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In the shadow of decline: Britain’s relative decline and secondary great power status in the
post-Cold War era

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Thesis submitted to the San Tiago Dantas Graduate Programme in International Relations, a joint initiative of São Paulo State University "Júlio de Mesquita Filho" (Unesp), the University of Campinas (Unicamp), and the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in International Relations. Area of concentration "Peace, Defence and International Security", research line "International Security Studies, Regional Security, new themes and approaches".

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Orientador: Samuel Alves Soares.

Coorientador: Zeno Leoni.

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POTENTIAL IMPACT OF THIS RESEARCH

This research deepens the debate on the decline of Western powers and British foreign policy in the post-Cold War period, contributing to the understanding of international dynamics and offering support for public policy formulation and Brazil's international engagement.

IMPACTO POTENCIAL DESTA PESQUISA

A pesquisa aprofunda o debate sobre o declínio das potências ocidentais e a política externa britânica no pós-Guerra Fria, contribuindo para a compreensão das dinâmicas internacionais e oferecendo subsídios à formulação de políticas públicas e à inserção internacional do Brasil.

IMPACTO POTENCIAL DE ESTA INVESTIGACIÓN

Esta investigación profundiza el debate sobre el declive de las potencias occidentales y la política exterior británica en el período posterior a la Guerra Fría, contribuyendo a la comprensión de las dinámicas internacionales y ofreciendo aportes para la formulación de políticas públicas y la inserción internacional de Brasil.

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The 'Great' will soon be gone from Britain ... in a few years she will fall to the second or third rank of European powers.

Tombs, 2021, quoting a French diplomat, 1777

ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyse how the United Kingdom's strategic readjustment unfolded in the post-Cold War period, with a focus on the Indo-Pacific region. This area "east of Suez" has acquired growing geostrategic relevance since the 1990s, although it has historically been characterised by a British military presence that is comparatively weaker than in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Despite this more discreet presence, the United Kingdom maintains defence agreements, overseas territories, and expanding military bases in the region. Moreover, it remains one of the world's leading economies, with a significant defence budget, a robust arms industry, global military power projection capabilities, and active participation in central institutions of the international order: it is a key member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and a central figure within the Commonwealth of Nations. These factors support the hypothesis that London adopted strategic readjustment measures that mitigated the effects of relative decline and repositioned the country as a Secondary Great Power, expanding the costs of its foreign policy and strategically returning to the Indo-Pacific after decades of strategic retreat. Accordingly, this research seeks to identify the factors and intentions behind the United Kingdom's strategic choices, with particular attention to its military presence in the Indo-Pacific, its power projection capabilities, and its relative position among other powers operating in the region. Finally, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how Great Powers manage their relative decline, distinguishing itself by prioritising the process of decline management over its structural causes, while also contributing to studies on the role of such powers in the post-decline period.

Keywords: Great Powers; Relative Decline; United Kingdom; Indo-Pacific.

RESUMO

Por meio desta pesquisa, objetivou-se analisar como se deu a readequação estratégica do Reino Unido no período pós-Guerra Fria, com enfoque na região do Indo-Pacífico. Esta área a “leste de Suez” tem adquirido crescente relevância geoestratégica desde a década de 1990, embora se caracterize por uma presença militar britânica historicamente inferior à observada no Atlântico e no Mediterrâneo. Apesar dessa presença mais discreta, o Reino Unido mantém acordos de defesa, territórios ultramarinos e bases militares em expansão na região. Além disso, trata-se de uma das principais economias globais, com orçamento significativo de Defesa, uma indústria bélica robusta, capacidade de projeção militar global e participação em organismos centrais da ordem internacional: é membro central da Organização do Tratado do Atlântico Norte (OTAN), membro permanente do Conselho de Segurança da ONU e figura central da Comunidade das Nações. Esses fatores sustentam a hipótese de que Londres adotou estratégias de readequação que mitigaram os efeitos do declínio relativo e reposicionaram o país como uma Grande Potência Secundária, expandindo os custos de sua política externa, retornando estrategicamente ao Indo-Pacífico após décadas de recuo estratégico. Assim, a pesquisa busca identificar os fatores e intenções por trás das escolhas estratégicas britânicas, com foco especial na presença militar no Indo-Pacífico, nas capacidades de projeção de poder e na posição relativa do Reino Unido frente às demais potências atuantes na região. Por fim, a proposta contribui para o entendimento dos modos pelos quais Grandes Potências manejam seu declínio relativo, destacando-se por priorizar o processo de gestão desse declínio em vez de suas causas estruturais, além de contribuir para os estudos sobre a atuação dessas potências no período pós-declínio relativo.

Palavras-chave: Grandes Potências; Declínio Relativo; Reino Unido; Indo-Pacífico.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo analizar cómo se produjo el reajuste estratégico del Reino Unido en el período posterior a la Guerra Fría, con énfasis en la región del Indo-Pacífico. Esta zona, al "este de Suez", ha adquirido una creciente relevancia geoestratégica desde la década de 1990, aunque se ha caracterizado históricamente por una presencia militar británica inferior en comparación con el Atlántico y el Mediterráneo. A pesar de esta presencia más discreta, el Reino Unido mantiene acuerdos de defensa, territorios de ultramar y bases militares en expansión en la región. Además, se trata de una de las principales economías del mundo, con un presupuesto significativo en materia de Defensa, una industria armamentística robusta, capacidad de proyección militar global y participación activa en organismos centrales del orden internacional: es un miembro clave de la Organización del Tratado del Atlántico Norte (OTAN), miembro permanente del Consejo de Seguridad de las Naciones Unidas y figura central en la Comunidad de Naciones. Estos factores respaldan la hipótesis de que Londres adoptó estrategias de reajuste que mitigaron los efectos del declive relativo y reposicionaron al país como una Gran Potencia Secundaria, ampliando los costos de su política exterior y regresando estratégicamente al Indo-Pacífico tras décadas de retirada estratégica. En consecuencia, la investigación busca identificar los factores e intenciones detrás de las decisiones estratégicas británicas, con especial atención a su presencia militar en el Indo-Pacífico, sus capacidades de proyección de poder y su posición relativa frente a otras potencias que actúan en la región. Finalmente, la propuesta contribuye a la comprensión de cómo las Grandes Potencias gestionan su declive relativo, destacándose por priorizar el proceso de gestión de dicho declive por encima de sus causas estructurales, y aportando además a los estudios sobre la actuación de estas potencias en el período posterior al declive relativo.

Palabras clave: Gran Potencia; Declive relativo; Reino Unido; Indo-Pacífico.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AUKUS	Australia–United Kingdom–United States Security Pact
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System
BIOT	British Indian Ocean Territory
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
DWP	Defence White Paper
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
USA	United States of America
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FPDA	Five Power Defence Arrangements
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HMS	Her (or His) Majesty’s Ship
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
JEF	Joint Expeditionary Force
MOD	Ministry of Defence
MSS	Ministry of State Security
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDS	National Defense Strategy
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
RFA	Royal Fleet Auxiliary
RN	Royal Navy
SSBN	Ship, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear
SSN	Nuclear-powered attack submarine
UKJLSB	United Kingdom Joint Logistics Support Base
UKUSA	United Kingdom–United States of America Agreement
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States

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1 INTRODUCTION

The decline of the position of United Kingdom (UK) in the early twentieth century as the first amongst the Great Powers and the ascension of the United States to that position is regarded as the latest geopolitical shift in the international system involving the “Hegemonic Power”¹ transition (Knutsen, 1999). As the international system witness a possible shift from the American hegemony to a Chinese-led or multipolar order, the question of Great Power decline, the strategies and the actions taken by the declining powers to counter or minimise the factors contributing to its descension grow in relevance. The centrality of the question of decline lies on the overbearing weight of the Great Powers in international politics, the reverberations of their actions to all players and risks posed by their changing perceptions of the world order when it comes to a necessity to reshape the game of power politics to once again see benefits from the status quo. Ultimately, managing or surpassing decline is directly tied to the challenge of ensuring the survival of the political unity in an anarchical system.

In the case of the United Kingdom, its relative decline from the later years of the Victorian Age to the last days of the Empire in the 1970s has been closely and extensively analysed (Crafts, 1997; Darwin, 2011; Dintenfass, 1992; Elbaum; Lazonick, 1986; Friedberg, 2010; Gamble, 2000). Nevertheless, Britain’s decline in the period after the 1980s, particularly the decades after the end of the Cold War, have not witnessed the same level of extensive and careful consideration, even less with works focusing on the British relative position and decline in the period from 1991 to the 2010s or 2020s. In part, this absence might be caused by what some argued in the late 1990s as relative decline not dominating the future political debate – and possibly its academic equivalent – due to Britain no longer experiencing an acute relative decline (Gamble, 2000).

Therefore, at a strategic level, the questions guiding this research were how the United Kingdom managed its relative decline, what the country’s relative position was between the early 1990s and the early 2020s, and how the Indo-Pacific can be used to analyse the power dynamics involving Britain’s position during the first decades of the post-Cold War era. Throughout this study, the research methodology relied heavily on access to primary sources from the relevant actors, including the National Archives (London, Kew), and was supplemented by extensive secondary sources. As the research progressed, the predominance

¹Due to military-strategic scope of this work, hegemony is understood as the exclusive ability of one State to (1) determine the rules of the international system through coercive and non-coercive means, (2) exercise leadership within that system and (3) influence the behaviour of other States (Beyer, 2009).

of qualitative materials was increasingly complemented by quantitative data. Notably, primary sources were necessary to identify the intentions and the official policies of the British Government throughout the period covered in this work.

As a central hypothesis, it is argued that the UK has managed to secure a position as a Secondary Great Power in the first three decades of the post-Cold War era through a mix of punctual retrenchment, economic measures, and strategic engagement internationally. The period analysed witnessed the end of an inherent “British” decline but coincided with a general Western decline that has blurred the lines between a diminished British decline and an increasingly evident Western decline. Moreover, the maintenance of Britain as a major player over three decades was not achieved peacefully. On the contrary, the British renewed willingness to intervene militarily around the globe exacerbated the volatility and brutal consequences of Great Power’s actions while pursuing the so-called national interest. Thus, these first three decades of the UK’s “post-decline” years are characterised by an export of instabilities, with preferable targets being smaller players of the periphery where resistance is fragile. These instabilities are often caused by the actor while attempting to maintain favourable terms to its interests, connecting to the idea of Headley Bull’s (1980) Great Powers as the “great irresponsibles”. Additionally, the British position has been one of a supporter of the status quo, opposing challenges to the established world order that could undermine its position, with the tilt to the Indo-Pacific directly influencing perceptions of emerging contestants, which by itself can be a source of attrition and instability to smaller actors and the global periphery.

In this work, it is also explored the actions of the UK beyond the linear formulae of “rise and fall of great powers”, casting light into the ambitions and strategies employed by its leaders to preserve British power and influence in the aftermath of relative decline in first two decade of the twentieth-first century. Using the Indo-Pacific as the main geographic and geopolitical area of British action serves this work for the region encapsulates well the position of the UK in the international system. It shows a former Hegemon trying to remain relevant and rebuilt its influence in a region that has once again moved closer to the top of London priorities and interests. Historically, the Indo-Pacific, or the region East of Suez, has also been the area where Britain had to apply its last extensive imperial retrenchment adding another layer to the strategic “return” of the country. In addition, in the post-Cold War years, the British in the Indo-Pacific must consider the challenges of the twenty-first century and the limits of Britain’s resources. In other words, as a Secondary Great Power facing the rise of the Primary Great Power of China, bargaining with other secondary powers (Japan and India, the latter possibly becoming a primary power in the medium to long-term), and reformulating its regional role and managing

to avoid the return of its own decline, the struggles and position of the UK in the region emulates its global standing and challenges.

Throughout the Cold War, as sign of its declining role in relation to the American and Soviet superpowers or primary great powers, the UK went through a period of imperial retreat coupled with successive economic woes (Darwin, 2011). Following almost four decades of retrenchment, in 1982, when the British position was challenged by the Argentine invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas in 1982, the country responded with a successful demonstration of force, showing its peers that it still retained the will and the wherewithal to defend British interests overseas (Lebow, 1983). Despite its challenges, the war and subsequent British victory in the South Atlantic decided the future of the UK's presence in the region and largely marked the end of the British global strategic retreat. The question of preserving Great Power status played a large role in the considerations of British leaders about how to respond to the Argentine invasion, resulting in the decision to reconquer the islands in the South Atlantic (Grandpierron, 2017). In the same decade, the relative decline affecting the UK also underwent considerable transformations that witnessed a change in the position the country in relation to most of its industrialised peers. Nevertheless, the relative British position in the international system had changed considerably since the Second World War and would compete for a more distinguished role within the ranks of the few secondary great powers that, in the 1990s, were only behind the primary power of the United States.

The so-called "relative decline" is the main term scholars employ to indicate succinctly the process of descent of the states in the international system. Despite that, the experience of decline can occur in a relational or a total way. In other words, the fall of a Great Power might happen due to its decline in relation to others Great Powers. However, it does not mean an absolute decline, for the country still "grows" its capabilities even if eclipsed by its competitors. The descent can also happen in a "total" or absolute way, which means that the Great Power not only decline relatively to its peers but also in relation to its own previous position. Due to the case of the United Kingdom being the focus of this work, the idea of relative decline is going to be explored for the British position in the world, as it is going to be analysed in the first chapter, declined concerning its Great Power peers in varying degrees but not in an absolute way (Sandbrook, 2005). Thus, "relative decline" is regarded as the reduction of the relative capabilities of a state concerning its peers.

Macdonald and Parent (2018) argue that adopting readjustment policies by declining states bearers of significant relative material power is essential for them to return to the select group of Great Powers or retain their position. According to Macdonald and Parent (2018), one

of the main strategies employed by the declining powers is “retrenchment”. Seeking to avoid its overstretch and strategic fragility if contested by rising or other established Great Powers, the declining actor adopts retrenchment as a “reload” strategy to recover its relative position, even if that means retreating to regions and interests considered more central than others. In this regard, the prevailing literature argues that Great Powers have a simple cycle of potency: ascension, accumulation of commitments, followed by the fall. States would be unable to balance their commitments and costs, leading to overstretch and their downfall. Domestic resistance to changes, financial challenges and strategic insolvency are the bases of the issue (Gilpin, 1981; 1988; Kennedy, 1988). However, between 1872 and 1988, in 14 of 16 cases of Great Power decline – France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and Russia/Soviet Union – the actor adopted readjustment, preserving its position in varying degrees (Macdonald; Parent, 2018). Within this context, retrenchment is a structural necessity due to the primary objective of the state being its security. Expanding the security of the polity, and therefore avoiding relative decline, is the unchanging objective of all state-based actors in the international system. There is no choice beyond survival while retrenchment offers a counter to diminishing resources.

With what is being explored, it is necessary to analyse the position of the United Kingdom in the international system in the three decades after the end of the Cold War and the British declinist debate. In the next chapter is explored the state of the literature on Britain’s relative decline, the so-called “declinist debate”. Aiming at identifying how the British epistemic communities conversed about the topic, the objective also includes covering the perceptions of its source while showing the constant preoccupation of the elites on Britain’s decline. The second chapter analyses whether the British position can be regarded as a secondary Great Power. With a relational analysis, focusing on its relative material capabilities in comparison to its peers, including the United States, China, France, and Russia. Military (overall military capabilities and budget, defence industry and overseas presence), political and economic aspects (GDP and economic growth) are explored along with the British leaders’ perception of the position of the United Kingdom. Although the scope is mainly focused between the early 1990s and early 2020s, it is necessary to expand the timeframe to a few events that might aid in searching for successive British Governments’ perceptions of the country’s relative standing and long-term trends.

In the third chapter, the focus is on the question of the UK as a Secondary Great Power interacting with other players as to show the country’s relative position in practice and the attempts to rebuild its influence in the Indo-Pacific, abandoning retrenchment as the primary

foreign and domestic policy and adopting a foreign policy with rising costs and ambitions. To achieve that, the third chapter is focused on the British strategic involvement in the Indo-Pacific through an analysis of the bilateral relationship with the United States (a Primary Great Power), Japan (a Secondary Great Power) and Australia (a Middle Power), focused on British efforts and considerations to enhance security and defence ties with these actors. The selection of countries follows the escalation of power with players that can be classified as a Middle Power, a Secondary Great Power, and a Primary Great Power to display the changing balance of the British relationship with different kinds of actors.

The fourth and last chapter cover the military presence of the UK in the same region, which occurs in former colonies and territories, with the intent to further explore the British approach to influence the area and keep it within its military reach. This last chapter also contributes to the justification of the position of the country as a Secondary Great Power and that post-decline is marked by an expansion of commitments, resulting in a period of increased instability exported overseas by the recently recovered power. Additionally, in the fourth chapter provides another view of the British approach to countries that are far removed from the position of middle or great powers. The actions and considerations of London rarely showing extensive care with the demands of these actors beyond the advancement of British interests. In other words, decisions to reduce, expand or terminate basing rights are made in the UK and often taken as *fait accompli*.

Arguing that the position of the United Kingdom in the first three decades of the post-Cold War world is one of a “Pocket Superpower” (Childs, 2014), Great Power, Second-Rate Power, or even a Middle Power, demands an additional step defining and characterising what these terminologies mean. Thus, before advancing into the broader questions of the relative decline, retrenchment, and strategic readjustment – which also demand proper definitions – it is necessary to identify the categories of power involved in this work that can or could be applied to the case of the United Kingdom from the early 1990s to the 2020s. Most of the definitions of power on this work follows the tacit recognition of realists and neo-realists that material capabilities are paramount but concede that other secondary factors contribute to or are the result of an actor achieving Great Power status or Hegemony.

Therefore, defined by the neo-realists such as Waltz (1979) as the main actors in the international arena the Great Powers are what matters, and the rest are the states subject to whims and competition between their more preeminent and more powerful colleagues. Waltz (1993) defines a basic criterion of six points to determine if a country is a Great Power: (1) population and territory, (2) military strength, (3) economic capability, (4) resources, (5)

political stability, and (6) competence. Notably, most of these criteria for defining Great Powers are prone to criticism due to the challenges of ranking available data, the availability of data, the multiple ways of defining and quantifying “military strength”, “political stability”, “competence” and other points that could result in ranking discrepancies. It is possible to argue that for Waltz and other neo-realists the remaining actors that do not qualify for the rankings of the Great Powers, for example, Middle Powers, occupy the same spot that others with fewer material capabilities that would not even aim for Middle Power status (Shin, 2015). For them, material capabilities include economic and military power, and the Great Powers matter the most, for they shape world politics and are the sources of stability and instability internationally (Morgenthau, 1965; Waltz, 1979). Therefore, classifying certain states as such means taking assumptions about their influence to shape international politics that has parallel only in its peers, which also leads to the understanding that hierarchy and asymmetric relationships are part of the international system.

Attempting a simple definition, the historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle (1960) argued that a Great Power must be capable of maintaining its independence in relation to any other power. Nevertheless, as Stuster (2023) observed, the ever-so-present criterion of capable military forces is “a hypothetical that hasn’t been observed since the development of nuclear weapons and would be disastrous if ever put to the test”. Stuster (2023) also argues that the absence of clear “examples” – in the years since 1945 – led to estimates by policymakers and academics on the relative power of countries “that can sometimes prove shockingly inaccurate”; a reference to the invasion of Ukraine of 2022, which proved to be a longer conflict than anticipated by analysts (Dougherty, 2022). Stutser (2023) indicates that attempts to classify what is a Great Power must consider the nuances of power or “domains” even at the cost of simplicity, which is the trademark of several hierarchical attempts to determine which state is a bearer of significant power internationally.

Hierarchical quantitative definitions are inclined to use a few indices to define or support Great Power status for a country. As Kim (2009) noted, these indices generally are the size of the territory, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), trade volume, population, and military strength. These categories share similarities to the six criteria established by Waltz, only identifying what specific indicators should be taken as a measure of power. In 2012, former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski stated that “A sequential ranking of other major powers beyond the top two [the United States and China] would be imprecise at best.”. Despite that, Brzezinski supported that any list should have Russia, India, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany (Brzezinski, 2012). Therefore, at a minimum, there is always a military aspect for a

country to be considered a Great Power, for there is little evidence that a state can sustain itself as a Great Power only through economic prowess (Bull, 1977; Berridge; Young, 1988). Beyond that, and indirectly implied by Brzezinski's analysis, there is the aspect of recognition. Hedley Bull (1977) argued that, alongside military strength, Great Powers must be recognised by others and seen by their own people and leaders as bearers of "special rights and duties". This reinforces the idea that military and economic power is only one – although highly relevant – side of the coin.

Moreover, in the first decades of the post-Cold War world, the presence of the United States and, later, China can further complicate the definition of Great Power due to the difference in material capabilities between the United States and China and the next countries that follow them in the ranking (Russia, the United Kingdom, India, Japan, and France, for example). A similar phenomenon occurred during the Cold War when the "superpowers", the United States and the Soviet Union, represented the post-Second World War military, economic, and ideological divisions. But as back in the Cold War years, the first decades of the post-Cold War indicate that a few more countries have been active players in the international system with reverberations across the globe.

For that reason, L. J. Cantori and S. L. Spiegel argued for a "primary" (a possible synonym for superpower) and "secondary" distinction between the Great Powers before jumping into the lesser category of "Middle Powers" (apud Holbraad, 1984, p. 73-74). The distinction between a Primary Great Power or Superpower and a Secondary Great Power is one of intensity and range of capabilities. Both categories influence the international system and have global reach, but the "primary" Great Power can sustain that for longer and with more intensity than its "secondary" peers (Holbraad, 1984). The contribution of L. J. Cantori and S. L. Spiegel recognises that there are differences in capabilities within the select club of the Great Powers and that it does not mean that certain countries are not part of that club if they do not match the "primary" country or countries, which in the 1980s were the United States and the Soviet Union. In this work, Cantori and Spiegel's terminology are borrowed to illustrate these differences and complexities of the international system.

