Europe. Despite all these traditional links with the United States, there was a fundamental condition to fulfil in order to achieve the necessary convergence of objectives between the two Anglo-Saxon powers: the United Kingdom *must* maintain "a position, closely related to the United States, and yet sufficiently independent of her, to be able to influence American policy in the directions desired." Thus, Britain had to remain a world power, otherwise the US would not be willing to respect and support British interests worldwide.[51] It is interesting to note that in practice the boundaries between dependence and independence would be a lot more difficult to establish, although it would not be wrong to use in certain moments the word

"interdependence". At the same time all these analysis betray an overinflated hope of being able to a certain point to dictate the agenda of the unexperienced American foreign policy. In January 1951 Bevin could still write to the Prime Minister: "Now is the time to build up the strength of the free world, morally, economically and militarilly with the US, and at the same time exert sufficient control over the policy of the well-intentioned but inexperienced colossus on whose co-operation our safety depends".[52]

If the Anglo-American connection acted sometimes as a brake on US actions can be argued, but it is certain that it acted as a brake on London's involvement in Europe. It was felt that such a course would almost certainly draw the Americans towards an isolationist stance in international affairs or would reorient America's European policy making France and possibly Germany the main partners or, in the last instance, would force the United States to find a common ground with the Russians.[53] The best alternative to this unwanted European supranational adventure was the Atlantic Community, a Community which seemed to be best embodied by the North Atlantic Treaty[54] which had the huge advantage of including, at least partially, all the three "pillars" which supported Britain's international status: the Commonwealth (through Canada), the United States, Western Europe. It offered, thanks to the American participation, the optimate framework for controlling Germany[55] and, essentially, it prevented Britain from making a choice in time of difficulty. Therefore, Britain's European policy was indivisibly linked to its American-Atlantic policy.[56]

But the North Atlantic Treaty had its shortcomings and these would become visible, the Whitehall officials believed, with the end of the Marshall Plan and of the OEEC. Western unity could not rest solely on a military and political basis (as the British officials acknowledged even at the time of the Brussels Treaty); it had to rest also on economic and cultural-ideological co-operation. The pressures for Western European economic and political integration were already immense and with the relapse

into insignificance of the OEEC caused by the end of the American funds flow they would grow even bigger. To counteract such a trend London proposed a considerable extension of NAT's attributions in the political and economic fields according to the article 2 of the Treaty. In fact, this became one of the main objectives for the London Conference: "Our object is to build up the political and economic side of the Atlantic Pact before OEEC runs down completely, so that the residual functions of the OEEC be drawn towards the Atlantic Pact Organization rather than towards the Council of Europe".[57] Economic co-operation would thus be conducted through a classical inter-governmental body in which Britain would act as a pivotal element, able to lead the Europeans because she was United States' main interlocutor and to be US' main partner exactly because she was able to exert her leadership on Western Europe.

One of the American basic interests was to see Europe organized as a coherent force against the Communist pressure and aggression. Britain was prepared to give the lead but only if at the same time it was recognized by the US as a special partner, their "special relationship" thus becoming the basis of the European co-operation. This was the Atlantic Community. This was the only system which fulfilled – from London's point of view – four primary conditions: 1) it was economically, politically and socially strong enough and more attractive than the Soviet system; 2) it was the only one which permitted full British participation without substantial sacrifices; 3) it allowed a certain freedom "to manipulate" and if necessary to block the projects for European integration without appearing as the main obstacle in the way of closer European co-operation; 4) it made less painful and safer the entry of Western Germany into the structures of the West.[58]

The climax of NAT's institutional evolution was supposed to lead to a security framework capable to cover simultaneously the United States and the dollar area, the United Kingdom and the sterling area and the Council of Europe. Bevin's words were as clear as possible when he confessed that he "would

like to get away from talk about Europe. We must think in terms of the West, of the Free Nations or the Free World. We must aim at bringing in all the non-Communist countries [not in NAT, but in an ill-defined, informal security structure of the West], including those of South and South-East Asia. The Americans were wrong to think in terms of Europe as a separate and self-contained unit."[59]