Considering what has been stated above, the definition of a Great Power remains abstract but must be drawn for better categorisation and analysis of the states in question in this work. As Martin Wight argued, whatever definition is likely to be "an abstraction in some degree removed from our complicated and unmanageable political experience" (Wight, 1978). Firstly, economic might is an acute condition but not sufficient to grant Great Power status alone (Berridge; Young, 1988), be it a "primary" or "secondary" Power as L. J. Cantori and S. L.

Spiegel (apud Holbraad, 1984) categorised. Soft power, popularised by Joseph Nye (2004), is within this argument, meaning that alone it is not enough. Morris (2011) argues that a “similar argument can be made regarding what Nye calls ‘soft power’, essentially ‘the ability to shape the preferences of others’”. Morris (2011) continues stating that a country which is a Great Power in “military and economic terms” with a significant level of soft power has its position strengthened. This occurs due to the Great Power’s ability to attract followers, minimising possible resistance and disagreements encountered when applying its strength to achieve its objective abroad (Nye, 2004). However, in this case, soft power might be a by-product that enhances an already established Great Power. The state’s position might also be within the prevailing world order or a central part of the “legalised hierarchies”, such as the permanent seats of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which attributes power and prestige (Simpson, 2004). Additionally, there is the already mentioned issue of recognition by other states and by its own leaders and people that the country in question has special rights and duties (Bull, 1977).

In sum, combined sources of power, particularly military power backed by economic strength and recognition by others, are essential for a state to have Great Power Status. Therefore, borrowing from the definition of Hedley Bull (1977), in this work, Great Powers must be part of the select group of states of similar power², in the “front rank in terms of military strength” backed by a robust economy, and “recognised by others to have, and conceived by their own leaders and peoples to have, certain special rights and duties”. For clarification, being a “front rank military power” means that the Great Power has quantitative (territories, military bases overseas, and personnel availability derived from its population pool, for example) and qualitative (high-level technology, training quality of troops, nuclear deterrent³, strategically located assets and territories or bases) resources at its disposal sustained by a strong economy.

Hence, the Great Powers are the leading military powers and, through their very existence and capabilities, collectively constitute an institution of international society (Bull, 1977). Waltz (1979) points out that collectively these actors form a structure within the

² Although with different theoretical orientations, Morgenthau (1965), Waltz (1979), Bull (1977), and Paul Kennedy (1988) converge when stating that measuring power is always relative. Thus, comparing a Great Power to its peers or aspiring powers – employing the six criteria of Waltz (1979), for example - can provide insight when trying to confirm or rebuke Great Power status for a specific country.

³ Nuclear capabilities are considered here as a qualitative asset due to the destructive characteristics of these weapons. Capable and modern strike capabilities have been relevant to overtake defences in a “first-strike policy” or to enable a response in a retaliatory scenario. However, it is worth noting that nuclear deterrence is not considered in this work as a necessary step towards Great Power status, but might serve to differentiate a primary Great Power from a secondary Great Power or to establish a rank within the secondary Great Powers.

international system, an unofficial governing body, central to the understanding of international dynamics. Indicating a role exclusive of the Great Powers, which is expected to be exerted by them from other states, Wight (1978) labelled them as the “Great Responsibles”. Within this context, Clark (1989) argues that from the Concert of Europe (1815-1914), passing through the League of Nations and the United Nations (UN) thereafter, the role of the Great Powers has been one that is expected by others to act with moderation and on behalf of the maintenance of international security. What is omitted is that the idea of moderation hints to a form of international social contract in which the Great Powers act as the sovereign, jointly managing the world order or tearing it down when divergencies prevail. The “order” itself is the result of what benefits these major actors without significant concessions to lesser powers. Thus, Great Power moderation is “expected” by others without the possibility of serious opposition. When considering Great Powers collectively, the moderation is more “hoped” than expected by the rest of the world. Thus, moderation becomes a tool of legitimisation and justification for these leviathans at the top.

The international order of the post-Second World War – and in the first decades of the post-Cold War – is also marked by a similar arrangement through the United Nations. The privileges of the five Great Powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China) are translated mainly through their permanent and veto-bearer position in the UN Security Council. A bargain struck to safeguard the international system from the malady of war (Russell, 1958). However, this view of Great Powers’ responsibility does not mean they act altruistically or sacrifice their objectives for the sake of the international society. This might be the case if the order they are entrusted by others and by themselves to maintain is their preferred order, which means an order that they sit paramount (Bull, 1980). In addition, the same states that can sustain international order – mainly through avoiding Great Power conflicts and punishing “dissident” states – are the very same that uniquely have the wherewithal to weaken or even dismantle it through violence (Jackson, 2000).

Therefore, having explored and established a definition for Great Powers and before advancing to whether the United Kingdom can be considered a Great Power, it is necessary to briefly examine the definition of Middle or Regional Powers. As already mentioned, for realists and neo-realists (Mearsheimer, 2001; Morgenthau, 1965; Waltz, 1979), there is no significant difference between the countries that do not fit in the category of Great Powers for they are ultimately subject to the superior strength mustered by these powers and influenced by their competition for maintaining or sustaining their special position atop. Nevertheless, this view contributes little to understanding the distribution of power beyond the “major players” of the

international system and how these Great Powers interact with those that can be considered important regional actors even though these actors do not possess a similar level of capabilities and recognition compared to Great Powers.

In the sixteenth century, Giovanni Botero laid down one of the first definitions of Middle Powers, stating that such *power mezano* has sufficient force and authority to sustain itself without the help of others (Botero, 1956). Middle Power can also be summarised by a loose definition that regards them as “trying to speak louder” than the Small Powers while aiming somewhat to influence the Great Powers (Campbell, 1984). For Carsten Holbraad (1984), Middle Powers have two subcategories, “upper Middle Powers” and “lower Middle Powers”. It is worth noting that this is a readjustment of concepts when compared to L.J. Cantori and S. L. Spiegel (1970), that argued for a division within the category of Great Powers before establishing the differences between the realm of “Middle Powers”, “Minor Powers” and “Regional states”.

While for Holbraad (1984), the “upper Middle Powers” included France, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and China, for Cantori and Spiegel (1970), these countries were the already mentioned Secondary Great Powers. This occurs due to the understanding of “Middle Powers” by Cantori and Spiegel being states that are involved and can influence events in only one more region outside their own. Within this context, “Minor Powers” are restricted to their own immediate region, and “Regional states” are only occasionally capable of exerting an influence regionally. As a contrasting definition, Secondary Great Powers can exert influence and are active in several regions around the globe – being global players – but not active or present in all areas. Then, a Primary Great Power has that actual worldwide presence and influence range (Cantori; Spiegel, 1970). Despite their divergencies of classification, both Holdbraad (1984) and Cantori and Spiegel (1970) recognised that there were relevant Powers beyond the United States and the Soviet Union. Both argued that Middle Powers had an important role within the dynamics of the Cold War and, more broadly, in the international system. However, Cantori and Spiegel (1970) identified that the gulf between the Secondary Great Powers and Middle Powers were so significant to the point of not even creating the same category division of upper and lower middle powers as made by Holdbraad (1984).

Moreover, while there has yet to be an agreement on the characteristics of a Middle Power within the field of International Relations (Shin, 2015), Chapnick (1999) argued that it is possible to identify three main perspectives or approaches to the question. The first is the functional perspective, which argues that a state able to exert influence in some functions and areas in international affairs is regarded as a Middle Power. The second perspective is

behavioural. This approach understands that a country is a Middle Power if it performs roles considered fitting of a Middle Power or if it sees itself as such. In this case, adopting multilateral foreign policies, compromising positions internationally, and supporting ideals of adequate “international citizenship” is the typical behaviour of such Powers (Cooper; Nossal; Richard, 1993). Lastly, there is the hierarchical approach, which ranks states by parameters related to their material capabilities. Hierarchical perspectives are the ones that generally employ statistical indices (Kim, 2009), which are similar to the ones used by neo-realists to classify a country as a Great Power.

As Shin (2015) stated, the three main perspectives have weaknesses. Depending on the case, they cannot stand alone as a theoretical device to define and classify a Middle Power. The behavioural approach is tainted by the liberal theory, which postulates that chances of cooperation among states are high, establishing a view for the Middle Powers within this worldview. Thus, “realist” questions – survival, security and conflict, for example – are not regarded as the main factor in defining a Middle Power by the behavioural and functionalist approaches. Concomitantly, the hierarchical does not consider the perception of others and the functions that the country exercises in the international system (Shin, 2015). Despite that, the main approaches “presuppose that individual-level features of a country are the first judge of whether or not it meets the criteria of a middle power” (Shin, 2015). Hence considerations on the interactions – and therefore the exertion of power – with other political entities are not entirely covered. However, if the concept of power is a relational one (Morgenthau, 1965), then it is necessary to have considerations on the comparisons of power between the candidates to Middle Power status⁴, just as in any other “rank” in the international system.

Therefore, retaining the centrality of security issues for this work and following the “relational” definition previously applied to Great Powers, it is possible to understand Middle Powers as part of a group of states with limited influence on a determined region, second to the Great Powers – Primary and Secondary –, capable of applying its sources of power to somewhat influence the position of those players while sustaining material capabilities only surpassed by the greater Powers, holding a relative preponderance regionally but not able – and generally not willing – to exert influence or establish a conventional military presence beyond their own immediate region. Moreover, due to their comparatively limited capabilities, Middle Powers

⁴This helps in defining if the United Kingdom and others Great Power that have experienced relative decline are still Great Powers. If they cannot be compared to the countries of the Middle Power spectrum in terms of material capabilities and behaviour, therefore, it should be taken that these declining Powers might still be “Great Power”, even if “secondary” as Cantori and Spiegel (1970) argued.

have “limited, non-global aims” that “do not change drastically over time, enduring even between different political regimes” (Moeini et al., 2022). This view possibly opens the way to classify countries such as Australia, Indonesia, and Brazil as Middle Powers.

In addition, whether employing the definition of Cantori and Spiegel (1970) or the one mentioned above, there is a convergence in arguing that the United States and China (the latter taking the place of the Soviet Union, but in the 2010s or early 2020s still relatively behind what the Soviets yielded) are the Primary Great Powers – or “Superpowers”, here these two terms will be synonyms –, followed by the Secondary Great Powers of the United Kingdom, France, Russia, Japan, and, more recently, India, while the Middle Powers can be regarded as including Australia, Indonesia, Brazil, Canada, and others. It is worth highlighting that, in this work, the definition of Secondary Great Power is similar to the one employed by Cantori and Spiegel (1970), meaning that these countries are in the front rank of military power and material capabilities, with global reach, but are not the major players in every region of the globe. However, they tend to be among the main powers in the regions in which they are attempting to perform a role and exert influence but might occupy “secondary” positions in areas of intense presence and influence of the Primary Great Powers.

Therefore, the difference between Great Powers and Middle Powers lies in the material capabilities and influence the former can muster in comparison to the latter while having its position recognised as special by its people, leaders, and other nations. Great Powers can extend their global influence through military, economic or diplomatic means and maintain that influence in several regions, establishing agreements and fostering allies or partners within the military and economic fields. A Secondary Great Power might be overshadowed the Primary Great Powers while remaining active across the globe. Meanwhile, a Middle Power has limited influence – militarily, economically and diplomatically – to sustain or even attempt to expand their influence into other regions beyond their own but is capable of somewhat influencing the behaviour of the Great Powers, particularly when these stronger countries are acting in the Middle Power’s strategic region and engaging in segmented diplomatic issues, such as climate-change, bilateral trade, and regional security partnerships. Within this context, in their immediate region, they are capable of defending their position on issues that directly affect it in most aspects. Lastly, the difference between a Middle Power and the “rest”, that is, the remaining countries that are neither Great nor Middle Powers, ultimately is one related to their capabilities to resist encroachments of and influence from the Great Powers to some extent, even if ultimately, they have clear limitations (Shin, 2015).

Therefore, the trajectory of the Great Powers in the international system is not simply one of rise, plateau, decline, and fall. In most cases, as is shown in this work, Great Powers can identify and manage their relative decline through policies that will readjust their strategic position in the international system, preserving their standing or being in the way to reacquire it in the short to medium term. Great Powers that do not perform a strategic retrenchment as part of their greater readjustment policies to deal with the challenges affecting their relative position do not recover their position (Macdonald; Parent, 2018). Hence, in this work, retrenchment is considered one of the possible strategic readjustment policies that a country can employ to tackle its relative decline. As a definition, borrowing from Macdonald and Parent (2018), “retrenchment” is a policy of reduction and containment of cost and foreign policy ambitions, particularly employed when the country’s leaders perceive the strategic position to be increasingly unsustainable. However, it can also be employed domestically to reduce costs of the state expenses, particularly defence budget. Besides, “readjustment” is a series of policies that might include retrenchment, but it is not limited to the idea of containing decline; it can also be described as the sum of policies employed when the country has an expansionist policy that aims to readjust its strategic position internationally. In short, readjustment is a collective of policies that aims to improve the relative stance of a state, be it as a decline management, a reaffirming or an expansionist policy.

In the case of the United Kingdom, a period of retrenchment is widely recognised in the decades following the end of the Second World War. The 1968 decision to “withdraw from East of Suez” by 1971 is considered the last grand strategic retreat of the Empire. John Darwin (2011) considers the late 1960s and early 1970s as the reminiscing years of the UK as a Great Power at the centre of a “world system” – based on the British Empire – that finally retreated from East of Suez due to the recognition of the unsurmountable costs of global ambitions of a country with increasing economic and material limitations. The choice of East of Suez – later on in the 2010s, the term “Indo-Pacific” became relatively common when referring to almost the same region – by the Labour Government under the leadership of Harold Wilson (1964-1970) as the target area to carry on retrenchment policies was a sign of recognising and responding to the country’s relative decline (Peden, 2013). Taking from the model posed by Macdonald and Parent (2018), reducing or loosening commitment in the Indo-Pacific or East of Suez occurred due to the British Government’s recognition of the necessity to focus on regions considered more strategically relevant for vital British interests than the ones regarded as peripheric or secondary. This is one of the main reasons for analysing the characteristics of the British engagement or “reengagement” with the Indo-Pacific in the post-Cold War era while having the

UK's relative decline as the background. Beyond that, it is necessary to explore the definition of Indo-Pacific and how it disassociates itself or not from the concept of "East of Suez" for the British Government.

Historically, a British definition for the Indo-Pacific would have to compete with the idea of an "East of Suez" region that has been present in the British defence policy since the rise of the British Empire in India and the Persian Gulf (Darwin, 2011; James, 1994). In the nineteenth century, British literature reinforced the political vision about the existence of an East of Suez region. Particularly the works of the British writer and poet Joseph Rudyard Kipling cemented the idea of an area directly influenced and created by Britain's imperial concerns and expansionism⁵. In that regard, the East of Suez strategic vision could be seen as the Pax Britannica equivalent of the Pax Americana's Indo-Pacific strategic approach. Hence, both hegemonic powers created or assimilated terminologies and ideas concerning regions that their leaders considered relevant for their global standing.

The term Indo-Pacific can be first found in the works of the German geographer Karl Ernst Haushofer, particularly in the "Geopolitics of the Pacific Ocean" from 1924. Haushofer's position considered that the region shared similar aspects that ranged from marine biology to ethnography. However, his main argument for an Indo-Pacific was mainly centred on the geopolitical grounds of Great Power competition. The German author affirmed that the region could provide valuable allies to Germany through its anti-colonial forces in China and British-ruled India. These allies would be central when the continental power of Germany had to confront Britain and the United States, which held military and economic domination over the maritime field in the area (Haushofer, 1924; Li, 2021).

However, the term "Indo-Pacific" did not achieve widespread usage within the governmental and academic ranks throughout the twentieth century. Following the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War, the geopolitics of the regions were dominated by the strategies employed by the new hegemonic power that replaced Britain in the early 1940s, the United States. The American Cold War geopolitics engaged the area through the context of the "Containment strategy" in regards to the Soviet Union and the spreading of communist regimes (Sloan, 1988). The Containment strategy employed by the United States during the Cold War relied partially on the works of Halford J. Mackinder (1904) and Nicholas J. Spykman (1944), as both authors analyse Eurasia's geopolitical and geographic centrality.

⁵Kipling's 1890 poem "Mandalay" is one of his works that employ the "East of Suez" terminology within the context of the British Empire's presence in Burma, present-day Myanmar (Selth, 2015).

Following the end of the Cold War and the resurgence of China as a Great Power, the term “Indo-Pacific” would return as a geostrategic concept within political and academic ranks. Nevertheless, Haushofer’s definition of the Indo-Pacific as a political and geographic region in opposition to British and American power would be replaced by a new vision that disregards the anti-colonial conceptions and centres on the terms of Great Power diplomacy (Li, 2021). The United Kingdom and the United States adopted the “Indo-Pacific” terminology as an equivalent of a spatial area for a new age of Great Power competition where their strategic position should be reinforced or, in the British instance, reformed (United Kingdom, 2021; United States, 2022).

Nevertheless, the return of the term Indo-Pacific as a lexicon applied to the Indian and Pacific oceans began in the late 2000s. Marking this return is the symbolic speech of the then Prime Minister of Japan to the Indian Parliament in 2007, mentioning the emergence of a “broader Asia” taking shape from the “confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans” (Japan, 2007). For example, Indo-Pacific quickly became a part of the lexicon within the Indian Government and epistemic communities (Scott, 2012). However, according to Haruko (2020), the first official mention of the “Indo-Pacific” occurred through an Australian White Paper called “Australia in the Asian Century” in October 2012, which focused on varying issues concerning the economic and security position of the country in the region. It was followed by the 2013 Defence White Paper published by the Australian Government (Australia, 2013). In less than a decade after the 2013 White Paper, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, and India adopted the term and were in the process of publishing official “Indo-Pacific strategies” or “frameworks” (Pardesi, 2019).

The case of the United States is relevant for this work because of its indirect influence on the defence policy of other countries, including the UK. In the United States, the term Indo-Pacific originates in the Obama Administration (2009-2017). It was a terminology employed as part of the Administration’s plans for strategic rebalancing concerning China. Despite that, Haruko (2020) noted that a “clear and coherent geographical definition” of the region would not appear during those years. Diplomatic initiatives of the Obama Administration in 2013 would consider South and Southeast Asia as central parts of the Indo-Pacific (United States, 2013). The following year, the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs defined the area as “the vast littoral arc stretching from South Africa to Australia” (United States, 2014). In 2015, the US Department of Defense considered the “Indo-Asia-Pacific” as an area “spanning from the West Coast of the United States to the eastern coast of Africa (...)” (United States, 2015). During the first Trump Administration (2017-2021), the American geographical vision of an

Indo-Pacific became almost a synonym for the area of action of the US Pacific Command, renamed “US Indo-Pacific Command” in 2018. These changes meant that the “American Indo-Pacific” covered the whole of the Pacific Ocean but not the entirety of the Indian Ocean. The western area of the Indian Ocean, surrounding eastern Africa and part of the Middle East, was not included by the United States in its Indo-Pacific strategy (Haruko, 2020).

Thus, a definition of the Indo-Pacific can display differences depending upon the country that elaborated it. It can be defined as an area stretching eastwards from the Indian sub-continent to the Americas and southwards from Japan to Australia and New Zealand. Understanding the British definition is essential for this work on the UK’s containment of its relative decline, especially for it enables a better understanding of the British efforts and decisions taken in the region. The brief exposition above on the definition of the main ally of the United Kingdom in the area might help understand the British particularities in the Indo-Pacific, for the United States has a vision of the Indo-Pacific that is not the same as the UK’s. As the “AUKUS”⁶ trilateral security initiative has demonstrated, Australia and the United States are some of the main powers – a Middle Power and a Primary Great Power, respectively – partnering with the United Kingdom in the region, alongside the small countries – Oman, Brunei, Kenya and Singapore – that receive the majority of the British military bases and personnel. Still, despite having clear partners regionally, a precise and direct definition of the geographical limits of the region for the government in London remained absent (United Kingdom, 2021).

The idea of an Indo-Pacific only appeared officially in a Defence Review in 2021. The British strategic thinking has been centred on a vision of East of Suez, not “Indo-Pacific”. The terms of the 1971 British withdrawal from most of its military bases and territories in South-East Asia and the Persian Gulf were within the mindset of the “East of Suez” strategy once centred on British India and with no clear geographical delimitation (Croft, 2001; Darwin, 2011;). However, the independence of the Indian subcontinent (1947-1948) would not lead to immediate changes to the British strategic approach to the region. As one member of the British Cabinet stated on the eve of the Indian and Pakistani independence: “(...) withdrawal from India need not appear to be forced upon us by our weakness nor to be the first step in the dissolution of the Empire” (Louis, 1999), displaying a willingness to ensure retention of prestige and strategic role in the region.

⁶In September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States announced that they would enhance their cooperation in defence and security, including the transfer of nuclear propulsion technology for the Australian submarines. The initiative has been labelled as AUKUS, the acronym of its members’ initials.

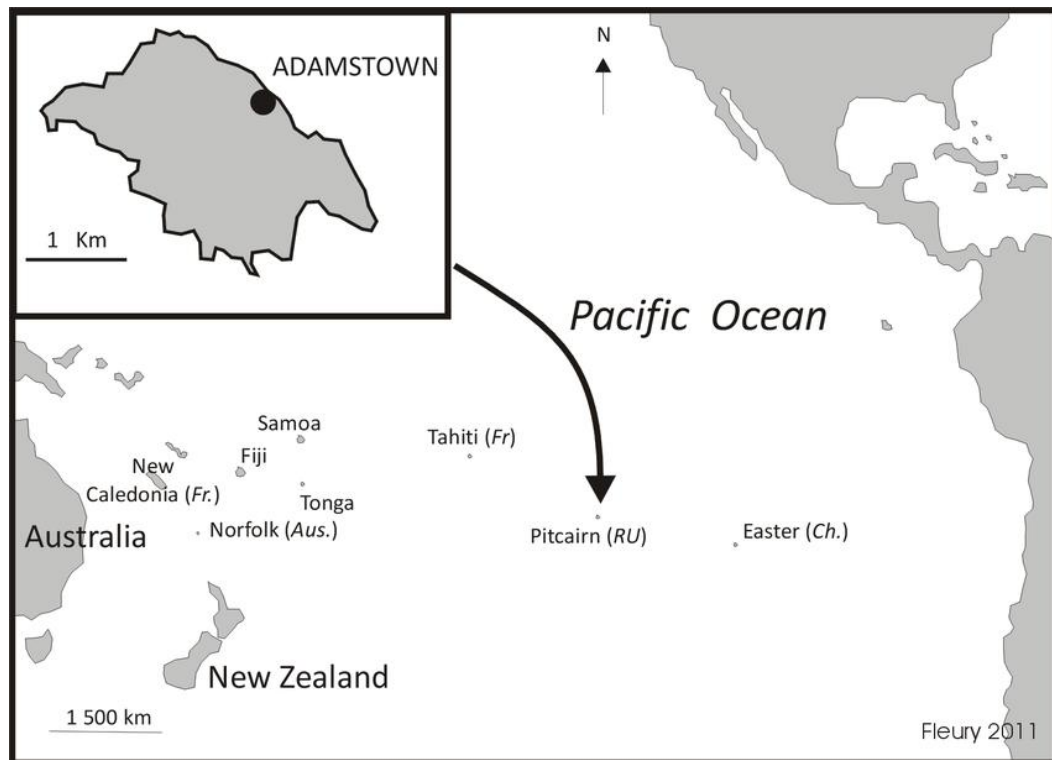
After two decades of holding onto the strategic remnants of the Empire, in 1967 and 1968, the British Government adopted a regional retrenchment (Dockrill, 2002). Therefore, as the UK employed a renewed strategic approach to the region, expanding and establishing new military bases and partnerships in the 2010s, the terminology used by British officials and the press fluctuated from “East of Suez” (Gardner, 2013; James, 2021; Kelly; Stansfield, 2013; United Kingdom, 2016; Vasagar, 2016) to “Indo-Pacific” (Hemmings, 2018; United Kingdom, 2021). One of the first official statements regarding the reopening of bases in the region occurred in December 2016, when the then British Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, stated that “Britain is back East of Suez” (United Kingdom, 2016). This return would later become part of the “British tilt” to the Indo-Pacific, announced by the Boris Johnson Government in March 2021 (United Kingdom, 2021). Officially, the idea of a British “return to the East of Suez” preceded that of a pivot or “tilt” to the Indo-Pacific, displaying that Britain adapted its conception of Indo-Pacific to become in practice a synonym for East of Suez. Thus, both nomenclatures share similar issues. Both have vague political and geographic definitions while being the area of action of a strategic approach considered by their creators an essential part of the global role of the UK (United Kingdom, 2021).

Despite the apparent relevance of the Indo-Pacific to London, in almost a decade after the British vote to leave the European Union, Britain had not published a precise official definition of its “Indo-Pacific”. However, as Haruko (2020) noted, reports of the House of Commons offer a glimpse at the British Government’s geographical and political perception of the Indo-Pacific. The House of Commons highlights actors considered close partners of the United Kingdom. The nations mentioned include Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore, which are members of the Five Power Defence Arrangements, a British-led security initiative focused on aiding Malaysia and Singapore’s defence. Additionally, China, India and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) initiative are cited (Haruko, 2020). Notably, the mention of the ASEM provides a look at the early understanding of British institutions about the region, as the initiative excludes countries from the Middle East and the small Pacific Island nations. Hence, this first glimpse at the “British Indo-Pacific” appears to be centred on the Indian Ocean, stretching its borders to the South China Sea and Japan while including Australia and New Zealand but not advancing to cover the entirety of the Pacific Ocean.

In that context, the 2021 Command Paper, the British Government planned to increase the number of vessels permanently deployed worldwide. Thus, it states that “Our Offshore Patrol Vessels will be permanently stationed in the Falklands, Caribbean, Gibraltar (to service both the Mediterranean and Gulf of Guinea), and East of Suez in the Indo-Pacific region.”

(United Kingdom, 2021a). This passage shows that the “East of Suez” and the “Indo-Pacific” have a similar geographical reach for the British Government. Beyond that, Indo-Pacific might even be considered a region within the “British East of Suez” conception or vice versa. Although indirectly and subtly considering Latin America as a separate strategic area, the Paper confirms that London understands that the Indo-Pacific is almost synonymous with the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Thus, this extends the region’s frontier to – at least – the British Overseas Territory of Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands, located in the southern Pacific Ocean, which can be seen in Map 1. Moreover, it is possible to conclude that the British Government considers at least some part of the Middle East to belong to its Indo-Pacific vision. When elaborating on the Indo-Pacific, it mentions the return of a permanent British military presence and installations in Oman (United Kingdom, 2021a).

Map 01. Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands



Map by Christian Fleury (Amoamo, 2016)

Having defined that London does not consider, or at least does not emphasise, Pacific-facing Latin America as part of its view of the Indo-Pacific, the majority of the Middle East follows the indirect understanding that London also has a different strategic approach to that region. Nevertheless, the Middle East occupies an opaquer position within the British Indo-Pacific than Latin America. This difference occurs primarily because of the British efforts to reinforce or rebuild its military presence in Oman and the Persian Gulf, concomitantly to its renewed interest in the East of Suez/Indo-Pacific region. As argued by Haruko (2020), the

country does not have a clear definition of Indo-Pacific yet, but – as it is argued here – that might occur precisely because the Indo-Pacific and East of Suez regions act as interchangeable terminologies for the strategic ambitions of the United Kingdom in a former imperial region.

2 RELATIVE DECLINE AND THE BRITISH DECLINIST DEBATE

The relative decline of the United Kingdom and its position in the first three decades of the post-Cold War must be analysed bearing in mind certain characteristics that are unique to the country. Chief among these is the fact that the UK is the former hegemonic power of the current world-system (Fiori, 2014). This status means that the British relative decline and position in the 2000s or early 2020s must not be overshadowed by the heights of its fall from world power after the two World Wars. For roughly a century, from 1815 to 1914, the UK was the “first amongst the Great Powers” and even before the end of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815), the British position was already a preeminent one, possibly already attaining the position of the leading world power in the early eighteenth century (Knutsen, 1999). Therefore, when the UK displayed signs of relative decline, it did so from the very top of the international “hierarchy” (Morris, 2011).

The height of British power is generally placed in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly from the 1840s to the 1870s. In the 1880s, rapid imperial expansion significantly increased the Empire’s foothold in Africa and Asia. By the 1920s, the British Empire covered over a quarter of the land surface area and almost the same amount of the world’s population (Ferguson, 2004). Beyond its “informal economic empire,” Britain held direct control over key markets ranging from the Indian subcontinent to Canada, and from Nigeria to Malaya (Darwin, 2011). Its imperial holdings provided protected sources of trade while establishing the country as a regional player in all inhabited continents. The wars of the Victorian Era (1837-1901) underpinned the Empire’s rapid and often violent expansion in the late nineteenth century. In its turn, the Empire contributed to cement Britain’s standing as a world power (Ferguson, 2004). British capital flew to secure markets, expanding the frontiers of the City of London. Colonial societies, mostly at the violent economic frontier of the Empire, experienced – although in different degrees – most severely the reverberations of imperial rule and its tense foundations as the incessant need to expand the frontiers of capital marched on relentlessly (Alliez; Lazzarato, 2021). Despite the growth of the United States, Imperial expansion had guaranteed Britain the territory, military bases, population, financial and other material resources to still be a titan in international politics in the 1920s (Burk, 2019).

However, after four decades and under the strain of another World War, the position of Britain had weakened considerably. Most of its imperial possessions had already achieved independence or were in the process of doing so, even if their de facto economic sovereignty remained fragile or dependent on London’s interests. The Pax Britannica of the Victorian era

was gone, and Britain found itself struggling to maintain relevance amid the rivalry between the two Superpowers (or Primary Great Powers) of the Cold War. Following the end of the Cold War, Hong Kong was the last economically significant overseas territory under British control. Its handover to China in 1997 marked the “end of the Empire” (Darwin, 2011; Ferguson, 2004). Therefore, the decline of the country from the Hegemon in the 1910s to a Secondary Great Power in the 2010s and the loss of a world-spanning empire are likely to influence perceptions of British relative decline, leading to regarding the country as no-longer a Great Power.

It can be argued that this reduction in the British capacity to influence and project power abroad is a form of absolute decline. The country has declined in relation to itself when it comes to weighting its influence in world affairs, but at the same time, the overall decline was relative to others. Gamble (1999) argues that British “absolute decline” can be seen in a quite specific way: “Where there has been an absolute decline is in Britain’s position as a world power in the twentieth century”. However, even this imperial decline might be regarded as relative given that Britain’s diminishing position is measured against the ascension of other nations. Gamble reinforces that what makes this imperial decline an absolute one is “(...) that Britain has demonstrably less power and influence at the end of the twentieth century than at the beginning.” The focus of this work, however, lies on the relative decline that characterised the decades following the core period of British decolonisation (1956–1971). This means an emphasis on relative decline rather than on a relational assessment of Britain’s absolute loss of power between the 1900s and the 2000s. Even though the “two declines” are separable analytically, as it is aimed in this work, politically they are inextricable from each other.

The perceptions of both elites and the public in the United Kingdom have tended to conflate the two forms of decline. Nevertheless, the experiences these sectors of society have not been the same. Popular discourse has largely focused on absolute decline, in part because the idea of losing the British Empire is more easily communicated and understood than the notion that, despite social and economic growth and prosperity, decline has become the norm rather than progress. In contrast, elite experiences have become centred on economic relative decline (Gamble, 2000; Wiener, 1992). As Gamble (2000) states, the political class defined relative decline as *the problem* affecting the country throughout the twentieth century, “(...) developing a discourse in which Britain was portrayed as constantly underperforming and slipping further and further behind its rivals.” The majority of the population had – in measurable ways – witnessed rising, not declining, living standards. However, the perceptions and experiences of the British political elite paint a different scenario for British leaders. Its members no longer inhabit a state that is the leading economic and military power in the

international system. British leaders on both left and right understood the world through the lens of British decline and, consequently, laid down projects and strategies to overcome such challenge to country's position (Gamble, 2000).

Moreover, an analysis centred on Britain must also account for its relative position vis-à-vis other powers and not only the decline from its former hegemonic position to a less preeminent one (Morris, 2011). With the aim of assessing a conclusion on the United Kingdom's relative standing in the international system and whether there were forms of decline management, this chapter is divided into two main parts. Firstly, in this chapter is covered the literature debate on relative decline of the Great Powers and the readjustment strategies employed by them to counter, manage and minimise their weakened position while having the historical case of UK as a main source. Secondly, aiming at the British case and its peculiarities, the long debate of decline in the UK is covered in the second half of this section. This theory and literature review-focused chapter followed by another one centred on relative position of the UK the post-Cold War years, an analysis of the British material capabilities (military, economic-industrial, and technological) and defence-related initiatives, the perception of its national leaders on the standing of their country in the world, and their diplomatic clout through the Commonwealth and other endeavours.

2.1 Relative Decline, Retrenchment, and post-Decline

According to Paul Kennedy (1989), the ascendancy of Great Powers is strongly linked to the availability of material resources and economic strength. Thus, relative decline correlates directly with the dwindling availability of such factors, leading to an increasing imbalance between foreign policy commitments and national capabilities. Powers whose ambitions and security requirements exceed their material capabilities are under constant threat of overstretch and subsequent relative decline. For Walter Lippmann (1950), failing to balance a nation's commitments with its power constitutes a foreign policy failure. This is because, in his definition, foreign policy is the tool used to "(...) bring into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and (...) power." Nevertheless, a gap emerges when a state's foreign policy becomes unbalanced and constrained by rising interstate competition, overburdening commitments abroad, and a declining pool of national resources. This situation is often labelled the "Lippmann Gap", a conceptual predecessor to Kennedy's (1989) notion of "overstretch," but with a stronger emphasis on the state's agency in addressing

and closing the gap between available resources and strategic demands, thereby restoring its foreign policy to a position of balance (Huntington, 1987; Robinson, 2019).

Considering the anarchic nature of the international system and the threats derived from this self-help scenario, in which states can ultimately rely only on themselves for their own survival (Waltz, 1959; 1979), addressing relative decline and its symptoms is crucial for dealing with the never-ending worries about the survival of the national polity. Hence, the gravity of relative decline for leaders of a power facing it, particularly when the symptoms are not perceived in their early stages; although, as will be explored, the lack of or delayed awareness about decline is questionable. The dilemma between securing one's position in the international arena while performing strategic readjustments is often called the "security dilemma" of relative decline (Robinson, 2019). Despite its challenges, failing to cope with decline is also a failure of foreign policy, and consequently, a non-fulfilment of the main objective of the state: the maximisation of its security in an anarchic international system.

However, the extent to which the leaders have an "option" to act against decline is considerably limited by the structural constraints of the international system. It is possible to argue that, due to the international system's anarchic configuration, with the Great Powers at the top, forming an informal and privileged structure within the system itself (Waltz, 1979), there is no room for manoeuvre: tackling decline is a vital interest that must be addressed as soon as it is diagnosed. Hence, the option is one of choosing what kind of strategy is employed to counter relative decline, and not about whether it should be dealt with or not. This follows the systemic demand that plagues Great Powers' politics in their quest for maximizing national security through hegemonic ambitions (Mearsheimer, 2001). Additionally, it implies that recognising decline is not a difficult task for the elites, particularly when they are the first to feel the effects of reduced power (Gamble, 2000).

Thus, relative decline creates persistent security concerns for every state, with Great Powers being the ones that bring the consequences of their decline to a global level or at least have more chances of doing so than others. Theorists of Hegemonic Stability Theory (Gilpin, 1981; 1987; 1988; Kindleberger, 1973) argue that relative decline erodes the ability of the systemic leaders to sustain a preferred international order, increasing risks that emerge from the consequences of a loss of relative power. Charles Kindleberger (1973) noted the withering of the hegemonic power – strained by relative decline – and the subsequent systemic instability derived from the increasingly difficult task of the declining hegemon to uphold its international order, leading to systemic instability and armed conflict. Britain in the inter-war years (1918–1939) is the leading example of this argument. Relative decline can also lead to power shifts

that might unsettle the equilibrium amongst the Great Powers. Therefore, for Balance of Power theorists, the issue is central to international stability and peace (Claude, 1962; Wolfers, 1962). Defenders of Power Transition Theory (Kugler; Organski, 1980) argue that periods of relative decline give opportunities to revisionist powers to challenge the status quo. Lastly, authors of Rationalist theories argue that “differential growth” leads to unbalanced foreign policies, which are one of the main causes of interstate conflict (Fearon, 1995).

It is worth noting that these theories share a baseline view of the Great Powers or, in the case of the Hegemonic Stability theorists, the hegemonic power. Beyond simply occupying the leading positions within the international system, these Powers are what best resemble a possible form of hierarchy for a system marked by its “anarchic” organisation. Bull (1977) argues that the Great Powers form an informal institution of international society, almost regarded as a loose governing committee for those that are not part of such an institution. In other words, being a Great Power comes with the privilege of effectively existing in an anarchic system while enforcing a specific hierarchical order on the rest. Ultimately, borrowing from Wendt (1992), anarchy is what the Great Powers make of it. As Fiori (2014) argues, Great Powers are both the source of stability for international orders and the source of instability when the order no longer serves them properly. Therefore, maintaining such an advantageous position is central for every state that can claim and exert a Great Power standing.

As Robinson (2019) noted, those theories recognise the influence of relative decline on the stability of the international system and that declining states have much to lose. Despite their differences, these theories and approaches also agree that decline is a volatile process, central to the emergence of conflicts amongst the Great Powers. Considering the stakes that are at risk when faced with relative decline, a state will react to it largely due to structural stimuli. Moreover, it is argued that the leaders of the declining power must act, but the pathway to action is unclear: the best direction might be a delaying strategy, a direct confrontation with the causes of decline – domestically and internationally – or a retrenchment policy aimed at cutting costs and improving the means to produce national security. Casting its long shadow is the imminent prospect of Great Power rivalry and war.

Hence, for Gilpin (1987), one of the options is to fight against relative decline by targeting the rising Powers that might surpass the one in decline and implementing economic reforms domestically. Paul Kennedy (1988) noted another practice of leaders when facing relative decline: the increase in military expenditure to compensate for diminishing influence and material resources while attempting to adopt a diplomacy based on deterrence. Nevertheless, these options partially belittle the basic strategic context of the descending power.

It can no longer sustain the same levels of military and economic prowess that it could muster at its zenith, therefore, armed conflict and increased defence spending might prove to be more harmful than reducing the costs of foreign policy, possibly setting the decline to become a definitive phenomenon (MacDonald; Parent, 2018).

MacDonald and Parent (2018) argue that retrenchment is a viable alternative employed by states facing relative decline while reducing risks of conflict with rising powers. On this note, the prevailing literature argues that Great Powers have a simple cycle: ascension, overaccumulation of commitments, followed by decline and fall. The argument goes on affirming that states are unable to balance their commitments and costs. Domestic resistance to change, financial challenges, and strategic insolvency are the bases of the issue (Kennedy, 1988). Nevertheless, between 1872 and 1988, in 14 of 16 cases of Great Power decline – France, the UK, Germany, Japan, and Russia/Soviet Union – the state opted for readjustment, preserving, in varying degrees, its relative position (MacDonald; Parent, 2018). Thus, despite their contribution to the literature, when it comes to the arguments of Kennedy (1988) and Kindleberger (1973) on the options and actions taken by a declining power, they have limitations, explaining increasingly less about the process of relative decline and the later position of the state. Despite that, as will be explored, Gilpin (1976; 1976b; 1981) recognises that the tools to contain relative decline go beyond armed conflict, and Kennedy (1988) partially acknowledges there are possible strategies to minimise decline.

Concomitantly, the main contribution to the literature by MacDonald and Parent (2018) is to point out that containing relative decline is possible through readjustment policies that seek to reduce the costs of the state's foreign policy. In other words, "retrenchment" is a strategy that historically has been applied by declining Powers to minimise the effects of decline. By cutting the costs of foreign policy, the leaders tackle the security dilemma of "rising demands and dwindling resources." Within this context, it is possible to argue that retrenchment is one answer to the Lippmann Gap and, thus, a strategy recommended as foreign policy for declining states. Arguably, considering that the argument for retrenchment includes a circumscribed foreign policy, the decline of Great Powers might not be as volatile a process as considered by Hegemonic Stability theorists and realists, and violent transitions are the exception (Gilpin, 1981; Kindleberger, 1973; Mearsheimer, 2001).

A foreign policy that implements retrenchment reduces expenses and shifts commitments to improve the power's "strategic solvency" (Sprout, 1968). The act of retrenching has several possible characteristics aimed at cutting back costs. One of the leading examples of retrenchment is the repeated reduction of military spending and the size of armed

forces. Additionally, foreign policy commitments – not only reserved for the security or defence fields – are eliminated or replaced by more flexible agreements, limiting goals and ambitions in secondary geographic areas⁷, and reducing the relevance of some interests overseas. Despite its many forms, retrenchment opens the way for a declining power to readjust its position, prioritising core security interests at the expense of peripheral ones, leading to more sustainable foreign policies. However, consequently, a declining Great Power applying this strategic approach has a more restrained foreign policy than its peers (MacDonald; Parent, 2018).

Robinson (2019) argues that foreign policy “sustainability” is central to the “long-term strategic solvency” of Great Powers in decline. Without that equilibrium, “relative decline may become absolute.” Considering the competition among the Great Powers, retrenchment has an additional point of consideration. According to MacDonald and Parent (2018), powers that retrench have more sustainable foreign policies and emerge well in subsequent “military disputes.” This implies that although retrenchment tends to be a period of relative peace – and is desired to be peaceful by the declining states – the subsequent period for the Great Powers that successfully maintained their position brings back their involvement in military conflicts. This view casts light on the phase that comes after relative decline has been dealt with and retrenchment is supplanted by a less restrained strategic policy. Having retained its Great Power standing, the state can return to exert its costliest privileges, including enforcing its interests on others.

Nevertheless, even the powers that perform retrenchment are not guaranteed to preserve their relative position or recover it after employing that readjustment policy. Factors such as when a Great Power is unable to remove itself from commitments, predation by other states, and unwillingness or lack of awareness⁸ on the decline, might be the causes of the retrenchment failure (Macdonald; Parent, 2018; Robinson, 2019; Shiffrinson, 2018). Beyond that, the literature on the relative decline of the Great Powers and retrenchment is divided between favourable and unfavourable arguments. Kennedy (1988) is not completely opposed to retrenchment, but Gilpin (1981) has a pessimistic view on the possibility of retrenchment and dealing with relative decline. Gilpin (1981; 1976b) presents the options of armed conflict with the challengers of the declining power and “economic rejuvenation,” while Kennedy (1988)

⁷This is the case of the United Kingdom in the Indo-Pacific since the 1967-1968 decision to significantly withdraw the British military and territorial presence throughout the region. In the next chapter, the British strategic presence in that region in the 1990-2022 years are thoroughly analysed.

⁸Unawareness might be only present in the very early stages of relative decline. When facing relative decline, the elites are the first to notice that gradually their voices count for less in the world stage (Gamble, 2000).

argues that even retrenchment or war are not adequate answers, ultimately delaying or hastening – in the case of botched conflicts – the fall of the Great Power.