To sustain this pivotal role Britain needed to be part of an Anglo-American-Canadian ("the real core of the anti-Communist coalition") informal group that would be kept "entirely from the Latins – to say nothing about the press". There would be also a façade "inner circle" which would include the French who could be in this way kept quiet. It is highly significant that this type of informal Standing Group, with or without French participation was the opposite of the plan France had put forward for the creation of a Secretary-General with wide powers and of a Great Atlantic Council which were interpreted as attempts to increase French influence inside the Alliance by bringing all the discussions into the open and to ban any association of Western Germany with the Treaty.[60]

Above all, to support this position it was of central importance that Britain retain a global presence against all odds, although at the same time it was trying to fulfil an ambitious domestic economic program. An American observer described acurately the whole picture in January 1950: "British leaders feel that they are now fighting a last-stand battle for survival as a world power. They see themselves confronted by a host of life and death problems. They are trying simultaneously to maintain their Commonwealth and Empire commitments, balance their trade, modernise their industry, balance their budget, fight off inflation, and prevent a fall in their standard of living."[61] There was a painful awareness of this situation among the British officials at the Foreign Office and of course at the Treasury. Both departments agreed that Britain did not have at the moment a "sound" foreign policy, a policy where commitments are matched by resources. But both of them were at one at

saying that "the attempt to maintain all its existing obligations would no doubt be less dangerous for the United Kingdom than a general withdrawal".[62] Not being a world power anymore, London would not be able to hold together the sterling area any longer and the direct consequence would be a drastic fall in life standards, a lot more heavier than in the case of continuation of the existing commitments. For the Permanent Under-Secretary Committee which prepared during the Conference an extensive document on the British overseas obligations even a limited withdrawal would have catastrophic consequences thanks to the high level of interdependence between London's various obligations: "the abandonment of any one obligation may start a crumbling process which may destroy the whole fabric... Reduction of direct British responsabilities should be as gradual and undramatic as possible". But how this could be done, how could a part of the immense burden be transfered to other shoulders without giving in the world position of the United Kingdom and the inherent advantages? How could that be done when it was obvious that the "Russians would be too ready to fill any vacuum created by a British withdrawal"? The answer was always on the other side of the Atlantic.[63] The Americans should be told "frankly that we are already overstrained and that it is only with the assistance of Marshall aid that we can carry out our present burdens" – thought Plowden, one of the Treasury's main experts. Simultaneously – the FO officials pointed – Britain should take advantage of the degrading international environment to force out upon the Americans the recognition of all British interests, including colonial interests.[64] For Whitehall officials – as the Cabinet discussions shows – the supreme manifestation of the American recognition of Britain's special status in the world would have been an undertaking to support the stability of the pound. On this point the divergence between Wahington's and London's aims becomes clearly visible: for the Americans strengthening the pound was an important part of their Cold War strategy (economic stability for essential regions of the world and

the price to pay to obtain a British lead in the organization of an anti-Communist and economically open Western Europe), while the British hoped to manipulate it to a certain point, to obtain the best of two worlds.

From this point of view the London Conference would be a disappointment as it had become obvious for many that "the value of this country to the United States, apart from the Commonwealth connection and our influence in the Far East and other parts of the world, lay in the leadership which we could give in Europe; and they [the Americans] were not prepared to encourage us to think that we can establish, through any special relationship with them, an alibi for our duties in respect to European integration...".[65] The Agreed Anglo-American Report of May 6 was very clear about this: "It is recognized that the close relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom should assist closer United Kingdom relations with Western Europe and foster the development of closer relations between all the members of the Atlantic Community".[66]

The lesson drawn from here confirmed instead the conclusions already arrived at: Britain needed to remain a world power. British skepticism regarding the prospects of European integration without UK participation took a heavy toll on London's European policy. The arrangement proposed by Schuman on May 9 would probably fail and the time would come for Britain to come to the rescue. If it did not fail, Britain could find ways to associate itself with it[67] and thus regain its role as a link between a European bloc, the United States and the extra-European world. That Britain would find itself instead increasingly marginalised – except for the moments of high Cold War crisis and for the short period of glory of Eden's bathtub-born ideas in 1954-1955 – never crossed the senior British officials and planners minds. Lack of planning for a long-term vision and above all Bevin's pragmatism combined to a certain perception of the British interests made in fact this dilatory tactic the only one possible.[68]