Critics of retrenchment state that it is a highly risk-centred strategy, particularly when the anarchic nature of the international system is taken into consideration. Retrenchment means waning power and inflicts damage to the reputation of the state among its peers, allies, and enemies (Brooks; Wohlforth, 2008; Gilpin, 1981; Thompson, 2012). The argument goes on stating that even retrenching from secondary commitments and geographic areas displays weakness and a decreasing resolve to play a leading role in the international system. Hence, critics of retrenchment recognise that a hegemonic power and Great Powers need their followers to maintain a world order. This is part of Stein's (1984) "hegemon's dilemma," in which the hegemon leads a world order but requires followers for legitimacy. Retrenchment might lead followers to search for new partners, hastening the collapse of the hegemon's position (Brooks; Ikenberry; Wohlforth, 2012). In addition, critics argue that retrenchment means diminished relative power. Consequently, a state that retrenches has reduced its chances of emerging victorious if engulfed by war. Robinson (2019) argues that for the critics, retrenchment's outcomes are widely negative, with "diminished power, influence, and security," and should only be considered as "a policy of last resort." Furthermore, it is possible to argue that the recessionary characteristic of resources for the power in decline appears to be completely ignored by most critics, for strategic insolvency cannot be sustained indefinitely.

Supporters of retrenchment understand that the policy can have positive results. Advocates state that critics exacerbate the costs of retrenchment and downplay the expenditure of prolonged overcommitments (Drezner, 2013; Haynes, 2015; Macdonald, Parent, 2011; 2018). Reducing commitments from peripheral areas with little strategic value to the Great Power in decline can be a positive policy that eases the way for the prioritisation of core interests. In part, the advocates have an underlaying vision on the costs of power projection similar to Mearsheimer's (2001) "stopping power of water"⁹, even though Britain's hegemony was partially based on naval supremacy and the largest Empire in history (Ferguson, 2004; Kennedy, 1989). Within this context, retrenchment is less burdensome than overcommitments or waging war against rising competitors. Historically, as already pointed out by MacDonald and Parent (2011; 2018), that policy is "by far the most common response to relative decline" affecting Great Powers and aids these countries in retaining or regaining their previous standing

⁹Mearsheimer (2001) argues that the oceans and large bodies of water, along with the challenges derived from projecting power through them, prevents the existence of world hegemon. According to the author, there can only be "regional hegemons" that relentlessly seek world hegemony.

while reducing their participation in armed conflicts. In contrast, Great Powers that do not retrench have not recovered their relative position. Supporters also rebuke critics regarding reputational damage derived from retrenchment policies, emphasising that reputation depends on context; thus, cutbacks in peripheral commitments may signal renewed resolve in other regions (Press, 2005). Reputational damage is more prevalent when an established power is unable to successfully counter challengers – militarily, in most cases – in secondary regions where it still has commitments.

Beyond that, a Great Power might be able to transfer its commitments to a suitable successor that shares its view on a preferred security order (Haynes, 2015). Considering peripheral commitments, clinging to regional responsibilities and privileges derived from them might also undermine the Great Power's legitimacy or trigger the creation of counterbalancing initiatives. An established regional security order centred on a non-regional Great Power might be targeted by members that perceive they can no longer extract benefits from it as the Power declines. Therefore, the declining Power may have to perform concessions to keep its "followers" in line, expanding the costs of its arrangements in an already costly region (Stein, 1984). Lastly, the position of the declining Power might also be tested and exposed by rising opponents, furthering doubts about the former's capabilities and level of commitment to peripheral regions (MacDonald; Parent, 2018).

Robinson (2019) argues that on both sides of the retrenchment debate there is a general agreement on the conditions that might trigger this policy and its costs and prerequisites. Considering its international costs, the policy can signal weakness and, if characterised by disengagement from peripheral regions, may cause regional instability, distrust among allies, and the emboldening of rivals. Within the domestic sphere, the costs are political, for representatives of special interests may mobilise to protect their specific assets, while sectors within the elite can become divided to defend their exclusive interests if retrenchment is not a consensus or seen as a policy of the highest priority. It is worth mentioning that even critics see retrenchment as a viable strategy when the costs of preventive war are insurmountable. In other words, leaders will only resort to war if other policies – including retrenchment – cannot be expected to avert relative decline (Copeland, 2000). Armed conflict is done to end relative decline. The point is which form is more effective. Segments of the literature on retrenchment also argue that such a policy is employed only when relative decline has created overwhelming incentives, not being applied following short-term decline (Haynes, 2012). In this case, the conception of "overwhelming incentives" is at odds with what is at play when the leaders of a Great Power recognise that decline is in motion. If the problem is not dealt with rapidly, the

Great Power's position – its privileges and benefits – is at risk of disappearing, and the same occurs for the elites' position. So, the very notion of a “state of decline” is already bombarded by incentives, particularly systemic ones that push the leaders to engage against it with the best tools available. Similarly, the argument of entrenched interests that might avoid or delay retrenchment is also at odds with the systemic incentives that will overwhelm this reluctant elite sector due to the urgency and the possible consequences perceived by the remaining elites if decline goes unchecked.

Both sides of the argument recognise that a declining power only adopts retrenchment – when it does adopt it, due to the existence of other options to combat decline – reluctantly. The reluctance does not mean that retrenchment is not performed, but that attachment to former glory, elites' entrenched interests, and perceived diminished power during retrenchment are present phenomena that linger even after the decline is over. As a way to avoid retrenchment abroad, MacDonald and Parent (2011; 2018) argue that states will first look for domestic retrenchment to solve the malady of relative decline; a tacit recognition that not only is retrenchment not the single policy to end decline, but that retrenchment might occur concomitantly or after other policies. If improvements through “domestic innovations” – influenced by Gilpin's (1976b) “economic rejuvenation” –, which might include economic reforms, fail to deal with the problem, retrenchment overseas is the next step taken by the power in decline. Therefore, although being indirectly and briefly acknowledged, the economy is the primary field in which relative decline must be combatted. According to such a conclusion, the relevance of retrenchment is severely changed. Firstly, the core economy of the Great Power is its source of material power; thus, economic reforms – or “rejuvenation” – are the main pathway to ending relative decline. Secondly, retrenchment is viable only if it removes strategic burdens, which in turn allow the state to spend more on domestic reforms. Retrenchment is a policy that appears secondary to economic reforms, increasing in relevance depending on the characteristics of the Great Power in question: the more overseas and peripheral commitments a Great Power has, the more it will be able to retrench, directly providing resources to be directed to economic rejuvenation¹⁰.

The core criticism of retrenchment lies in the issue of its frequency and form. Under certain conditions – for instance, prolonged and slow decline (Copeland, 2000) – retrenchment might be an answer to relative decline instead of preventive war. Gilpin (1981) recognises that

¹⁰The British debate about decline is covered in the next section with a focus on the industrial and economic debates, reinforcing that the economy occupied the spotlight when discussing decline.

in some cases, reducing the costs of foreign policy has benefited the declining state, with Britain in the decades prior to the First World War being the main example that the author classified as a successful case of retrenchment¹¹. Concerning the frequency of retrenchment, its advocates show that it happens more frequently than predicted by critics (MacDonald; Parent, 2018). However, both sides tacitly recognise the phenomenon of retrenchment in the international system, and even its critics acknowledge that it is possible to apply retrenchment as a policy for strategic readjustment if armed conflict is not a viable alternative.

Therefore, retrenchment is a policy that has contributed to Great Powers recovering or minimising the consequences of relative decline. The challenge of retrenchment lies in its application and not in its position as a worthy policy in times of dwindling resources (MacDonald; Parent, 2018; Allison, 2018). Thus, it is necessary to have an understanding of how to realign priorities and resources by axing commitments in a region to channel additional attention and capabilities towards dealing with more central strategic areas and challenges. This task is complex due to the necessity of analysing the historical context and the characteristics of the Great Power in decline, along with the latter's commitments and capabilities. Despite that, it is possible to define general outlines for retrenchment policies that are likely to provide the desired outcome of avoiding the loss of relative standing and power in the international system, which, if not contained considerably, weakens the capacity of the state to sustain its sovereignty and severely limits the possibilities of recovering the lost position.

Within that context, retrenchment policies have a wide range of options when put into practice. Although retrenchment can be defined as reducing the costs of foreign policy, it can be applied to the state's domestic sector. Reducing the defence budget and foreign aid are the main characteristics that give shape to the "domestic face" of retrenchment within the strategic field. In addition, other domestic ramifications of this policy include the restructuring of armed forces and the reform or replacement of security institutions regarded as old-fashioned (Allison, 2018; MacDonald; Parent, 2018). Reforms to economic policy, if applied alongside these defence-related retrenchment measures, can also be regarded as domestic attempts to reverse or minimise relative decline. To some extent, the Thatcherite economic "shock treatment" of the 1980s in the United Kingdom could be considered as part of a readjustment strategy that included retrenchment and sought new ways to revitalise British economic performance in relation to its main competitors in the West (United States, France, West Germany, and Japan),

¹¹For Gilpin (1981), Britain retrenched by reducing its presence overseas and concentrating its forces in its primary region, Europe, against a rising Imperial Germany while allying with less threatening powers. When the Great War (1914-1918) broke-out in Europe, London's strategic decisions were proved correct.

leading to what Gilpin (1976b) labelled as “economic rejuvenation.” The relation between retrenchment and economic reforms is only interchangeable when the latter includes reducing costs for the country’s budget. However, for the sake of definition, economic rejuvenation is not a synonym for retrenchment due to its objective: the expansion of innovation and economic productivity within the Great Power’s core economy (Gilpin, 1976b).

Concerning its characteristics when applied to non-domestic policies, retrenchment includes the repositioning of military forces, eliminating possible flashpoints derived from the state’s foreign policy, and discharging security commitments. On the issue of commitments, the declining power might find a successor to take on its former responsibilities in secondary regions, keeping the interests of the former key actor relatively aligned with the new regionally pre-eminent Great Power. However, if that is not possible, and the declining Power’s elite has already achieved an internal consensus on retrenchment as the policy to engage relative decline, it is likely that the power will abandon its commitment and derived interests altogether (MacDonald; Parent, 2018). As noted by Shiffrinson (2018), having at least one stable or rising like-minded partner is central to a falling Great Power to sustain its long-term position, as it might become an ally or close partner to the rising Power against other peers that could predate the declining giant. Thus, retrenchment in the foreign policy of a Great Power might stimulate the country to find another Great Power that shares similar values and interests, reinforcing the informal structure – as indicated by Waltz (1979) and Bull (1977) – that entangles the Great Powers of the interstate system. In the case of a special relationship between the declining and ascending Powers, not only are the chances of terminating decline through retrenchment increased because it is relatively safe from predation (Shiffrinson, 2018), but also due to the possibility of the declining power influencing, directly and indirectly, its successor to establish an international arrangement or even an international order that remains friendly and beneficial to the old waning Power.

However, the view of finding a successor state to fill the political and strategic void left by the retreating power as a pathway to counter relative decline is not without caveats and criticism. Gilpin (1976; 1977; 1981) is sceptical about the overall effectiveness of retrenchment, even though the author concedes that it might be the solution for cases where preventive war is not viable, pointing out that power cannot be understood and supported without its economic base. Thus, solving the issues plaguing economic performance is one of the solutions – a wave of “rejuvenation” through economic reforms and other policies – to escape decline (Gilpin, 1976b). Finding a like-minded “successor” can be understood merely as a way to disguise the extent of the power’s descent, mainly if the rejuvenation of the economic base is not achieved.

Similarly, Susan Strange (1971) argues that what largely led to the United Kingdom losing its hegemonic position – and any other hegemon’s – is the failure to maintain a robust and dynamic domestic economic base. This is one of the reasons that preoccupation with economic decline and the countermeasures to this problem took centre stage within the British elites’ thinking in the decades after the World Wars (Crafts, 1997; Gamble, 2000). Despite that, the outcome of encountering a like-minded successor has the potential to significantly reduce predation chances from other Great Powers, which would have severe consequences for every state. Even if it is not the solution for the causes of relative decline, it is an issue that contributes to its management as long as it allows retrenchment to proceed undisturbed, with the preservation of prestige internationally.

According to Gilpin (1977; 1981), the main issue that determined whether a hegemon or a Great Power was facing prolonged relative decline or not is an economic-technological one, rather than a purely military issue, which also provides insight into the reasons for Gilpin’s distrust of retrenchment as a “first option” policy. This occurs because the field of economics is where a power encounters the majority of the factors that allow it to be a major player or even a hegemon. The capacity for technological innovation and the ability to increase domestic productivity are leading aspects that must be dealt with when a state is facing relative decline. If the leaders are able to perform the challenging task of rejuvenating innovation and productivity, relative decline can be avoided without hegemonic wars and retrenchment. Nevertheless, the process is difficult due to domestic resistance and entrenched economic interests. The author also indicates that maintaining control of foreign markets contributes to the efforts within the economic field to reverse decline, creating a combination of economic reform at home and possible military action abroad to counter relative decline. In short, Gilpin (1977; 1976b) indicates a way out of the descent through economic reinvention and the maintenance of control over key markets. It is worth noting that this control of relevant markets resembles a veiled version of the practice of establishing formal and informal imperial holdings that characterised the heyday decades of British and European imperialism and power. Hence, eliminating the problem of “uneven growth” – the root of all problems – would guarantee the end of the hegemon’s or Great Power’s decline.

Agreeing with Gilpin (1976b), supporters of retrenchment have largely conceded that efforts in the economic field have their part in minimising or reversing relative decline but tend to focus on the retrenchment policies that can be part of economic “rejuvenation.” In short, retrenchment does not cover economic reforms that go beyond the expected reduction of the country’s expenditure. Particularly, MacDonald and Parent (2018) consider domestic reforms

and the cutting back of commitments overseas to alleviate the national budget as having the same rationale: reducing policy costs and increasing the availability of resources for the state. Due to their concern about the causes of relative decline, the defenders of Hegemonic Stability Theory, mainly Gilpin (1981) and Kindleberger (1973), highlight the economic field as the main source of decline while arguing that tackling the malaise of uneven growth is an essential step to avoid loss of power. However, the process of addressing the issues of economic troubles is an arduous task that requires political willingness to overcome opposition domestically and internationally¹².

Following the convergence of the elites' position on the matter of decline, the possibility of economic reinvention domestically can occur while retrenchment is performed by the state both in the domestic and international fields. Thus, in this work, it is argued that declining powers are not presented with mutually exclusive alternatives of readjustment. On the contrary, retrenchment is only one option that is complemented by others, including what Gilpin (1976b) labelled as "economic rejuvenation" and what Shiffrinson (2018) described as the "like-minded successor" in major secondary areas of former activity of the power in decline. The strategic aspect receives the focus of this work due to the scope presented, but the primacy of economic reform is recognised, and retrenchment is treated as a complementary supporting policy behind economic rejuvenation. Therefore, when exploring the case of the United Kingdom's decline, retrenchment will be paired with the overall economic reforms and policies of the British elites that aimed to increase innovation and productivity while protecting their economy from the encroachments of Primary and Secondary Great Powers. Taking retrenchment in conjunction with economic rejuvenation strengthens the possibility of a "successful strategic readjustment," meaning that the relative decline is over.

Nevertheless, the beneficial potential of rejuvenation and retrenchment ultimately depends on the perception of the state's leaders and their policies. Complacency derived from the established privileged position of the hegemon – or other Great Powers – can delay the response to relative decline, for it does not generate a sense of urgency (Gilpin, 1977; 1981). As already stated, the argument that leaders are slow to identify relative decline is questioned by the several stimuli that come from systemic sources. Relative decline is a central issue and threat for a Great Power, for it erodes the core assets of the actor, that is, its ability to sustain

¹²Gilpin (1976b) is pessimistic about the chances of economic rejuvenation's success. In the case of the US in the mid-1970s, the author argued that the expansion of American multinationals became a double edge sword: a symbol of American hegemony but a possible inhibitor to needed economic reforms due to established interests.

and relentlessly expand its own security. This issue, coupled with the consequences of losing Great Power capabilities and benefits, only reinforces the importance of identifying relative decline and deploying policies to manage its effects. Even Gilpin (1976b; 1977; 1981) defends that recognising decline is not difficult, but that the strategies to counter it are laborious due to entrenched interests. Hence, arguing that decline is difficult to identify means downplaying the rationality of the state actors and the threat that decline poses to the nation-state. Within this context, Kennedy (1988) has a similar pessimistic view to Gilpin (1977; 1981), arguing that the identification might not be difficult, but the challenge ahead might prove to be insurmountable.

Despite that, the case of the United States between the 1970s and 1980s shows that, generally, leaders are able to identify quickly when one's relative position is in decline, employing countermeasures that in the American case involved rejuvenation policies (Schutte, 2021). Gilpin's (1976b) view on the economic reforms in the American case was marked by a pessimistic tone, however, the elites in the United States proved able to counter the perceived decline of the mid-1970s and 1980s, limiting the growth of competitors – mainly Japan in those years – by monetary actions while pursuing rejuvenation of the core national economy (Schutte, 2021). Similarly, the British elites felt the consequences of relative decline earlier than the British public because the UK's decline was marked by increasing living standards and purchasing power of its population, while the elites – used to having their voices projected on a global scale – recognised that gradually the country was losing ground because their influence internationally was no longer the same as it was before the 1950s (Gamble, 2000).

Robinson (2019) also implies that recognition of a “need for retrenchment” is not a difficult task for the country's leaders. The author argues that the perception that retrenchment is needed occurs when the state faces “periods of misalignment”, which are characterised by “rising international threats, especially shifts in relative power, and declining domestic resources resulting from economic downturns, dysfunctional politics, or declining public support for existing foreign policies” (Robinson, 2019). These preconditions “eventually” lead the decision-makers to a debate on retrenchment that involves considerations of the strategic scenario and the means of reducing strategic expenditure. Robinson (2019) states that “realignment” begins after leaders begin employing and synchronising different retrenchment activities, arguing that the outcome is based on how “the costs and benefits of retrenchment facilitate strategic reorientation.” Therefore, retrenchment is necessary for the fulfilment of strategic reorientation. This “reorientation” is similar to what is defined in this work as a facet of strategic readjustment, which is the set of policies through which the elites aim to improve the relative stance of the state, be it as decline management, reaffirmation or an expansionist

policy. The main difference is that for Robinson (2019), retrenchment is the “core” of strategic reorientation, and this policy exists only when a power needs to reconsider its commitments while experiencing a declining relative position.

In most cases, having performed readjustment policies, a Great Power reverts its relative decline and preserves its international standing, or at least minimises the effects of decline and prolongs its influence on the international stage. Due to the frequency of positive outcomes, supporters of retrenchment argue that this policy is the most common and successful reaction to combat relative decline (MacDonald; Parent, 2011; 2018). It is possible to summarise the different factors that contribute to this “successful” picture. They include the cohesion and recognition of decline by the declining power’s elites, the results of rapprochement with former rivals, and the existence of secondary regions and interests that can be targeted by the policy to relocate resources back to primary interests¹³, availability of not only “allies” but of a successor state with shared principles, and the performance of retrenchment both domestically and internationally. Moreover, economic reforms and the retention of access to foreign markets – as Gilpin (1976b) argued – contributes to remedying the core problem of decline that is the uneven growth.

However, the prevailing view of the literature on the issue of handling decline presents the phenomenon as a linear pathway. The formulaic premise is one of stages or phases that determine the position and longevity of a Great Power. Firstly, there is the “rise” or the “ascension” of the Great Powers or hegemonic power, followed by its heyday or zenith, only to be succeeded by a period of descent or “fall” (Gilpin, 1981; Mearsheimer, 2001; Kennedy, 1988; Kindleberger, 1973; Robinson, 2021; Shiffrinson, 2018; Waltz, 1979; 1993).

In some cases, the notion of a non-linear trajectory is hinted at by indications of what could be labelled as “episodic decline” – which is dealt with through retrenchment – even if the Great Power is still at the height of its strength (MacDonald; Parent, 2011; 2018). Despite that, the issue is left untouched and the traditional linear view of “rise and fall” remains paramount, even though relative decline might occur as a result of short-term issues while not being part of a larger trend of “fall” or the decline might not remove the Great Power status of a country. These points may challenge the notion of retrenchment’s role, for the causes may not be severe or related to the core economy of the power in question, thus easing the task of retrenchment policies. More importantly, it challenges the notion of a simple “rise and fall,” pointing out that

¹³This could be considered as “a given” when considering the major actors, largely because all Great Powers, by definition, have significant interests and active economic-military presence beyond its primary and immediate geographical region.

overall trends are simplifications that can degrade the understanding of a country's condition of power. In other words, decline or the "fall" is not the end – this being one of the arguments of this work – the "rise" and "zenith" are not perfect, and the very notion of a cycle is not without its limitations. On the matter of the "fall" or decline not being the end of the country's struggle for power, it is possible to identify – as a generalisation – a new stage that is crucial to dispel the notion of the "rise and fall" narrative. Having performed a strategic readjustment that achieved the objective of ending relative decline or largely minimised its effects, the stages of retrenchment and particularly the phase that comes following "successful" readjustment demand attention.

The last stage of retrenchment simply is its outcome: "reorientation," implying that the "fall" will not happen if retrenchment is successful (Robinson, 2021). However, this last stage is not deeply explored even when decline is avoided. In other words, after the end of retrenchment, the literature is concerned largely with identifying whether the policy was successful, advancing little beyond those conclusions. Hence the demand for at least an insight into Great Power behaviour following the end of long or severe retrenchment periods of its foreign policy. Essentially, the question is whether the power remains less likely to involve itself in military conflicts – which is the case during retrenching periods – or whether it will expand the clout of its interests once more, profiting from its new strategic solvency. Before advancing into further considerations, it is worth stating that the narrative of "rise and fall" is not present here, for the Great Power remained within the top ranking of the international system, even if its position suffered changes within this exclusive and relevant Great Power hierarchy.

It is argued that a power that adopts retrenchment has systemic stimulus to test its new limits if the policy proves fruitful, beyond domestic and non-systemic motivations that might include the restoration of old economic interests. The systemic motivations are akin to the ones involved when the leaders of the country once had to ponder over relative decline. This systemic stimulus is centred on the necessity of survival in an uncertain and anarchic system, which demands the persistent and relentless quest for improved security (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1959). As when the Great Power faced relative decline, retrenchment and other policies ultimately were the rational result of the leaders' considerations for security, aimed at a way to end the threat of losing the wherewithal to maintain Great Power standing. The same rationale is applied post-decline. It is necessary to reassert national power and interests as a way to improve the state's national security, consequently expanding its chances of survival as soon as strategic solvency is achieved and resources are available to improve its relative position. In a turn of events, the relatively peaceful retrenchment period (MacDonald; Parent, 2018) is

supplanted by an assertive foreign policy, willing to take on new commitments and reinforce the country's position as a Great Power through diplomatic and military means. Thus, the consequence of retrenchment in the post-decline period is the desire of the power that once retreated internationally to reimpose, if necessary by armed means, its strategic interests and privileges overseas, exporting instabilities to other players.

The main divergence of this argument from Mearsheimer's position (2001), traditionally labelled as "offensive realism," is the eclectic and pragmatic nature of the rational thought of state leaders when faced with relative decline. Decline is managed mainly through retrenchment and economic rejuvenation, which at first might lead to fears of exposing national security and decreasing the chances of survival, therefore not being part of "offensive realism." Decline is addressed precisely to restore and expand the survival chances of the state. The motivations behind retrenchment have the same concerns for national security as advanced by Mearsheimer's postulate on the never-ceasing major objective of securing and holding on to power for the sake of survival. Ultimately, the expansion of foreign policy costs in the "post-decline" period is partially in line with not only Mearsheimer's (2001) but also Waltz's (1959; 1979) arguments on the quest for maximised security in an uncertain and anarchic system. With maximised power, the state can more easily impose its will on others to defend its own interests.

Empirical evidence on those points can be taken from the scope of this work (1990–2023). The leading examples are the cases of the United Kingdom, from as early as 1990, and the Russian Federation, after the early 2000s. Both countries suffered relative or absolute declines that led to a new position within the ranks of the Great Powers. The British decline occurred mainly between the 1940s and the 1980s, while the Russian case is a decline derived from the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Russia's role as its "successor state" with diminished economic, military, diplomatic, and human resources in the 1990s.¹⁴ As L. J. Cantori and S. L. Spiegel (1970) argued, the Soviet Union was one of the Primary Great Powers of the international system during the Cold War, while the UK – still under relative decline and retrenchment – occupied the position of a Secondary Great Power. Following the definitions of Cantori and Spiegel (1970) and the ones established for this work, Russia's position might have become one of a Secondary Great Power while the UK still retained a similar position after losing its Primary Great Power standing after the Suez Crisis of 1956¹⁵. In these cases,

¹⁴On Russian decline and resurgence see: Ramani (2023), Lo (2015), Mankoff (2009), Vinhas de Souza (2008), and Oliker and Charlick-Paley (2002).

¹⁵Between 1945 and 1956, the United Kingdom was considered one of the three Superpowers of the immediate post-Second World War years. The Suez Crisis, involving the UK, France, and Israel against Egypt proved a military success but failed to gather support from the United States, which pushed for a withdrawal of the

retrenchment and economic reforms avoided the loss of “Great Power” capabilities but were unable to restore the actor to the first rank of the Great Powers. Hence the relevance of identifying the differences within this exclusive “club” of countries¹⁶.

On the topic of post-decline, both Moscow and London engaged in renewed commitments and military operations beyond their borders in the years after their relative decline had been largely minimised or eliminated. In the British case, the intervention in the Gulf War (1990–1991) can be regarded as the first signal of the return of the interventionist foreign policy of the years before retrenchment took hold of most British policies in the 1960s and 1970s. Under Tony Blair (1997–2007), the country intervened in Kosovo (1999), Sierra Leone (2000), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (1998 and 2003) (Lunn; Miller; Smith, 2008). The first six years of Blair’s premiership became the most active period of the British Armed Forces since the Second World War. After the British Government’s display of political willingness to project power overseas in the late 1990s and early 2000s, committing itself to long-term operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, British attention once again turned to the regions east of Suez. The war accompanied the increased returns from British investments overseas, which reached 2% of the national income by 2007, higher than they had been “at any time since Britain had an empire” (Davis, 2007), reinforcing the notion that British economic interests overseas tied to a national economy performing free of relative decline had renewed growth in the first two decades of the post-Cold War era, which for Britain is generally regarded as a post-decline period (Crafts, 1997; Gamble, 2000).

In 2013, the British think tank Royal United Services Institute¹⁷ (RUSI) stated that Britain was undergoing a strategic shift to East of Suez. The British Royal Air Force would have a base in the United Arab Emirates, and the build-up of troops in the Persian Gulf would increase as London withdrew its forces from Afghanistan. Additionally, beyond the liberation of resources after the end of large operations in Afghanistan, Britain would fill the increasingly large political gap that was appearing as the United States concentrated its attention towards the Indo-Pacific to counter China’s rise as a world power (RUSI, 2013). Effectively, this decision represented a reversal of the 1968 policy to withdraw from east of Suez by the early 1970s. In

Anglo-French forces. The withdrawal of the British forces after fears of economic retaliation from Washington led to a severe setback to national prestige. However, the Crisis must be considered as the most glamourising signal of Britain’s diminished role and not the cause of British decline or imperial disengagement (Leebaert, 2018; Louis, 1989; Peden, 2012).

¹⁶The relative position of the United Kingdom is analysed in the next chapter.

¹⁷It has members from the British Armed Forces, diplomats, and academia while keeping close links with the UK Government and Monarchy. Notably, the President of the Institute in the 2010s and early 2020s is the Duke of Kent and the Monarch is the Institute’s Patron. The Chairman is generally a member of the British Parliament.

other words, the symbol of Britain's retrenchment, the 1971 withdrawal from east of Suez, was in the process of being dismantled and supplanted by a new – expansionist at its core – readjustment policy in the region.

By 2014, a defence agreement with Bahrain started the return of the UK as a permanent military actor in the Persian Gulf (Johnston, 2014). The accord with Bahrain was followed by an ambitious agreement to re-establish British military bases in Oman in 2016 (United Kingdom, 2016a; 2017). By 2021, bases in Kenya, Singapore and Brunei, and the British Indian Ocean Territory were the targets of a refreshed strategy that aimed at expanding their roles as supporting bases for Britain's power projection in the region (United Kingdom, 2021). In 2021, the AUKUS tripartite security agreement guaranteed closer cooperation with the United States and Australia in the region. It also secured a significant share of the chains of production derived from the future fleet of Anglo-Australian "AUKUS-class" submarines for the British defence industry at the expense of the French (Brooke-Holland; Curtis; Mills; 2021; United Kingdom, 2023). In 2023, the British Government had its application – dating from 2021 – for membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) approved by its members¹⁸ (Webb, 2023).

In the three decades after the end of the Cold War, the Russian case has a parallel with the British. After the decline of the 1990s, Russia's strategic readjustment reached its climax in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Similarly to London, Moscow went on to reassert its position as a Great Power after a period of decline, aiming to rival the hegemonic momentum of the United States. In the military field, in the 2000s, Russia began a reform and modernisation programme for its Armed Forces. In 2008, the early test of its capabilities came with the Russo-Georgian War which lasted five days and culminated in a Russian victory. The conflict was considered to be the "first European war of the 21st Century" and showed that despite shortcomings, Russia was still a major military player (Emerson, 2008).

The war against Georgia put the Russian forces against a conventional enemy after years of insurgency confrontations in the Caucasus. Perceived Russian weaknesses, including lack of precision-guided missiles coupled with the inability to gain air superiority in the Russo-Georgian War, led to further modernisation programmes. During Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war, it demonstrated that the capability gaps of 2008 were largely addressed (German, 2022). The willingness of Moscow to intervene in Syria also forms part of the

¹⁸One of the arguments for the United Kingdom, geographically located in Europe, to become a member of the CPTPP is the British Overseas Territory of Pitcairn in the South Pacific Ocean.

conflicts that saw Russian participation between 2008 and 2022, which are not restricted to Eurasia but also extended to Africa and elsewhere through regular and irregular forces. Lastly, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine continued the trend of assertive foreign policy as a response to perceived Western encroachments while attempting to reaffirm the country's position as a Great Power (Lo, 2015; Ramani, 2023).

Beyond the motivations of the UK and Russia, which can be traced to security and survival issues, the outcome of this outward foreign policy that came after retrenchment is the continued retention of Secondary Great Power standing but increasingly aligned with one of the Primary Great Powers. The case of the United Kingdom as a junior partner in relation to its hegemonic successor, the United States, after the Suez Crisis and the decolonisation of the 1960s is a long-standing proposition (Renwick, 2016). However, a possible “junior” role for Russia in relation to its strategic partnership with China emerged and gained traction in the early 2020s, particularly after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine (Lau, 2022; Leahy; Seddon, 2023; Long, 2023). This is in line with Shiffrinson's (2018) argument that the declining power has more chances to maintain its position amongst the Great Powers if it has a like-minded successor with similar strategic objectives in the international system. It is worth noting that in both cases the term “junior partner” is a simplification and has been used as a critique of the foreign policy of London and Moscow (Renwick, 2016; Long, 2023) but does not change or downplay the characteristic of these two actors as Secondary Great Powers.

The stimulus to reassert a relative position is derived from the availability of resources after the actor went through retrenchment or other policies that contained decline. Taking the cases of London and Moscow, periods of resource resurgence coupled with political will are marked by an increased risk of conflict, as the state assumes or restores commitments abroad, expanding its zone of action and exhibiting a greater willingness to resort to brute force, the opposite of what happens when the state is under retrenchment and other decline-management policies. This also shows that readjustment policies advance beyond the simple “accommodation after the end of decline”, which seemingly does not explore the subsequent possibilities for a country that largely preserved its relative position as a Primary or Secondary Great Power. Therefore, two main phases or stages are proposed for retrenchment – not for the general trend of “rise and fall” already discussed – and a third phase occurs detached from the pre-eminence of retrenchment and decline, but with readjustment policies still in motion.

The first phase is marked by the early stages of decline, characterised by initial attempts to employ relatively mild retrenchment measures, such as the British situation between 1945 and the mid-1950s. Concerning the British case, the Suez Crisis has been considered a turning

point that opened the way for retrenchment, but that event is only one factor that influenced the rationale of British leaders to enforce further retrenchment (Peden, 2012). In the second phase, cost reductions and commitment withdrawals are dominant. Retrenchment is at its peak and strategic insolvency must be minimised. This is the UK from the 1960s to the early 1980s (Darwin, 2011; Douglas, 2002; Kennedy, 1998; Peden, 2013). Similar to the United States' rejuvenation in the 1980s (Schutte, 2021), the British ascension to the European Economic Community (1973) and the economic reforms under Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990) in the UK can be regarded as an economic attempt to achieve a similar outcome alongside retrenchment policies (Campos; Coricelli, 2017; Card; Freeman, 2004; Minford, 2015; Walters, 1986). The third phase is marked by reconsiderations about the continuation of retrenchment. The consensus on relative decline is gradually weakened. The expansion of foreign policy costs is one of the possible characteristics of readjustment without retrenchment. However, post-decline readjustment remains influenced by retrenchment because the power needs to uphold a balance between its new capabilities and resources, insofar as its desires to maintain itself as a centre of significant material capabilities. This is the UK in the decades starting in the 1990s and possibly other Great Powers, including Russia starting in the 2000s.

Therefore, in the immediate period after emerging from relative decline, the foreign policy of a Great Power can return to established interests, old commitments, and ambitions that once were the target of retrenchment policies. Foreign policy goes through a readjustment renewal marked by increasing defence spending and an expanded military footprint beyond the regions regarded as primary, dormant or old commitments are reinvigorated through new dedicated strategic assets and political attention, regions that retrenchment once left free are targeted in an attempt to partially revert withdrawals from the period of decline, and new commercial and strategic partners are sought globally. Nevertheless, much of these readjustments – although still performed by a Secondary Great Power – are not on the same scale as the Primary Great Powers, and the limitation of resources remains a constant issue for the actor that retained Great Power status and capabilities. In short, for the British case, the UK managed its decline through economic rejuvenation and retrenchment, enabling in the 1990s a new age of interventionist and expansionist foreign policy but under the strains of its position as a Great Power that is no longer *primus inter pares*.

If the position of Primary or Secondary Great Power is to be sustained, avoiding strategic insolvency or the Lippmann Gap is a central objective. Although the management of the strategic balance is a task of all Great Powers, the peculiar position of the Secondary Powers leaves them with less room for manoeuvre while bearing fewer resources. The complacency of

“being at the top” that Gilpin (1981) mentioned as a factor that might be present when leaders are tackling the issues of decline is even less affordable for Secondary Great Powers. In addition, the menace of relative decline for a country that has emerged from it after retaining the position as a Great Power demands continued management of assets and resources, while aiming at a stable or ascending position among its peers. The combination of having Secondary Great Power status and having just emerged from a period of decline reinforces the central objectives of the state: expanding security while recognising that extrapolating material limits is no longer possible without risking a return to a position of relative or absolute decline.

Threading this fine line is the position of the United Kingdom. Thus, it is necessary to analyse the nature of British relative decline, the policies employed to reverse this threat to the country’s position, and the UK’s relative position in the international system, whether as a Secondary Great Power or as a different category. Thus, the next part of the current chapter will cover and rethink the characteristics of British decline, followed by an exploration of the British debate about national decline, and the general strategies that the elites adopted in attempts to end relative decline. After that, an empirical analysis of the British position in the international system between the early 1990s and early 2020s, with a focus on British economic-industrial and military capabilities, is also necessary to expand the understanding of relative decline’s legacy to the United Kingdom in the post-Cold War era.

2.2 The debate on the United Kingdom’s relative decline

From the middle of the nineteenth century, British leaders and a significant part of the British public began to display increased self-confidence. The British position as the major player globally and the leading power in industry and technology was increasingly apparent to them. In the Victorian Age (1837–1901), an ideology emerged, influenced by the expansion of the British Empire, within the British public and elites, characterised by the idea that Britain should openly seek to be an “imperial country.” The Empire became a popular topic with the public, and imperial expansion was seen as a synonym for national prestige and power (Morris, 1998a). Britain’s hegemonic position rested on its economic strength and innovation, an Empire that secured markets and prevented other competitors from doing the same, and the naval pre-eminence of the Royal Navy. One pillar could not exist entirely without the others. From the onset of the Napoleonic Wars to the late Victorian Age, Britain could muster all those bases that reinforced each other (Kennedy, 2017). Thus, as this power became perceived by its population, “like many another nation at the summit of its power, Great Britain in the second half of the

nineteenth century was an image of conceit, and brazenly equated glory with strength, wealth and size” (Morris, 1998a).

On a structural level, the zenith of British power established its own “world-system,” centred politically and economically in London, having the pound sterling as the reserve currency of the world and the Royal Navy as the enforcer of gunboat diplomacy whenever “minor” powers challenged – mainly politically – London’s systemic dominance (Darwin, 2011). Until the last three decades of the nineteenth century, Britain’s position was unmatched by any other Great Power. Even after the United States emerged from the Civil War (1861–1865) and the German unification (1871), these competitors had to go to great lengths before challenging the systemic position of Britain and its Empire. Nevertheless, two decades later, by the 1890s, Britain’s position was already one of relative decline in comparison to the United States and Germany. Marking Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897 was the recognition that the glory and supremacy of the British Empire were weakening (Morris, 1998b). Retrenchment was underway in sectors of foreign policy, and the increasing competition from Germany, Japan, and the United States, beyond the traditional ones with France and Russia, led to a gradual focus on Britain’s core region (Friedberg, 2010; MacDonald; Parent, 2018; Gilpin, 1981). As Gilpin (1981) noted, retrenchment in the British case prior to the First World War helped London to focus against the threat from Berlin.

Nevertheless, the costs of the efforts of the World Wars and the rise of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers – or Primary Great Powers – meant that the British position was no longer unique. By the 1950s, the “British world system” had gradually shrunk. With it, the benefits of British hegemony and the once grand national self-confidence followed the declining relative position of the country. Darwin (2011) argues that Britain’s world system would survive to some extent until the early 1970s, indicating that, in some ways, the British were able to delay their decline. Despite that, for Kindleberger (1973), Britain could no longer sustain the world order under its auspices since the inter-war period (1918–1939). The fact that the three decades after the start of the First World War (1914–1918) were marked by instability within the ranks of the Great Powers indicated that British hegemony was crumbling and its heir apparent, the United States, had initially been unwilling to assume hegemonic responsibilities. For Gilpin (1977; 1981) and Kindleberger (1973), the World Wars were conflicts for hegemony, specifically a conflict challenging the weary British hegemony. The German attempt failed twice, accelerating the strain on the declining hegemon and facilitating the ascension of the United States as the successor of Britain (Ferguson, 2004).

By the mid-twentieth century, particularly after the Suez Crisis in 1956, it is possible to argue that relative decline also affected the British elites' self-confidence (James, 2002; Peden, 2012). Doubts about the country's position were signs of the diminishing confidence of the elites and the public in the national self-image (Morris, 1998b) that Bull (1977) highlights as part of the characteristics for classifying a state as a Great Power. Even though the extent of the role of the Suez Crisis as a pivotal point in Britain's decline is an ongoing debate, it still reverberates in how British leaders and the public saw their country. Lord Armstrong, a member of the Civil Service (1970–1987) and later Head of the Service (1981–1987), considered that it was not until the British victory in the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982 that Britain was able to restore “faith in itself as a power which was able to exercise influence outside its immediate surroundings” (apud Peden, 2012). British Prime Minister Edward Heath (1970–1974) regarded the foreign policy reorientation from the Commonwealth and Empire to Europe as the lasting legacy of the Suez debacle (Heath, 1988; Peden, 2012). However, the Suez Crisis had little impact on the elites' perception of British power. As Peden (2012) argues, for the majority of the British political elite, Suez was not a shock for “Whitehall was already well aware that Britain's world role was dependent on American support; that Britain's relationship with its informal and formal empire was changing” and “that a response to European economic integration would be required.”

Amidst the changes in Britain's relative position, especially after the decolonisation process of the 1960s, relative decline had become an inseparable part of the nation's politics. Thus, throughout the Cold War, the elites' concerns about economic performance and the Empire's shrinking contributed to decline establishing itself as the major public debate in Britain. Within this context, the academic and political discussion on the British relative decline has produced a “literature on whether there really has been a decline and if so how it is best measured, and whether there are any policies which might reverse it” (Gamble, 2000). In Britain, decline has also been a cross-party source of debate, with both major political parties – the Conservative Party and the Labour Party – and their Prime Ministers and Leaders of the Opposition debating and proposing ways to overcome the decline in the country. In those arguments, decline itself is applied to many sectors of Britain, including but not restricted to its military power, international influence, institutions, and economy (idem).

Permeating this debate is the conflicting view of what kind of decline affected the British state. As already discussed, overall, Britain has faced a relative decline. That is a decline in relation to its peers. As Gamble (2000) mentions, British productivity and living standards grew throughout the century, which witnessed the United States rising as the hegemon. Hence,

comparison between an actor's performance and its equals is one of the methods used to identify relative ascension, stability or decline. The scenario can be one of relative decline abroad and rising economic prosperity domestically, which creates a debate ultimately focused on world power, fuelled by an anxiety to improve economic performance to sustain world-reaching ambitions. Domestically, this phenomenon was epitomised in Britain by the optimistic speech of the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan (1957–1963), telling fellow Conservatives in 1957 that “most of our people have never had it so good” (Sandbrook, 2005). In other words, despite losing the privileged position among the Great Powers, Britons experienced rising living standards.

Thus, in the British case, absolute decline can only be regarded when comparing the country's relative position in the late twentieth century to itself in the early decades after the end of the Victorian Age. In absolute terms, British influence in the world has diminished since the 1910s compared to the 1990s or 2010s. However, it does not mean that the overall absolute decline included economic contraction, a fall in productivity or a lack of technological innovation. Nevertheless, British growth was lower than that of its main competitors, and as continental Europe and Japan recovered from the Second World War, the state of Britain's “uneven growth” became apparent (Kennedy, 1988; 2017; Ferguson, 2004). Therefore, absolute decline only comes from the assertion that Britain has “demonstrably less power and influence at the end of the twentieth century than at the beginning” (Gamble, 2000). For analytical purposes, this work is focused on British relative decline instead of exploring the absolute changes in Britain's qualitative position since the days of the Empire.

As already argued, the British elites and public felt the “forms of decline” differently. Dominating “popular discourse” is the absolute decline of British world power. As Gamble (2000) summarised, “The loss of Britain's colonial Empire is much more readily communicable (...) than the idea that increasing prosperity signifies decline rather than progress.” Concomitantly, elite discourse was focused on the idea of economic decline, precisely at a time when Britons “never had it so good.” Displaying this concern, economic decline has been characterised as the most critical issue facing Britain in the twentieth century, enabling the argument that every major economic policy or decision was oriented within a canvas of countering decline (Wiener, 1992). Gamble (2000) argues that if economic decline is the country's most important problem in that century, then that is because the British political class has defined it as such. The discourse follows a pattern of portraying Britain as slumbering behind its rivals due to constant economic underperformance despite social improvements in the post-war years. The difference in the overall view between the elites and the public is mainly

due to a different experience. British elites no longer command a state at the top of the international system, and every generation of leaders is “reminded in innumerable small ways of what has been lost” (Gamble, 2000). For them, the underperformance of the British economy has been understood as a symptom of “national decline” because associating it with British power as the Victorians did has become a difficult task.