The reactions to the Schuman Plan are certainly harder to understand from another

point of view. It was obviously a challenge to the British leadership in Europe from the part of the French. "In order to establish their own leadership and to keep the British out, the French said <<Europe will not wait>>; what they meant was that the French could not secure their objectives by any other means".[69] Almost none of the British documents prepared during these critical days seemed to grasp this point.[70] Monnet knew practically form the beginning that the British would not be able to agree to the proposal, and while Schuman seemed surprised, the only significant personality ready to give up the pre-conditions to allow Britain to be at the negotiating table was Rene Massigli.[71] The tactics used by Schuman during the last days before the 2nd of June point the same way. On the other hand controlling the Ruhr was a lot more important than having the British in for they could disrupt the whole scheme.

Facing this obvious, but never stated fact, the British had to decide whether to acquiesce the French leadership of this small western group, to attempt to lead it to failure, or to wait for an eventual self-inflicted breakdown of the Plan (which seemed more than possible at the time). If someone can accuse them of something – and it is certainly not a job for the historians to do – it is this always present skepticism regarding the future of the "defeated" Europe combined in some cases with biases. An entry from 14 May in Younger's (the senior FO official during

Bevin's long absences caused by illness) diary: "if we can get the scheme executed in a way which safeguards the public interest and limits the power of the vested interests in the international authority it may be a step forward. On the other hand it may be a step in the consolidation of the catholic <<black international>> which I have always thought to be a driving force behind the Council of Europe."[72]

In the medium and long term London's *position as a balancing factor and as a link* within the Western world became unnecessary. To Britain itself could be applied a formula which the British officials reserved for an impotent European Third World Force: talking about the Schuman Plan and its possible development into an independent continental bloc it was said: "the proposal is inherently dangerous and objectionable since the conception of a European third force is not realistic and history teaches that groups of power or powers which seek to maintain their neutrality or play a balancing role fall miserably between two stools unless they have the strength and coherence required for such a policy".[73]

Britain may have had occasionally the coherence, but it certainly did not have the strength. In the last instance, it was the economic weakness which determined more than everything else the outcome of the British struggle for a world status. In one sense it was a continuous retrenchment. In another, it was just a necessary readjustment.

Notes:

[1] See for example the series of works of Corelli Barnett: *The Audit of War. The Illusion and Reality of Britains as a Great Nation,* London, MacMillan, 1986; idem: *The Collapse of the British Power,* Gloucestershire, Allan Sutton, 1993; and especially idem: *The Lost Victory. British Dreams, British realities 1945-1950,* London, Pan Books, 1995

[2] Isabelle Lescent-Giles: *Une réévaluation de la compétitivité britannique au XX-e siècle* in Frédérique Lachand (ed.): *Histoire de l'outre-Manche. Tendances récentes de l'historiographie britannique,* Paris, Presse de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2001, p.301

[3] Perhaps the best brief description of the post-war British foreign policy was given by Peter Calvocoressi in *British Experience 1945-1975,* Harmonsworth, Penguin, 1979, p.199: "England has been a very great power and a world power. In 1945 it was no longer, but what people chose to believe was less apocalyptic. They concluded that Britain, having been a world power grade one, had become a world power grade two. But there is no such thing as a world power grade two. This error, venial but costly, delayed for a generation the British withdrawals from distant theatres, the abnegation of the role of international financier and adjustment to the realities of what was, within limits, still a powerful position."