Arising from these considerations is one possible conclusion: relative decline within the state can produce absolute decline abroad. The United Kingdom as a nation-state did not experience absolute decline domestically – despite sectors of its industry declining in absolute terms (Coates, 1994; Wiener, 1992) – but its position internationally was gradually on a descending path because of the relative decline weakening the economic core that sustained its power in the international system. The British position as the former hegemonic power in the decades after the World Wars contributed to facilitating the public and elites’ perception of the apparent differences of power when the country in the 1980s compared its capabilities to itself a few decades earlier. Additionally, this debate shows that awareness of decline is relatively unchallenging, particularly for the political elites, since their international influence is the first to be affected by relative decline even if the national economy is growing steadily.

Having that explored, it is necessary to cover the debates on British decline more extensively to see how the elites reacted to it, its dimensions, and what remedies were applied to counter such a problem. Gamble (2000) states that the decline in Britain can be divided into three major political debates, and each of these is linked to “a definite historical and political context” reflecting the position of Britain in the international system, which presented different strains and options for British foreign and domestic policymakers. Thus, centred on the challenge of Germany and the United States to Britain’s hegemonic position, the “first debate” lasted from the 1880s to the 1920s. The underlying questions that the British political elites sought to answer were (1) how to contain these rising Powers and (2) how the bases of British power globally could be preserved (Gamble, 2000). It is worth noting that the period of this debate is not a consensus. However, the years between 1895 and 1905 are regarded as the crucial period for this “first decline debate” within the British elites and, to some extent, its public. Economic reform – or rejuvenation – was at the centre of the discussion. Politically, the debate occurred between those in favour of or against free trade and tariff reform. Out of fear for its security – or, in other words, for being left unprepared economically and militarily against its competitors – Britain was reconsidering the centrality of free trade, a premise that sustained its hegemonic power for decades (Friedberg, 2010). Both sides of the argument converged on seeking a programme for improved “national efficiency,” modernisation of the British state, and

preservation of the Empire (Gamble, 2000). Simultaneously, Britain's foreign policy underwent retrenchment in the peripheral regions, focusing most of its military assets closely on core interests (MacDonald; Parent, 2018).

The First World War and its aftermath led to the second debate, which lasted until the 1960s. In those decades, the efforts against decline focused on answering how Britain could be accommodated in a changing international system. Accommodation to a rapidly changing international system became a foreign policy question of preparing Britain for the anticipated decline (Renwick, 2016; Watt, 1984). The Second World War consolidated the trends of power signalled by the First World War. Centrally, for London, the most important aspect of the international power shifts was the rise of the United States' hegemonic position (Gamble, 2000) and the incapacity to preserve imperial unity and the pound sterling as the international currency (Stephens, 1997; Strange, 1971). Susan Strange (1971) argued that the obsession of British leaders with the defence of the pound turned the currency from a source of power during its hegemony to a liability in the Cold War that could erode the British economic production base. In the domestic sphere, the debate was on how to modernise the British economy. For Gamble (2000), the "dividing line" in the political discussion became the role – and size – of the state in the economy, "the free market versus planning." The prevalence of the Keynesian-inspired approach opened the way for significant growth in the size of the British state, and "new forms of economic management" openly aimed at eliminating the problem of uneven growth.

Disillusion with successive governments' economic programmes marked the beginning of a third debate on decline in the 1960s and early 1970s (Gamble, 2000). In short, it was a perceived failure to rejuvenate the British economy in the mould of a mass production-style or Fordist economy (Overbeek, 1990) that broke the decline consensus of the second debate, leading to a new one. Britain's interest in participating in the European economic and integrationist project in the 1970s – itself part of an argument to counter relative decline – and increased commercial interdependence mark the context of this new debate. In the realm of foreign policy, the wrangling became whether the country should support European integration by taking part in the plans for a single currency, defence and foreign policy or whether it should support the European project as little more than a free trade area between sovereign countries (Gamble, 2000). This debate still casts its shadow, being vivid in the process that culminated in the British exit from the European Union (Brexit) in 2016. Domestically, the debate gravitated around the topics of "social democracy and how far collective institutions should be dismantled" and, consequently, the role and size of government (Jenkins, 1996). Thatcherism is argued to have emerged as the rejuvenating opposition to the prevailing assumptions of the

previous “second debate” that could not, in the eyes of the elites, deliver the performance expected and end decline in Britain. Improving national competitiveness became a central objective and by the 1980s the enterprise state under Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990) supplanted the Keynesian state (Marquand, 1988).

Gamble (2000) argues that the three debates have “made decline a long-running theme in twentieth-century British politics” and ever since the elites realised that preservation of the Empire was not going to be possible, “absolute imperial decline has been treated as a painful inevitability.” The political elite slowly understood “the need to manage an orderly decline of British power through the dismantling of the British Empire” (idem). Harold Macmillan’s Conservative Government (1957–1963) symbolised this realisation in London about the future of the Empire, and the “winds of change” that were blowing throughout the Imperial possessions (Darwin, 2011). Moreover, undergoing retrenchment had already reduced upkeep costs of British military forces abroad, and retrenching from non-profitable territories no longer had the same political resistance from imperial enthusiasts. As early as 1956, the British Treasury – the Exchequer – had issued papers to Cabinet Ministers warning that since the end of the Second World War, the British Government had been trying to do more than it could afford, placing strain on national resources. Future planning should focus on having a balance of payments surplus instead of the deficits that the country had been operating for years (Peden, 2012). Strategic insolvency was already affecting the British position before the Suez Crisis.

Gamble (2000) states that the majority of the British political elite recognised the impossibility of reversing the decline of British power occurring through the fragmentation of the Empire, but that it could be delayed and managed. It is worth mentioning that the author does not indicate what kind of position the elites wanted for Britain after “managing” decline but implies the retention of a privileged position. Moreover, Gamble (2000) argues that even the later British imperial acts of the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982 and the negotiations over the devolution of Hong Kong are mostly without substance due to what he perceived as a British desire for disengagement from the South Atlantic prior to 1982¹⁹ and what he considers to be acquiescing to return Hong Kong to China in 1997 on “Chinese terms”²⁰. The author implies

¹⁹Lord Armstrong, head of the British Civil Service in the 1980s, would disagree with this assessment (Peden, 2012). The War in the South Atlantic was a reminder that even though the country might have wanted to retrench in the South Atlantic, the victory demonstrated that it had the political and material wherewithal to defend its interests in that region. Moreover, the war for the territory was also seen as an attempt to preserve Great Power status (Grandpierron, 2017). For more of Britain’s military presence in the South Atlantic, see Tossini (2021).

²⁰This might be due to the negotiations occurring in the 1980s and essential details remaining undisclosed to the public under secrecy restrictions for up to three decades. Gamble’s work was published three years after the

that these gestures, notably the victory in the South Atlantic, do not contradict the assessment that the elites saw decline as irreversible.

However, Gamble (2000) affirms that “the props to British grandeur – the maintenance of a nuclear deterrent and a state-of-the-art military capability, the diplomatic service, the Foreign Office, the UN role, the secret service and special forces – are all still present at the end of the century.” Notably, after recognising that many facets of Britain’s grandeur are preserved, he proceeds by stating that “much of the substance of British power has disappeared” while an “acceptance” for “middle-ranking status” – without further exploration – is all but complete as of the late 1990s (Gamble, 2000). To a lesser extent, the author himself becomes part of the fatalist and resigned current of the debate on British decline, which he claims to be the intrinsic condition that marked the mainstream of explanations of decline. Within this context, the fatalistic approach, although present in the three debates, has not been the sole defining backdrop against which decline has been discussed. An example is the prevailing argument of tackling economic weaknesses that is present in all British debates on decline (Barnett, 1986; 1996).

Beyond the traditional historical division of British decline and its debates, a sector of the decline literature has a diverging position. Pollard (1982) argued that the focus of the debate should be concentrated on a shorter timeframe from the third or fourth decade of the century onwards instead of going back to the late Victorian Age, for Britain’s decline only became significant in the 1950s. Despite that, many critics argue that even if economic decline has not been an ever-present issue since the 1880s, the roots of the problem can only be thoroughly explained by exploring its historical context in relation to British economic development. In addition, another divide in the literature occurs between those who accept the idea of a “national economy” and believe that it can be in decline and those who argue that the talk of national economic performance and decline is fiction. The debate on decline – particularly economic decline – might be regarded as the result of a period of national protectionism, when creating the concept of “national economy” for the purposes of state policy was extremely necessary (Gamble, 2000). Lastly, the debate on the roots of British decline has to contend with “theories of British economic development” that analyse the national economy as part of a broader context that included the trends of the global economy, stating that if the British economy was

devolution. The next chapter covers the British position on the Handover of Hong Kong. It shows that Britain was reluctant to even consider returning the totality of the territory to China and ultimately pressed for a “special status” for Hong Kong.

in decline, the process has to be understood within the concepts and trends of the global economy and not as exclusively generated within the country (*idem*).

Other sectors of the decline debate are focused on more specific issues than the economy and global power. The first segment is dedicated to studying the British industry as an explanation of decline. In this case, the problems of Britain's economy are due to a combination of factors or a single problem that might include poor management, the archaic state of industrial relationships (Gamble, 2000), and institutions and institutional relations that have contributed to the phenomenon of decline (Dintenfass, 1992; Elbaum; Lazonick, 1986). The institutionalist literature focuses on the relations between finance and industry, the labour unions, and the perceived low level of training and education among British workers. These studies are based on the argument of path dependency, suggesting that economies can be trapped in specific development paths. In the case of Britain, for this line of argument, its institutions contributed to reinforcing decline and locking the country in a descending path (Dintenfass, 1992; Elbaum; Lazonick, 1986).

The 1980s were a turning point for Britain's industrial productivity and challenged the institutionalist view. Economic "shocks" that occurred in Japan and Germany in the 1950s and 1960s, considered as "delayed" in Britain by the continuity provided by its territorial integrity in the Second World War, finally occurred in the 1980s, leading to an expansion in British productivity (Gamble, 2000; Maynard, 1988). However, for the economy as a whole, the economic policies for increased productivity and innovation of the Thatcherite years (1979–1990) and the decision in the early 1970s to push forward with a new attempt to join the European Economic Community worked jointly (Campos; Coricelli, 2017; Card; Freeman, 2004; Minford, 2015; Walters, 1986). Thus, it is possible to argue that the economic shock occurred twice, firstly in 1973 through EEC membership and secondly through a new set of economic policies in the 1980s.

Within this context, changes in the economic landscape in Britain since the mid-1970s, gaining momentum in the 1980s, coupled with power shifts in the international system after the end of the Cold War, led to a repositioning of British foreign policy. As already stated, the 1990s witnessed retrenchment being slowly replaced by old habits of interventionism and particularism in Britain's foreign policy, particularly after 1997. A shift in the decline debate in the country accompanied these strategic changes. As argued by Gamble (2000), "in historical terms the focus of concern in the political debates on decline has shifted." The concerns of the British elites in the first (1880s–1920s) and second (1920–1960s) debates were focused on the British Empire and how British power could be preserved. The changes in the backdrop against

which decline was debated remained essentially the same between these two debates. By the late 1950s, the relative decline concerning peers in Europe and Japan took hold of the elites' concerns. Thus, the third debate (the 1960s–1980s) shifted the ground because it was centred on the idea of what could be done to reverse the economic decline against British competitors – reaching its high point in the 1970s – and not on the view of preserving a global and imperial role. By the early 1990s, the debate had shifted once again. However, with a novelty: the very relevance of decline started to be questioned (Gamble, 2000), and if decline persisted, it was in relation to rising powers in Asia (Crafts, 1997).

One of the possible secondary reasons behind the “new debate on decline” that originated in the 1990s is the renewed thrust for globalisation leading to the reconsideration of the notion of a “national economy.” The argument says that the concept began being questioned following the end of the “national protectionism era” enacted in the mid-1910s and terminated by the suspension of the Bretton Woods system in 1971. In those decades, the national economy and its management policies were regarded as well-developed. Further European integration, characterised by the single market, the creation of a single currency, and the growing influence of financial markets and transnational companies on governmental policies, questioned the notions of a well-defined national economy. The exchanges between financial, commercial and corporate networks would make the statistical definition of national economic boundaries problematic (Ruggie, 1993). Thus, for this line of thought, the debate on decline in an interdependent and globalised world is fruitless. The literature centred on British decline is critical of this approach, stating that the view of a loss of power by the nation-state – and the national governments – is significantly exaggerated. Many points branded as “new” under globalisation in the 1990s are not a novelty. Even though the ways of government action have received less confidence from the public and the elites, the importance and breadth of government have not decreased (Gamble, 2000; Hirst; Thompson, 1996).

The main reason for the shift in the decline debate is Britain's economic performance. In short, in the 1990s, decline in Britain was over because the British economy had been presenting better or similar performance compared to its Great Power peers in the West. The policies of the Conservative Party – in power between 1979 and 1996 – effectively addressed the problem of economic decline in the country, although social questions remained or became more acute (Crafts, 1997). This explanation was labelled as “prosaic” not because of the existence of approaches that disagree with it but for its inclination to generalise the Conservative Party's economic policies of the 1980s and early 1990s. However, the economic shock of the early 1980s ultimately caused behaviour changes, altering the path of British development and

breaking the “obstacles to higher productivity and greater enterprise” (Gamble, 2000). The successor of the Conservatives, the Labour Party under Tony Blair (1997–2007), continued and accepted the changes and economic principles of the previous governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, meaning that the problems that were barring a “more successful economic performance have been overcome” (idem), accompanied by the consensus of the political class. Within this context, some analysts consider the Thatcher Government in Britain as a return to traditional policies of the British state, particularly the openness of the economy and the flexible institutions and labour market (idem). It is worth noting the semblance of a return to policies of the late Victorian Age, a period slightly before decline, which was ruled by the classical tenets of *laissez-faire*. Thus, according to some, the return to Britain’s “traditional economic policies” enabled the country to end the malady of decline (Rubinstein, 1994).

However, in Britain in the 1990s, some authors were still concerned about the long-term absence of relative economic decline (Michie, 1992). The improvements in competitiveness and the supply side of the economy implemented in the 1980s were regarded as essential to bring down the decline problem. However, issues remained, particularly in innovation and investment (Gamble, 2000). In this context, the years from the 1950s to the early 1970s are usually considered by the literature as the “golden age” of British decline (Crafts, 1997; Gamble, 2000; Rubinstein, 1994). The turning point that changed Britain’s economic decline is far from a consensus. The Conservatives’ economic reforms between 1979 and 1997, although playing an important role, occurred against the background of the European Economic Community – later the European Union – of which Britain was a member from 1973 until the 2016 Brexit referendum’s implementation in 2020, and subsequent end of the transition period in 2021. Hence, the argument that the reforms of the 1980s were supported by the reforms of the mid and late 1970s, including EEC membership (Campos; Coricelli, 2017). It is worth noting that the effects of Brexit are still being pondered – tending to be negative (Chu; Kovacevic, 2025) –, but for this debate leaving the European Union resembles the economic shocks

Despite the debate on what were the main sources that contributed to the end of economic decline in Britain, the new terms – originated in the 1990s – that cover issues related to decline are the ones of “national competitiveness” and not “economic decline” (Gamble, 2000). The organisation of the inter-state system and its structural stimuli for the survival of the national polity will continue to force leaders to think in terms of “national” issues, be they territorial, demographic, or economic, in comparison to their competitors and how to improve the competitiveness of the state in those fields. However, for Gamble (2000), the discourse of relative decline in Britain is expected to disappear, for the narratives that supported decline have

collapsed: the British Empire has been dismantled, the era of national protectionism was over, and as part of the European Union the notion of “national economic decline would have no meaning.” It is worth highlighting that Gamble (2000) defended that even if the British were to leave the European Union, decline would not become the central “framework of interpretation” in the twenty-first century, largely due to the changes in the redistribution of state functions “between different levels within the international system.” In short, for the author, decline could be seen at least in part as a particular phenomenon of British history influenced by the British position as the declining and former hegemonic power and the long readjustment of its elites to this change.

Beyond the economic-industrial side of the debate, it is worth mentioning that Britain’s debate on decline includes other approaches or theses. These aspects focus on issues that form part of a discussion that is not entirely within the scope of this work but remain relevant to provide a richer picture of the “declinist” debate that has diminished since the early 1990s. One of the best-known is the Cultural Thesis, labelled as the “declinist thesis” by its critics, who have argued that the basic assumptions of this thesis are flawed and do not provide adequate explanations for the economic underperformance of the country in most of the twentieth century (Edgerton, 1991; 1996; 2018; Rubinstein, 1994). The Cultural Thesis argues that the leading cause of British decline is the existence of an “anti-industrial” and “anti-enterprise” culture in Britain through conservative educational institutions and professions. Attribution of social status to certain traditional positions at the expense of new occupations of the “modern industrial economy” helped create a society averse to technology and industry and a national elite supposedly less entrepreneurial than the elites of other nations. This was labelled as a unique British “gentlemanly capitalism” marked by the lack of social mobility. Supporters of this thesis argue that the prevalence of the liberal welfare state after the Second World War generated further problems derived from the practices of fiscal redistribution and welfare safety instead of the efficiency of production (Barnett, 1996).

It is possible to argue that, in part, the Cultural Thesis presents more of a critique of the welfare state, consolidated in Britain after 1945 and challenged after 1979, than an analysis of hypothetical “cultural” problems that led the country to economic decline. Nevertheless, the mainstream of the Cultural Thesis is the approach that links the behaviour of the elites – particularly their unpreparedness – as the main cause of decline and the transfiguration of the country from an economic and industrial power in the Victorian Age into an underperforming economy in the next century (Wiener, 1992). One implication is the premise that culture has a defining role in economic behaviour. Another assumption is that the elites in Britain are highly

impervious to change and innovation. Consequently, the argument of the Cultural Thesis supports radical reforms to the elite institutions or the creation of new ones dedicated to stimulating another form of culture. Critics of the Cultural Thesis argue that it is “impressionistic and selective,” a generalisation that amplifies anti-industrial and anti-labour actions in Britain while disregarding similar but broader actions in countries that are considered “successful economies” (Rubinstein, 1994).

Moreover, the Cultural Thesis ignores or downplays the emergence of a growing number of entrepreneurs and the founding of new major companies in a country supposedly averse to innovation and change. Extensive criticism is also made regarding the absence of an analytical, historical context of British capitalism. Britain’s “aristocratic ethos” was more robust in the early nineteenth century than in the mid-twentieth century or at any other time since. Nevertheless, it did not prevent the rise of Britain as the leading industrial nation, the rise of industrial capital and the formation of an industrialist class (Gamble, 2000). In part, the popularity of the Cultural Thesis might be related to its usefulness as a political tool by successive governments. As Gamble (2000) puts it, the Cultural Thesis “suggests that the ultimate cause of decline is deeply embedded in culture rather than in policy or interests, and that until beliefs and attitudes are transformed, there is unlikely to be any significant change in economic performance.” By the 1980s, the Thesis was seized by members of the Conservative Party who defended the creation of an entrepreneurial culture that seemed absent in Britain, and that changing prevalent economic behaviour concerning modernisation was necessary for British economic ascension. Therefore, in line with Party policy, expanding the role of the state in the economy was futile.

Some arguments point to British economic decline due to finance, imperial, and state-related issues. Concerning finance, the proposition is direct: Britain’s large financial sector and the autonomy of the City have been destructive to British industry. The City of London’s financial success is contrasted with the economic decline of most of the British industry. In practice, the argument goes, British finance and industry have a “destructive” relationship (Hutton, 1996). The City’s influence on the British establishment has ensured that the relationship between finance and industry is inclined towards exploiting global markets instead of investments in the domestic economy. Even Kennedy (2017), when writing about the pillars of British power and their erosion, links the existence of the large financial sector and its desire for secure investments in the imperial holdings and elsewhere as one of the factors contributing to British economic decline. Consequently, British companies have been forced to focus on short-term returns to please the financial market. The lack of competitiveness of the British

industry is due to a failure to invest. The main postulation of the “finance thesis” is that a “successful” capitalist economy demands a close relationship between industry and finance, stating that Britain had precisely the opposite. Nevertheless, as Gamble (2000) points out, one of the main counterarguments is that the United States – considered a model for the problematic British financial sector – imposes “an even more distant relationship between finance and industry through legislation.”

The role of the Empire in British decline is more important than the financial thesis in this work. As will be explored, Britain still benefits from its close diplomatic, economic and security links with former colonies and protectorates that facilitate its Indo-Pacific tilt. However, the Empire has been singled out as the shield that kept British industry from avoiding the necessity for significant innovation and increased productivity. In short, since the last decades of the nineteenth century, the British Empire had been where British industry could seek refuge without concerns about the growing competition outside imperial possessions. Eric Hobsbawm (1968) argued that Britain could sustain a loss of competitiveness due to the enormous wealth from investments and the size of imperial markets. Kennedy (2017) shared a similar view, arguing that the Empire acted as a haven for British investors, causing the dual effect of diverting investments from the British Isles and decreasing competitiveness, leaving the country badly prepared to face the rising industrial powerhouses of Germany, the United States, and Japan. The neglect of productive investment in Britain in favour of attending to its security and consumption needs – influenced by entrenched economic interests in the status quo – is part of the imperial overstretch that Kennedy (1988) described as one of the causes of Great Powers’ fall.

Underlying these theories is the already mentioned cyclical view of Great Powers in the international system of rise and fall. Gamble (2000) supports the argument that this imperial thesis is intrinsically tied or even merged with the cultural thesis, mainly when covering the causes of the “fall.” Additionally, the imperial thesis seems to ignore the role of the Empire in securing and reinforcing Britain’s naval supremacy, which in turn provided security and the wealth generated for British elites, who were also, in part, industrialists. Lastly, some argue that the Empire was connected closely to British commerce and finance and not to industry, hence the small influence imperial holdings had on the decisions of company managers in Britain on whether to invest in innovation or not (Cain; Hopkins, 1993).