[4] Henry Kissinger: *Diplomacy,* Oxford University Press, 1997

[5] Martin J. Dedman: *The Origins and the Development of the European Union 1945-1995. A History of European Integration*, London, Routledge, 1996, p.35

[6] Kenneth O. Morgan: *Labour in Power 1945-1951*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984, p.7

[7] Pascal Delwit : *Les partis socialistes et l'intégration européenne: France, Grande-Bretagne, Belgique*, Bruxelles, Edit. de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1995, p.134-136

[8] Anne Deighton: *"Britain and the Cold War 1945-1955. An Overview"* in Brian Brivati, Harriet Jones: *From Reconstruction to Integration. Britain and Europe since 1945*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1993, p.10

[9] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Volume III. Britain and America: Negotiations of the US Loan 3August–7December1945*, London, HMSO, 1986, p.3

[10] David Dilks: *Britain and Europe. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Cabinet* in Raymond Poidevin (ed.): *Origins of the European Integration (March 1948-May 1950)*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 1986, p.392

[11] See Wm. Roger Louis: *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951. Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 9 for the importance of the Abadan investments and of the Suez base.

[12] Martin Walker: *The Cold War*, London, Vintage, 1993, p. 86-87

[13] Stefano Dejak: *Labour and Europe during the Attlee Governments: the Image in the Mirror of RWC Mackay's "Europe Group", 1945-1950*, in Brian Brivati, Harriet Jones: *From Reconstruction to Integration. Britain and Europe since 1945*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1993, p.56

[14] Jan Melissen, Bert Zeeman: *Britain and Western Europe, 1945-1951: Opportunities Lost?* , "International Affairs", vol. 63/1986-1987, no.1, p.94

[15] Two entries from Cadogan's diaries during the Yalta Conference are most relevant: "The P.M. got rather off the rails. Silly old man – without a word of warning to Anthony or me, he plunged into a long harangue about World Organisation, knowing nothing whatever of what he was talking about and making complete nonsense of it all. The worst of it was that what he said was completely contrary to the line already agreed with the Americans!" or during the Berlin meeting: " The P.M., since he left London, has refused to do any work or read anything. That is probably quite right, but then he can't have it both ways: if he knows nothing about the subject under discussion, he should keep quiet, or ask that his Foreign Secretary be heard. Instead, he butts in on every occasion and talks the most irrelevant rubbish, and risks giving away our case at every point." David Dilks (ed.): *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945*, London, Cassel, 1971, p.706, 765

[16] Sean Greenwood: *The Third Force Policy of Ernest Bevin* in Michel Dumoulin (ed.): *Wartime Plans for Postwar Europe 1940-1947. Contributions to the Symposium in Brussels*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 1995, p.421. See also idem: *The Third Force in the Late 1940s* in Brian Brivati, Harriet Jones (eds.): *From Reconstruction to Integration. Britain and Europe since 1945*, Leicester, LeicesterUniversity Press, 1993, p.60

[17] David Gowland/ Arthur Turner: *Reluctant Europeans. Britain and European Integration 1945-1998*, London, Longman, 2000, p. 11-12

[18] For the British roel at Bretton Woods see D. E. Moggridge: *Maynard Keynes. An Economist's Biography*, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 721-756

[19] The devaluation is also important because it practically put an end to the American pressures for the integration of the British economy with those of the Western European nations

[20] Alan Milward: *The Reconstruction of Western Europe 1945-1951*, London, Methuen&Co., 1984, p.337. The entire book is highly useful for comprehending the evolution of the West European economies during the aforementioned period and especially for explaining some of the mechanisms that lead to the striking divergence in the British and continental economic behaviour in the decades to come. His findings reveal explain in part the reluctance regarding the involvement on the continent beyond the intergovernmental co-operation: "After 1949 the United Kingdom had lost all capacity to reshape Western Europe in its own interest, a just reward for the low level of priority it had given to the problem." (Ibidem, p. 339)

[21] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume II. The London Conferences. Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950*, London, HMSO, 1987, p. 228, note 3

[22] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British PolicyOverseas. Volume III. Britain and America: Negotiations of the US Loan 3August–7December1945*, London, HMSO, 1986, p. XXV

[23] Kenneth O. Morgan: *The Second World War and British Culture* in Brian Brivati, Harriet Jones (eds.), pp. 44-45

[24] Richard Toye: *The Labour's External Economic Policy in the 1940s* in "Historical Journal", vol.43, No.1/ 2000, pp. 189-192

[25] Anthony Adamthwaite: *Britain and the World, 1945-1949: the View from the Foreign Office* in "International Affairs", vol 61/1985, No.2, p. 233 Adamthwaite writes also about an "ingrained resistance to the idea of planning" and even more significant about "the effects of prolonged fatigue" (idem, p.232). The great majority of the FO

officials were the same men that served during the war and this sense of exhaustion dominated many branches in the Whitehall. In 1949, a vital year, the Cabinet was warned that the "increasing volume of international work was already in danger of imposing intolerable strains on the machinery of national government".

[26] David Dilks: *Britain and Europe. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Cabinet* in Raymond Poidevin (ed.): *Origins of the European Integration (March 1948-May 1950)*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 1986, p.391 David Dilks go as far as saying that "Bevin enjoyed an initiative in the making of the foreign policy which no Foreign Secretary since the days of Sir Edward Grey had exercised."

[27] *Ibidem.*

[28] E. Dell: *The Schuman Plan and the Abdication of the British Leadership in Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995. Others place this abdication in 1948 or 1949. For a discussion on this see Zeeman, passim

[29] Cristopher Lord: *"With but not of": Britain and the Schuman Plan. A Reinterpretation,* "European Integration History Review", No.1/1998, p. 23

[30] Michael J. Hogan: *The Marshall Plan. America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987 See for example the chapter called: "Between union and unity: European integration and the sterling-dollar dualism" (pp. 293-336). The chapter neglects certain aspects of the Conference while stressing the economic difficulties and arguments caused by the British opposition to a greater degree of economic integration in Western Europe and to any initiative which seemed to threaten UK's role in the sterling area or the financial cohesion of the latter. It is obvious that by giving the impression that the US would recognize – which was largely not the case, at least not formally – the special partnership the United States had with Great Britain and the need to sustain the sterling system, Acheson and the American representatives, in their search for a better form for organising the anti-Communist Free World, lost the last chance of forcing the United Kingdom into a closer relationship with Western Europe.

[31] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume II. The London Conferences. Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950*, London, HMSO, 1987, p. 4

[32] *Ibidem*, pp. 13-14.

[33] *Ibidem. See also Michael J. Hogan, pp. 311-314

[34] See for the Oliver Franks ambassadorship in Washington Alex Danchev: *Oliver Franks. Founding Father*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 109-135

[35] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume II. The London Conferences. Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950*, London, HMSO, 1987, p.33

[36] *Ibidem*, p. 44 The common agenda focused on the clear definition of global roles and objectives for each of the parties and on Britain's relations with the United States, Europe and the Commonwealth. Inevitably, the European situation was also among the main topics (the role and the development of NAT, the economic and political integration on the continent, but also Germany's future connected to these developments) ibidem, pp. 48-49

[37] For the "Western Union" concept see Stuart Croft: *British Policy towards Western Europe, 1947-1949: the Best of Possible Worlds* in "International Affairs", vol. 64/1988, No.4, p.617-631. The author's observations on the reasons that forced the Labour Government to choose this concept and no that of "unity": "the unity approach did not adress the core problem for Britain-enhancing security during the Cold War. And since the unity approach did not involve the United States integrally, in the long term, it would actually damage British attempts to deal with the Cold War problems."

[38] *Ibidem*, pp.56-57

[39] *Ibidem*, pp. 57, 59

[40] *Ibidem*, p. 139, see also Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly: *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II, Volume III, German Rearmament September-December 1950,* London, HMSO, 1989, p.18-19, 21, 33, 38. Athough it was recognized that in the end Britain would not have the force to resist an adamant America on this subject, there were considerable apprehensions, as we can clearly see from one of Strang's minutes wrote on September 14, 1950: " We are irresistibly carried down the stream of events. Many and great voices are raised in favour of this course. Against it, I can raise nothing but an unreasonable prejudice, some wishful thinking and what will be called an unwillingness to face unpleasant realities... By this decisive and fateful act, I think that we confess to ourselves that we believe the war to be inevitable. Indeed, I fear that we make it inevitable, for a Russian reaction must sooner or later be expected, which will force us to make war." (ibidem, pp. 52-53)

[41] The only such advantage was that the economic integration offered the the only alternative acceptable to the French which could lead to the reintegration of Germany in the community of free nations.