At this point, it is worth noting another line of the third decline debate that focuses primarily on the role of the British state. The so-called “developmental thesis” supports the idea that the British state has failed to create the institutions and policies suited to a developmental

state. Instead, Britain developed a large public sector and interventionist and planning agencies, but bearing no developmental role characteristic of other large economies, particularly Japan. In this thesis, the “developmental state” is focused on economic growth instead of welfare and redistribution policies. The central argument of this thesis is that the British state not only failed to modernise itself and guide the economy towards a growth trajectory but also that its institutions and traditions are uneasily organised with modern forms of administration (Marquand, 1988). The developmental thesis is directly linked to other debates already mentioned, particularly with the industrial thesis and the general debate about planning, proposing sweeping state reforms and an interventionist policy. Gamble (2000) highlights that critics of this developmental thesis point out that the British state had already intervened too much. The argument for a “developmental state” is considered simply another version of interventionist programmes, which in the late 1970s and early 1980s were dislodged by the third debate of decline and replaced by the Thatcherite-Conservative reforms with neo-liberal policies that broke the previous consensus about economic decline established by the second debate.

By the 1990s, the conception that Britain was a country in relative decline began to lose ground in British political debates. After falling behind its main European competitors in the “Golden Age” of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, characterised by significant economic growth on the continent, Britain underwent economic rejuvenation and strategic retrenchment that contributed to the end of its relative decline in relation to other large “developed” economies (Crafts, 1997; MacDonald; Parent, 2018). Following the end of the Cold War, Britain had growth rates comparable to or better than the other major European economies. Real GDP per person recovered between 1979 and 1994 compared to the OECD economies after growing relatively slowly in the previous decades. Productivity in the manufacturing sector grew stronger than in Germany and the United States while keeping up with France. Moreover, the annual output growth per hour worked between 1979 and 1994 was second only to Japan when taking the economies of the Group of Seven (G7). Growth in the business sector per annum had a similar performance, from twelfth place among OECD countries from 1960 to 1973 – behind Japan, Italy, France, and tied with Germany – to fifth place from 1979 to 1994, ahead of all major economies. However, as the country emerged from decline concerning major powers like Germany, France, Russia, and Japan, British growth lagged behind the performance of the East Asian Tigers (Crafts, 1997).

In short, the argument supporting the end of British economic decline from the 1990s onwards is based on factors that range from the accession to the EEC in 1973 to the

Conservative Party's economic policies in the 1980s and early 1990s (Campos; Coricelli, 2017; Card; Coates, 1994; Freeman, 2004; Gamble, 2000; Minford, 2015; Walters, 1986). British growth rates began to outpace those of its significant contenders, while Britain's productivity growth was higher than that in the rest of Western Europe. Signs of the British manufacturing sector recovering from contractions and absolute decline through domestic and overseas investments were accompanied by the country's financial sector maintaining its competitiveness (Crafts, 1997). Coates (1994) contends that the improvements of the 1980s only removed the economic problems of the 1970s, and investment levels were insufficient to prevent new problems in the future. However, the author concedes that productivity levels and the economy grew at similar rates or higher than its main competitors. Coates's (1994) position about Britain's economic position in the early 1990s is at least partially influenced by an economic (1990–1991) and financial crisis (1992). Thus, his stance was that the country was not much different in 1992 than in 1982. Despite criticisms of the idea of an economic recovery, the central contention is which decisions have played the leading part in reverting British economic decline: the economic policies of the 1980s or those of the 1970s. Although the exact causes for the reversal of decline are disputed, the British position in the 1990s was no longer dominated by economic relative decline. As Gamble (2000) argued, the declinist debate was already losing ground by the turn of the decade.

In the following years, after almost four decades, Britain recovered its position as Europe's second-largest economy in 2004. GDP per capita, both nominal and purchasing power parity (PPP), had a similar trend. In the decade under the Labour Premiership of Tony Blair (1997–2007), the trends identified in the 1990s as an economy that was no longer under relative decline (Gamble, 2000; Crafts, 1997) appeared to be reinforced. Concerning GDP growth, Britain's overall growth rate has been 2.8% a year between 1997 and 2006, discreetly exceeding the average of the so-called "developed world" and ahead of the major European economies – France, Germany and Italy – by an average annual percentage point (Davis, 1997). In addition, as an example of what Gamble (2000) stated as the acceptance by the Labour Party in 1997 of the Thatcherite-Conservative economic principles, the Blair Government granted independence to the Bank of England, adopted a flexible position towards foreign acquisition of British companies, allowed greater movement of manufacturing to offshore production, eased the influx of foreign labour into the country, and became a champion of free trade. As a consequence, manufacturing as a share of the economy shrunk from 21% in 1997 to 14% in 2007, and the country experienced a demographic growth of roughly 4%. This growth might have contributed to establishing the position of the United Kingdom as the second-largest

economy in Europe. By 2007, the returns from British investments overseas reached 2% of the national income, “higher than it has been at any time since Britain had an empire,” supporting and fuelling the renewed interest of the Government in protecting British assets and interests globally through an interventionist foreign policy (Davis, 2007).

Taking a broader period between 1990 and 2008, including the early stages of the recession caused by the 2007–2008 Financial Crisis, presents a similar picture with an annual GDP growth rate of 2.3%. Amongst the G7 economies, Britain’s average economic growth remained only behind the United States and Canada. However, from 2000 to 2008, Britain’s economy grew (2.4%) slightly faster than the United States (2.3%) and above the average of the G7 (2%). Furthermore, the trends of increased productivity – regarded as a chronic problem of the British economy in the 1970s – continued with progress in closing the gap with Germany and narrowing the gaps with France and the United States. Despite progress, the country still experienced a decline in business investment as a share of GDP and below-average investment in the formation of skilled workers (United Kingdom, 2010). Moreover, the British economic performance suffered more than its peers as setbacks commenced in the second quarter of 2008 following the Financial Crisis which hit the economy, ending 63 quarters of continued economic expansion (ONS, 2018).

Britain’s recession ended in the fourth quarter of 2009, becoming its most profound and protracted recession of the post-war period (United Kingdom, 2010) and the last country of the G20 to leave the recession behind (Elliott, 2009). It is worth noting that Japan (8.7%), Italy (6.9%), and Germany (6.8%) suffered an overall more significant contraction in GDP than Britain (6.4%), and both Japan and Italy experienced further contraction in the year after leaving their recessions (Allen, 2010). The British economy returned to pre-recession levels in 2013, but national productivity entered a period of stagnant or slow growth, failing to keep up with the trend in the decade before the Financial Crisis (ONS, 2018). Although the “productivity puzzle” is shared by other European economies, the British case brings back the concerns of economic decline, for the issue of productivity and the low level of business investment were part of the problems that the reforms in the 1980s tried to solve. Thus, the return of productivity stagnation after two decades of relatively rapid expansion might signal that Britain – through its economy – could face a new phase of relative decline.

Despite that, by the mid-2010s, confidence in the British economy remained high compared to the G7 economies. The Centre for Economic and Business Research and the OECD claimed in 2013 and 2016, respectively, that Britain would by the 2030s overtake Germany as Europe’s largest economy. The “great overtake” would be caused by a combination of

population growth and labour policies that put Britain in a better position than Germany, although productivity was almost 20% smaller than that of France and Germany (Elliott, 2013; OECD apud Mohoney, 2016). The picture of decline, although always present, persisted as a sideline when regarding it as a decline concerning emerging economies. In this case, estimates pointed out that Brazil and India would have overtaken Britain in the global ranking of nominal GDP by 2023, while Russia would not be far behind the British economy (Elliott, 2013). One decade after these estimates, Britain's economic performance proved better than expected in relation to the "emerging markets" except for China and has shown difficulties in fulfilling the dethroning of Germany as the largest European economy. The British economy remained considerably larger than the Brazilian one – 3.16 trillion dollars against 2.08 trillion dollars – while being overtaken by the Indian economy in 2023. The possibility of Russia having a similar GDP to Britain also did not materialise between 2013 and 2023, with the Russian economy in nominal terms having a size comparable to Brazil instead of Britain (IMF, 2023). However, it remains debatable the extent to which the resilience of the British position will be able to hold itself in the following decades against the trends of economic growth worldwide.

In conclusion, for Britain, the first three decades of the post-Cold War era are characterised by a trend of British economic ascension within the large "industrialised" economies and an overall relative decline concerning emerging markets, particularly China, and since the 2010s, India. Its predominance in British politics has been diminishing in the declinist debate arena, particularly since the late 1990s (Crafts, 1997; Gamble, 2000), although it remains a source of press reports and tabloid headlines. Decline in Britain during the 2010s and early 2020s, when brought up by the press, is largely in terms of social inequality and its worsening since the 1980s, accompanied by the inaction of British leaders in combating these problems (Beckett, 2022) or the question of inequality and lacklustre productivity (Cowderly; Shafik, 2023). After the economic shocks of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in part, British decline has been seized by the debate on the rising cost of living, with the majority of the public stating in opinion polls that the country is in "decline" – even though no specification or meaning is given to such a statement (Ipsos, 2022).

Thus, decline is no longer the main backdrop of British politics: the country is not declining when compared to its peers in the G7, and amongst the rising economies, Britain declined relatively in comparison to China and India, the main powerhouses of economic growth outside the "Western world." Ortolano (2020) criticises the declinist discourse by arguing that it will emerge whenever the country suffers short-term economic or political issues, stating that most "analyses" of British decline or "doom" are without adequate empirical

support. It is necessary to understand that not every crisis is evidence of “national collapse.” Furthermore, “British decline” declarations have obscured more than they have clarified about Britain’s economy and relative position in the international system (Ortolano, 2022). As Gamble (2000) argued, the British position after the Cold War would likely not be dominated by a discourse of relative decline, especially when considering domestic factors. A complete “fourth debate” on decline has not formed in British political and academic discourse despite the country’s declining position concerning the two Asian giants. However, the relative strategic position that the British economy has sustained in those three decades must be analysed to ponder what kind of Great Power Britain has been in the post-Cold War era or whether it has been a Great Power at all.

3 THE UK'S RELATIVE POSITION IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA (1991-2023)

An analysis of the British relative strategic position in the three decades after the end of the Cold War must include considerations about the size and performance of the British economy, the defence industry and budget, power projection capabilities, and the position of the country in the main international institutions and security initiatives. Aiming to identify what position Britain occupies in a rapidly changing international system also demands a brief exposition of the terminologies that have been applied to the country, especially Pocket Superpower, Great Power, Secondary Great Power, “Medium Power with extra clout,” and Middle Power. Comprehending what these labels mean is essential to best classifying Britain.

While the definitions of Great Power – Primary, Secondary or simply as a junction of both – and Middle Power have already been given previously, the concepts of Britain as a Pocket Superpower (Childs, 2014; Lindley-French, 2011) appearing in the 2000s and early 2010s, or as a Medium Power with extra clout (Kampfner, 2022) have not been explored. However, both terminologies share an uneasiness about the British relative position between the early 1990s and early 2020s. Ultimately, both are at odds with simply placing the country among the Middle Powers – or Medium Powers – while also unsure about its position as a Great Power in the same sense as the United States. Thus, the argument emerges that Britain might be in between these categories, and due to its position as the former hegemon and sizeable core capabilities, it leans towards Great Power status. Hence, the “Secondary Great Power” position for Britain seems to be an adequate label for better understanding the country’s relative capabilities and weight in the international system.

The term “Pocket Superpower” is not precisely defined. However, its basic assumptions are almost universally the same, implying a state that can maintain a full-spectrum military capability, like a proper Superpower but on a more modest scale (Childs, 2014; Financial Times, 2021; Lindley-French, 2011). Primarily, the difference between a Pocket Superpower and a Secondary Great Power is the possibility of the former being ahead of the latter within the capability spectrum, but still behind the Primary Great Power. The Boris Johnson Government (2019–2022) viewed the British role as a “problem-solving and burden-sharing nation with a global perspective” through its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy” (United Kingdom, 2021), which has also been interpreted as projecting the image of Britain as a “pocket-sized superpower” (Financial Times, 2021). In a similar manner, previous discussions about the necessity of pushing forward the Queen Elizabeth class of aircraft carriers’ construction programme were framed as part of a matter of choosing between

being a Pocket Superpower or a “Super Belgium” (Lindley-French, 2011). Beyond that, the reorientation of British military assets to the East of Suez since the 2010s has been taken as a series of decisions made from considerations of a country that sees itself as a Pocket Superpower instead of a “Medium Power” (Childs, 2014).

In these discussions, the difference between a Pocket Superpower and a Superpower is mainly one of scale: Britain, the assumption goes, can have a full-spectrum military capability supported by its economic base and soft power, enabling the claim to pocket-sized superpower status. However, there is no discussion or analysis of the possible differences between a Pocket Superpower and a Great Power. In this work, the concept of Great Power – without specification between Primary and Secondary – remains broad and vague when classifying and measuring states that might be included in that category. Hence the preference for the “Primary” and “Secondary” labels. A Pocket Superpower can be regarded as being between these two classifications, but remaining closer to the Secondary Great Power category.

Concerning the label of “Medium Power with extra clout” (Kampfner, 2022), the argument is less ambitious. Just as the Pocket Superpower discussion proposes a special place for Britain within the Great Powers, the “extra clout” argument supports the country as a special kind of Middle Power with a “global reach”. This discomfort with the discussion around status is frequently claimed to be due to the discussion not always being “productive”²¹ (Kampfner, 2022b) as if status and the material base that originates and supports it – that is, the relative position of the state – had no interference in the way and manner the country and its leaders engage with other actors. Uncertainty about the “Medium Power with global reach” and its lexical variations is significant to the extent that it proposes a new definition: “Pivot state.” The terminology is loosely defined as “a country that has a certain limited global role but is particularly prominent in its region” (Idem). Despite the concept of a pivot state being flexible, its broad definition with opaque delineations turns it into a concept that does not necessarily imply similar capabilities and power. Including a variety of countries – Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, South Africa, Poland and France, and possibly Germany and India – in this “club” only dilutes its purpose of pointing out a precise position on which foreign policy could be based reliably.

²¹Yet, criticism about a supposed “delusion” within successive British Governments on Britain’s relative position as a Great Power or a global player is frequently present in the very discussions that argue or imply the unproductive outcome of frequent debates about status (Childs, 2014; Financial Times, 2021; Kampfner, 2022; 2022b).

Lastly, the discussion on the British position is marked by an attempt to put it forward as a mutually exclusive decision Britain must take to understand its position in the international system better. The “options” are recognising a reduced role – “Super Belgium” (Lindley-French, 2011) or a “big player regionally (Europe, or rather northern Europe)” (Kampfner, 2022b) – or continuing to hold onto delusional aspirations of grandeur (Childs, 2014; Kampfner, 2022; 2022b). In some cases, the option is falling into irrelevance or retaining a unique position as a Pocket Superpower (Lindley-French, 2011). It is possible to argue that for some of the defenders of these choices, the country might not be in decline, but it does not have an accurate perception of its standing in the world. However, instead of asking if Britain “does it believe it can still hold sway in all six continents?” (Kampfner, 2022b), this section explores whether the country’s core assets can sustain a particular position within the definitions of Primary and Secondary Great Power or as a Middle Power. Additionally, throughout this chapter, the relative position of Britain will then be considered briefly in comparison with other actors.

3.1 Economy

As explored in the previous section, the economic performance of the United Kingdom has been the primary source of worries and, consequently, of policies to end relative decline (Coates, 1994; Crafts, 1997; Gamble, 2000). The decision to apply a second time for membership of the EEC in the early 1970s (Campos; Coricelli, 2017; Card; Freeman, 2004), leading to membership in 1973, the economic reforms of the 1980s under the Conservatives (Gamble, 2000; Maynard, 1988; Minford, 2015; Walters, 1986), and the continued influence of these policies during the Labour Government from the mid-1990s to the 2000s (Davis, 2007; Gamble, 2000) have been highlighted as the factors contributing to ending Britain’s economic decline by the 1990s. Within this context, it is argued that the British economy ceased its decline in relation to the economies of the “West,” including the members of the Group of Seven (G7). Nevertheless, the British position has experienced a relative economic decline compared to “non-Western” countries, particularly China and India. Since the expenditure capability of the state is closely tied to its economic base, the British defence budget was also surpassed by the spending of the rising Powers in Asia, which have been catching up with Britain and the West in the areas of military might and technological prowess.

Firstly, as an overview, there is the metric of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) nominal or market exchange rates. In part, the choice of nominal GDP instead of a purchasing power

parity (PPP) exchange rate²² is due to considerations of economies in relation to others in a world permeated by financial flows. Moreover, “PPP is generally regarded as a better measure of overall well-being”, and it is harder to measure than market-based rates, with new price comparisons available at uneven intervals leading to estimated PPP rates (Callen, 2007). Although PPP is an attempt to remedy possible measurement disparities between central and peripheral economies, it ignores the dynamics that set prices and, most importantly, the factors and importance behind the long- and short-term strength of a currency and patterns of consumption. In addition, for the question of relative economic prowess in an interconnected international system, and considering that the currency is a source of strength or weakness (Strange, 1971), GDP at nominal or market-based rates is the metric used to explore the size and weight of a state’s economy internationally. Lastly, in 2011, a spokesperson for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stated that it sees GDP at market rates as more relevant for comparisons than GDP PPP. This is the case because the IMF does not consider GDP PPP as an adequate measure for comparing the relative size of countries in the global economy, largely due to PPP prices being centred on non-traded services, “which are more relevant domestically than globally” (Webber, 2011).

Considering the British economy, in 1970, it had a 3.8% share of the global GDP, behind the United States (31.4%), the Soviet Union (12.7%), Germany (6.3%), Japan (6.2%), and France (4.3%), but ahead of Italy (3.3%), China (2.7%), Canada (2.6%), and India (1.8%) (Mathisen, 2022). Although Britain was the sixth largest economy in the world, the British economy was only 60% of the size of a possible unified Germany, which would later enter the considerations of the British Government under Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) when unification emerged as not only possible but likely to occur (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 2009). Similarly, the British economy was 88% of the size of the French economy, which had surpassed Britain’s less than a decade earlier, and 16% bigger than the Italian economy (Mathisen, 2022). Thus, by the early 1970s, Britain had fallen behind Japan, Germany (even if only considering West Germany), and France in the economic ranks, failing to sustain its privileged position of the late 1940s as one of the three largest economies in the post-war world.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Britain would be labelled as the “sick man of Europe” due to its troubled relative economic performance. The 1976 sterling crisis became “the most potent symbol” of Britain’s perennial economic weakness decades after the Second World War

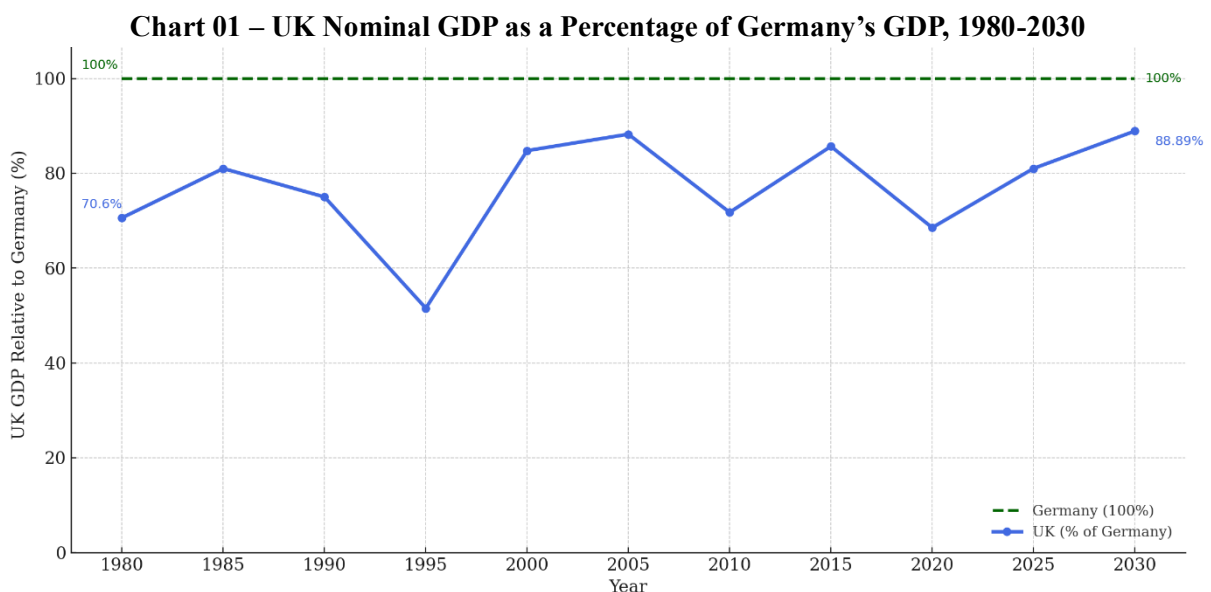
²²The purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rate can be briefly defined as “(...) the rate at which the currency of one country would have to be converted into that of another country to buy the same amount of goods and services in each country.” (Callen, 2007).

(Pickford, 2016). A combination of high inflation, balance of payments deficits, persistent public spending deficits, and an increase in the price of commodities in the previous years caused the currency crisis. Ultimately, fearing a run on the pound sterling, London had to apply to the IMF for a \$3.9 billion loan to stabilise “market confidence” (Harmon, 1997). Two years later, in November 1978 and lasting until February 1979, industrial disputes led to what was called the “Winter of Discontent”, which involved widespread private and public strikes over pay rises, contributing to the weakening of the Labour Government of James Callaghan (1976-1979) (Colin, 2009) and the landslide victory of the Conservatives in 1979.