[42] It is the case especially of Malaya, an important source of dollars for the British Commonwealth, but threatened by a Communist take-over. Extremely relevant are the signals received in London from the areas of traditional British influence like the Middle East: for example, a telegram sent by K. Helm, the minister in Tel

Aviv, to the Permanent Under-Secretary on April 11 1950: "The feeling is that the Arab countries, led by us for so long, have lost all sesnse of direction since our positive direction was withdrawn and that unless it is restored in some *modified form*, the whole area will further disintegrate and become a ready prey for whichever power chooses to step in and take control...The Middle East does need leadership... we can give it and... we should have more confidence in ourselves." (*ibidem*, p. 41)

[43] Stuart Croft, p. 620

[44] *Ibidem*, p257-258 The same thing can be said about the conclusions of a Cabinet meeting on 25 October 1949, which apart from lisitng the strategic, economic and political arguments which were considered to be essential in considering any model of European organisation, concluded: "we naturally expect that these proposals [for European economic unification] should be clearly formulated and discussed with us so that we can judge how they will affect our interests and can define our attitude towards them." (http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/hisotry/rtg/res1/cab1049.htm, p. 5) For the British it was the way to obtain a high degree of influence on the formulation of any such proposal and the conditions were certainly not fulfilled by Schuman's Plan

[45] Roger Bullen, ME Pelly: *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume 1. The Schuman Plan, the Council of Europe and Western European Integration, May 1950-December 1952*, London, HMSO, 1986, p.7, 35

[46] *Ibidem*, p.211: Sir Stafford Cripps, the Chancelor of the Exchequer, was among those who believed that this partnership would evolve swiftly into a relation of dependency ("It was essential to our future as a nation that we should achieve independence of United States financial aid as quickly as possible."). Their opposition was also expressed in ideological terms: "The views of the Labour Government of the United Kingdom on economic methods and objectives were widely different from the bi-partisan approach of the United States Government. The former believed in a planned economy, for which discrimination and non-convertibility were essential instruments; the latter, believing in a free economy, were constantly pressing the former to pursue economic policies which they would not and could not accept." Anyway, there was a fundamental flaw in his argument, because he demanded simultaneously a high degree of economic co-operation with the United States seen as the unique source of substantial economic assistance *and* the creation of an independent Third Force.

[47] *Ibidem*, p.70

[48] *Ibidem*, p.76

[49] *Ibidem*, pp.61-62, 248

[50] *Ibidem*, p.96. See also Roger Bullen, ME Pelly: *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume 1. The Schuman Plan, the Council of Europe and Western European Integration, May 1950-December 1952*, London, HMSO, 1986, p.7, 35, 134, 138. On the day of the rejection of the French ultimatum, the May 2, Strang minuted the *de facto* head of the Foreign Office, Younger, and while acknowledging the fundamental chracter and the extraordinary far-reaching consequences of the decision to be made, he concluded: "We should not become involved in Europe beyond the point of no return. To contemplate, even in principle, an agreement to pool the British coal and steel industry with those of other Western European countries, and make their operation subject to the decisions of an independent European authority which are binding on His Majesty's Government, would imply a readiness to accept a surrender of sovereignty in a matter of vital national interest which would carry us well beyond that point."

[51] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume II. The London Conferences. Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950*, London, HMSO, 1987, pp.81-84

[52] Martin Walker, p. 90

[53] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume II. The London Conferences. Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950*, London, HMSO, 1987, pp. 54-55, 81-82

[54] For a differnet view on the implications of the North Atlantic Treaty on the British foreign policy see John Kent: *NATO, Cold War and the End of Empire* in Gustav Schmidt (ed.): *A History of NATO. The First Fifty Years*, vol I, Houndmills, Palgrave, 2001, pp.141-153

[55] *Ibidem*, pp.100-102: "This task [controlling Germany] is more than the United Kingdom alone can undertake...The North Atlantic Treaty is... the most attractive organisation on which to build for the future..." See also the minute of the meeting Bevin-Acheson of May 10 during which the Foreign Secretary expressed the deep apprehension that the French projects aim at excluding for good Western Germany from the Atlantic Community as embodied by the North Atlantic Treaty in Roger Bullen, ME Pelly: *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume 1. The Schuman Plan, the Council of Europe and Western European Integration, May 1950-December 1952*, London, HMSO, 1986, pp. 8-10

[56] Stuart Croft, p. 618

[57] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume II. The London Conferences. Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950*, London, HMSO, 1987, p.46. Equally significant is the British opposition towards the French projects supported by the Americans to create a powerful and quasiindependent Secretary General. (Hogan, p.316)

[58] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume II. The London Conferences. Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950*, London, HMSO, 1987, p. 11, 91, 96, 124, 258, 261.

[59] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume II. The London Conferences. Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950*, London, HMSO, 1987, p. 199

[60] *Ibidem*, p.47, 153-154

[61] *FRUS 1950 III*, p.1599-1604, quoted in Wm. Roger Louis: *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951. Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 609

[62] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume II. The London Conferences. Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950*, London, HMSO, 1987, pp. 129-130, 162, 171: "The ability of the United Kingdom to sustain her overseas obligations must therefore be considered not in the light of the impact on the budget but in their effects on the whole economical and political strength of this country". This latter attitude belonged to the Foreign Office, while the Exchequer was naturally more preoccupied by "the impact on the budget".

[63] *Ibidem*, p.161. The argument regarding the impossibility of abandoning some of the commitments because the zones involved would almost automatically fall under Russian influence was used even immediately after the war by the Chiefs of Staff and by the Foreign Office to justify the lack of substantial evolution in the British strategic planning. See, Wm. R. Louis, p.29, Julian Lewis: *Changing Direction. British Military Planning for Post-War Strategic Defence, 1942-1947*, London, The Sherwood Press, 1988, p.367

[64] Roger Bullen, M.E. Pelly (eds.): *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume II. The London Conferences. Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950*, London, HMSO, 1987, p. 78-79, 83-84, 204, 245, 251

[65] *Ibidem*, p.389

[66] *Ibidem*, p.243

[67] Roger Bullen, ME Pelly: *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume I. The Schuman Plan, the Council of Europe and Western European Integration, May 1950-December 1952*, London, HMSO, 1986, p. 18, 21, 34, 65, 76, 80, 89, 104, 117, 138, 163, 168, 188

[68] Roger Bullen: *The British Government and the Schuman Plan, May 1950-March 1951* in Klaus Schwabe (ed.): *Die Anfnge des Schuman-Plans 1950-1951. The Beginnings of the Schuman Plan. Beiträge des Kolloquiums in Aachen, 28-30 Mai 1986. Contributions to the Symposium in Aachen, May 28-30, 1986*, Bruxelles Bruylant, 1988, p.201

[69] Roger Bullen: *The British Government and the Schuman Plan*, p.200

[70] An exception could be a telegram from Younger to Oliver Harvey dated 12 June 1950 which found the origins of the French rigidity at the end of May in their desire to reestablish themselves as the leaders of a continental bloc and implicitely as a Great Power. Nevertheless, this French-lead bloc was not seen as a fundamental threat to one of the three "pillars" of the British foreign policy. Roger Bullen, ME Pelly: *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume I. The Schuman Plan, the Council of Europe and Western European Integration, May 1950-December 1952*, London, HMSO, 1986, p. 173-174

[71] William I. Hitchcock: *France Restored. Cold War, Diplomacy, and the Quest for Leadership in Europe 1944-1954*, Chapel Hill & London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998, p.131

[72] Roger Bullen, ME Pelly: *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series II. Volume I. The Schuman Plan, the Council of Europe and Western European Integration, May 1950-December 1952*, London, HMSO, 1986, p. 35

[73] *Ibidem*, p. 34