However, the 1970s witnessed Britain’s EEC membership, which inaugurated a new economic phase in the country with improved access to major European markets and investments. It symbolised the departing note in Britain’s reorientation from Empire to Europe, both politically and economically. By the early 1970s, the argument for a Commonwealth-centred policy could no longer compete with the EEC project. Above all, the Conservatives under Edward Heath (1970-1974) perceived that joining the European Economic Community was a strategy to stop Britain’s decline in relation to the major economies in Europe after at least two decades of economic setbacks and underperformance (Campos; Coricelli, 2015; 2017). In London, by the early 1970s, the prospect of reversing the decline was paramount, and the Commonwealth was not seen as the exit to the problem.

In the 1980s, anti-decline policies that led to EEC membership were reinforced by successive economic reforms by the Thatcher Government (Crafts, 1997; Gamble, 2000; Marquand, 1988; Maynard, 1988; Minford, 2015; Walters, 1986). As mentioned, the economic reforms that ended the Keynesian consensus and inaugurated a neo-liberal era in Britain had the same objectives as the preceding post-war economic policies: ending relative decline. In simple terms of the relative position of Britain’s economy, the Conservative Party led by Thatcher and John Major from 1979 to 1997 strengthened Britain’s economic standing. For example, in 1995, the British GDP represented 4.3% of the global economy, up from 3.8% in 1970. That same year, Britain held the title of the fifth-largest economy in the world. Britain remained behind the United States (24.4%), Japan (17.7%), Germany (8.3%), and France (5.1%). Except for the United States, all the other three countries ahead of Britain had also experienced an increase in their share of the world GDP. The British economy suffered the most against the Japanese and German performance in the 25 years since 1970 and remained closely followed by Italy. The main change was the dissolution of the Soviet Union, even if the Soviet share was primarily replaced by Japan (17.7% in 1995) (Mathisen, 2022).

However, the data for 1995 might be misleading, especially when considering that an economic crisis hit Britain in the early 1990s, worsened by the Black Wednesday (1992) currency crisis. According to the IMF, in 1990, the British economy (1.19 trillion dollars) was almost the size of the French (1.27 trillion dollars). Concomitantly, the gap between the size of the British and the German economy (1.59 trillion dollars) fell considerably. In 1970, Britain had 60% of the German output, while in 1990, it grew to 75%. By the end of the decade, in 1999, the British economy had grown further, representing roughly 81% of the size of its German counterpart. Britain overtook France in 1997, taking the place of the second-largest European economy after more than three decades behind the French, while the gap with Italy grew from having a 16% bigger economy in 1970 to 35% in 1999 (IMF, 2023).



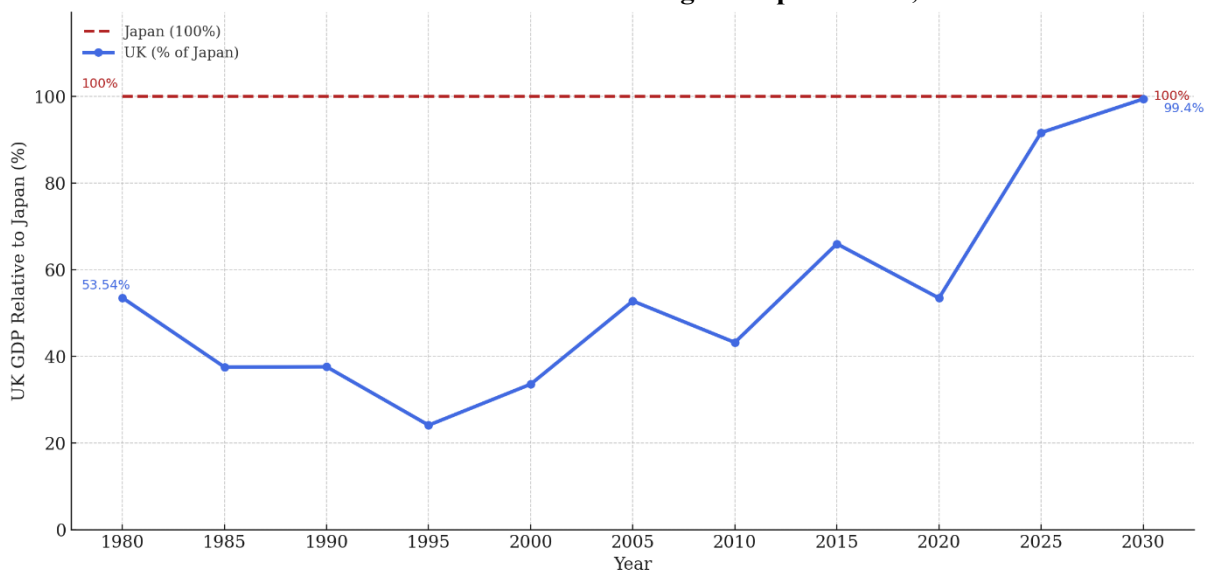
Source: IMF World Economic Outlook, April 2025 projections.

Between 1997 and 2005, Britain was the fourth-largest economy in the world, and as will be shown, its defence budget occupied a similar position. As can be seen in Chart 01 above, in 2005, the size of the British economy was 89% of the German. Similarly, it was almost 15% bigger than the French. When considering the Italian economy, its British counterpart was roughly 37% bigger. Concerning Japan, since the early 1990s and the end of the “Japanese Miracle”, Britain gained ground. From an economy representing only 37% of the Japanese in 1990, it rose to approximately 52.5% in 2005 (IMF, 2023). Economic growth, supported by competitive productivity expansion and a strong currency, led to Britain’s economy being almost 91% of the size of Germany’s in 2007, a feat not witnessed since the early German post-war recovery in the 1950s. Therefore, the period between 1996 and 2007 witnessed economic momentum for Britain compared to its G7 peers. Despite that, in line with the argument of

British stability or rise within the Group of Seven while the country declined in relation to peripheral or semi-peripheral players, it is worth noting that China overtook Britain as the fourth-largest economy in 2006, just one year after surpassing France. In 2010, China displaced Japan as the world's second-largest economy (IMF, 2023).

Moreover, the Financial Crisis of 2007-2008 severely hit Britain's economic performance. The British momentum in Europe and within the G7 came to a close, with France overtaking Britain in 2009. That same year, the British economy represented 71% of the German, compared to almost 91% in 2007. Economic recovery led to Britain retaking its position from the French in 2014, but not before almost falling behind Brazil in 2011. By 2015, as seen in Chart 01 and Chart 02, in terms of GDP, the losses from the Financial Crisis were partially reversed, and the British economy was roughly 65% the size of the Japanese and 87% of the German (IMF, 2023). Although the economic effects of the decision to leave the European Union in 2016 (Brexit) are numerous and with varying aspects, the devaluation of the pound sterling contributed to a scenario where the economy grew. However, its relative standing in the short term was weakened in relation to the American dollar and the euro. In 2020, the British remained ahead of France, but the gap with Germany had widened to similar levels seen in 2009. Concerning Japan, the 2020 gap (with the British economy representing slightly more than 53% of the Japanese) had returned to levels seen in 2005 (52.5%) (IMF, 2023) but would close again within five years to reach roughly 91% of Japan's GDP (IMF, 2025).

Chart 02 – UK Nominal GDP as Percentage of Japan's GDP, 1980-2030



Source: IMF World Economic Outlook, April 2025 projections.

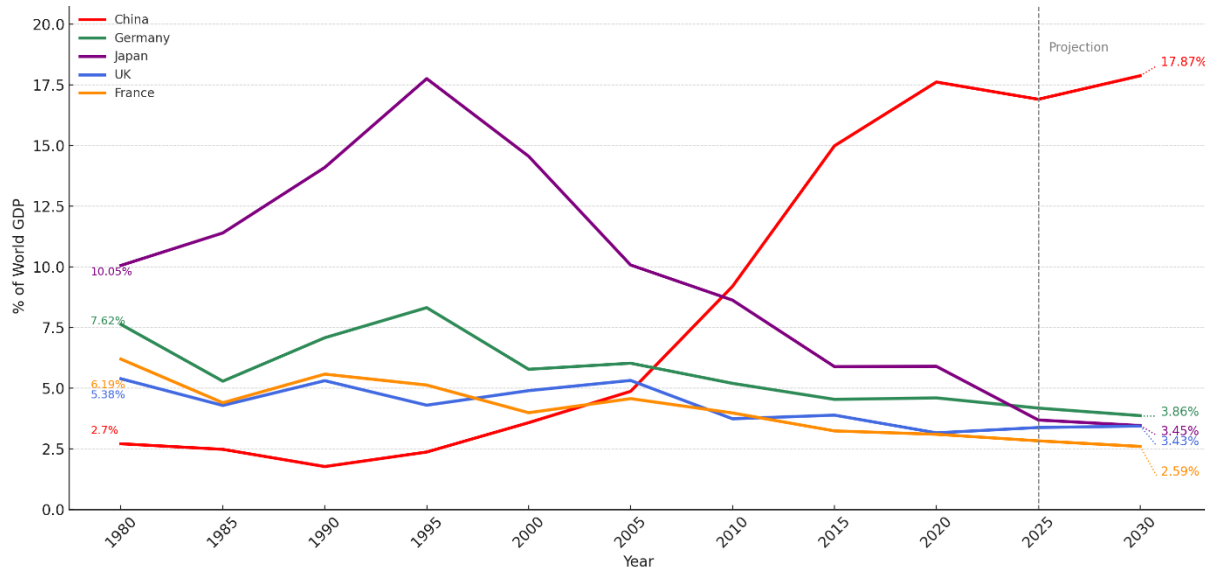
In terms of share of global GDP, in 2020, Britain represented 3.2% (down from 4.3% in 1995), while the United States accounted for 24.5% (up from 24.4%), followed by China with

17.3% (up from 2.4%), Japan with 5.9% (down from 17.7%), and Germany with 4.5% (down from 8.3%), see Chart 02. France was seventh, behind an ascending India, with the French share being 3.1% (down from 5.1% in 1995) (Mathisen, 2022). It is worth highlighting that among the G7 economies, Britain was the most severely hit by the 2020 recession related to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2022, the economic position of the country improved slightly: the British economy was roughly 75.5% of the size of its German counterpart (up from 69.5% in 2020), 73% of the Japanese (up from 53% in 2020), and approximately 10% bigger than the French (in 2020 the difference was less than 4%) (IMF, 2023). In 2023, the British economy reached roughly 80% of the size of its Japanese counterpart – more due to issues related to Japan's economic performance than Britain's – and 76% of the German economy while remaining ahead of France (*idem*). This data indicates a recovery from the slowdown of the late 2010s, even though a recession was caused amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Revisions by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published in 2023 indicated that the British economy performed better than expected in the 2020-2021 period, contracting less and recovering faster than previous data had shown. Overall, it indicated that Britain's economy was not the worst-performing of the G7 between 2020 and 2022, recovering as strongly as France's and better than Germany's (Giles, 2023). Thus, the numbers for the 2020-2022 period are slightly more favourable (around 2%) to the country than those presented here, even though India overtook Britain in 2021 as the world's fifth-largest economy.

Considering the share of the global GDP, when discussing British relative decline, it becomes necessary to mention that the American, French, German, Japanese, and Italian declines were, in most cases and in the long term since 1970, more severe than the British. Using data from the United Nations (UN), the United States had a share of roughly 31.4% of the global economy in 1970. In 1995, its share had fallen to 24.4% and remained stable over the next 25 years, at 24.5% in 2020 (Mathisen, 2022). The American economy's share of the global GDP was roughly 22% smaller in 2020 compared to 1970. It is worth mentioning that the World Bank puts the United States economy with a 36% share in 1970, slightly above the UN's data, but with a 24% share in 2019, indicating a more acute loss of economic weight than shown by the United Nations (Bhutada, 2021). Concomitantly, Japan experienced a decline of 5% between 1970 (6.2%) and 2020 (5.9%). However, in the Japanese case, it is necessary to emphasise the post-war economic boom that would become stronger in the 1980s. In 1995, already leaving behind the Japanese Miracle, Japan's share of the global economy reached 17.7%, but by 2020 it was 5.9% (Mathisen, 2022). When considering the 25-year period, Japan's share declined by 66%, meaning that the economic weight of the country represented

only one-third of its strength in the early 1990s. The situation worsened if the years from 2021 to 2023 are included, which witnessed a weaker currency that led to Japan's economy being similar in size to Germany's by 2023 (IMF, 2023).

Chart 03 – Nominal GDP share of the World Economy (1980-2030)

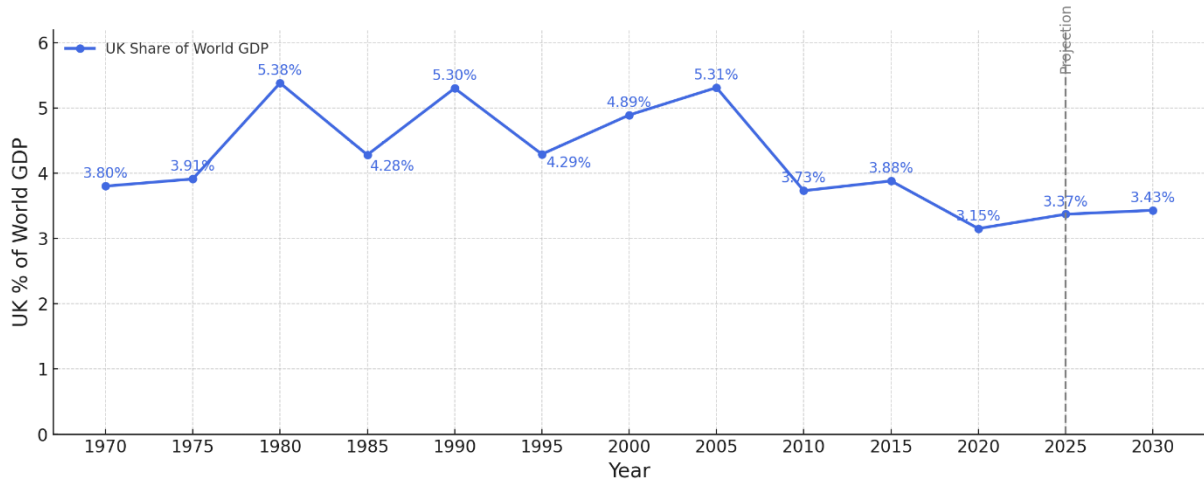


Source: IMF World Economic Outlook, April 2025 projections.

The cases of Germany and France also present a similar picture. In 1970, Germany (both West and East Germany) had a 6.3% share of the world economy; 25 years later, this number rose to 8.3%. By 2020, the German economy represented 4.5% of the global GDP (Mathisen, 2022). Considering the long-term period between 1970 and 2020, the German share contracted roughly 29%. However, from 1995 to 2020, the contraction was almost 46%, only better than the Japanese economic performance when considering the G7. Concerning the case of France, its economy had a 4.3% share in 1970, going up to 5.1% in 1995 and falling to 3.1% in 2020 (Mathisen, 2022). Within 50 years (1970–2020), the French economic weight globally fell by 28%. When taking only the period from 1995 to 2020, the French share of the world economy declined by slightly more than 39%, further decreasing by 2025. Lastly, the two remaining members of the G7. Italy experienced a decline of 34% of its share of the global GDP, from 3.3% in 1970 to 2.2% in 2020 (Mathisen, 2022). In a shorter timeframe, it is possible to argue that from 1995 to 2020, the Italian relative decline became more substantial, and its economic weight contracted by 42% (when the country had a 3.8% share) compared to the 34% contraction from its position in 1970. Meanwhile, Canada's global economic share contracted by 27% between 1970 and 2020, from 2.6% to 1.9% (Mathisen, 2022). Canada followed the American pattern seen between 1995 and 2020 and remained relatively stable, showing that its

main decline in relation to the world economy occurred especially between 1970 and 1995 (IMF, 2025).

Chart 04 – UK Share of Global Nominal GDP, 1970-2020



Source: IMF (2025); Mathisen (2022); United Nations (2025).

The British share went from 3.8% in 1970 to 3.2% in 2020, a contraction of 15.7% (Mathisen, 2022). However, the years between 2020 and 2025 witnessed a discreet increase in the British share to 3.37%, which would mean an 11.3% reduction between 1970 and 2025 (IMF, 2025). Taking a shorter timeframe, see Chart 04, between 1995 and 2020, the British weight in the global GDP fell by 25.5%. In short, Britain declined less severely than its peers in the five decades from 1970 to 2020. This supports the argument of a rise in relation to most G7 nations and a decline when compared to new “peripheral” Powers, namely China and India, which experienced since the 1990s a sharp rise in their global GDP share. Even when considering the shorter timeframe – from 1995 to 2020 – the British economy (with a 25.5% reduction of its share) performed better than Japan (–66%), Germany (–46%), France (–39%) and Italy (–42%), while the United States and Canada remained stable. The UN’s data for the 2021 GDP nominal has the United States with a 24.1% slice of the world economy, followed by China with 18.3%, Japan with 5.1%, Germany with 4.4%, India with 3.3%, Britain with 3.2%, France with 3%, Italy with 2.2% and Canada with 2% (United Nations, 2023). For 2025, the United States would continue to lead (26.5%), followed by China (16.9%), Germany (4.15%), India (3.7%), Japan (roughly 3.69%), Britain (3.37%), France (2.8%), Italy (2.1%), and Canada (roughly 1.95%). Between 2020 and 2025, out of the top nine, only the United States (up 6.4% in relative terms), India (up 19%), Britain (up 7%), and Canada (1.3%) grew their GDP share of the world economy. Japan (down 37.3%), Germany (down 9.6%), France (9.4%), Italy (5.4%), and China (4%) showed a contraction of their share (IMF, 2025).

3.2 Defence Budget and Power Projection

Advancing into the question of the defence budget and industry, Britain has traditionally been among the largest spenders globally, and its defence industry has remained substantial, broad-based, and sophisticated, although not fully capable of supplying all the sizeable demands of the British Government (United Kingdom, 2005). Due to economic weakness, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, the debate in Britain about defence expenditure was marked by the frequent necessity to retrench (Brooke-Holland, Mills and Walke, 2023). In short, during the first decades of the Cold War, the country's position was one of strategic insolvency, leading to a long-term trend of cuts to the defence budget. Thus, the trend of reductions in military spending as a share of GDP was only actively reversed during armed conflicts involving Britain, including the Falklands/Malvinas War. The dismantling of the Empire and its final imperial retrenchment in 1971 would not witness the end of British cuts to its military. As the international strategic scenario changed rapidly with the end of the Cold War – and the dissolution of the Soviet Union – the argument for reduced forces gained strength in Britain through the so-called 'Peace Dividend' (Brooke-Holland, Mills and Walke, 2023).

In 1960, Britain spent roughly 7.1% of its GDP on defence, but within a decade, that number fell to 5.2% and went as low as 4.7% in 1979. Still, British military spending as a percentage of GDP remained higher than its peers. The high defence expenditure occurred precisely when the economy was underperforming, in part as a way to compensate for diminished economic influence. However, the limits of this practice were clear: high defence spending was contrary to the much-needed retrenchment policies to reverse decline. The war for the Falklands/Malvinas in 1982 led to a short-term increase in military spending, particularly in the years after the conflict, largely to replace lost assets and increase British military infrastructure in the South Atlantic (Beach, 1986), reaching 5.5% in 1984. However, by 1987, defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP (4.7%) fell below the pre-war value of 5%. The decision of the John Major Government to publish a new Defence Review in 1990, which had been primarily formulated by the Thatcher Government, established the basis for a new wave of budget cuts. In 1990, defence spending was 4%, already down from 4.7% three years earlier. When the Labour Party achieved a majority in the 1997 elections under the leadership of Tony Blair, the defence budget was 2.6% of GDP. Between 1990 and 1997, British military expenditure was cut by roughly 35%. If the timeframe is expanded back to 1987, the cuts represent approximately a 48% reduction in the defence GDP share. After the Peace Dividend cuts, the Blair Government and its successors maintained expenditure at around 2.2%, almost

in line with its NATO peers but still slightly higher than most of the Alliance's major players except the United States (SIPRI, 2022).

A brief comparison shows that France implemented a 22% cut to its military expenditure between 1987 and 1997, a sharp reduction but not as significant as the British. Italy decreased its spending by a quarter in the same period. A reunified Germany followed a similar pattern with a 30% reduction of its defence budget as a share of GDP within the first seven years after reunification (1990–1997). Within the G7, only the United States had a reduction resembling the scale of the British cuts, from 6.4% in 1987 to 5.4% in 1990 and 3.4% in 1997 (a 47% reduction between 1987 and 1997). In the aforementioned cases, defence cuts occurred mainly after 1990–1991, symbolising the Peace Dividend in the West. Despite the proportion of its military cuts, Britain remained amongst the three largest spenders throughout the 1990s. Notably, the defence share of GDP fell when the country experienced a relative economic rise compared to its Western counterparts. In 2001, the country had the third-largest defence budget in the world, behind Japan in second and the United States. Following the intervention in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), Britain occupied second place until it was surpassed by China in 2008 (SIPRI, 2023).

Thus, although Britain performed one of the most severe reductions in defence spending of the 1990s, it still had considerable weight as the third or second largest budget until 2008. Nevertheless, the 1990s and 2000s witnessed an increase in the British practice of military power projection, with the Gulf War (1990–1991) being the first glimpse of an interventionist foreign policy for the post-Cold War era. Under Tony Blair (1997–2007), the country intervened in Kosovo (1999) as part of NATO, unilaterally in Sierra Leone (2000), and as part of American-led coalitions in Afghanistan (2001), and bombed and later invaded Iraq (1998 and 2003, respectively) (Lunn, Miller and Smith, 2008). As already stated, the first six years of Blair's premiership became the most active period of the British Armed Forces since the Second World War. Britain wanted a global role and saw itself as a Great Power with a duty and responsibility to intervene militarily overseas – alone, if necessary – to support the stability of the international order. This view is the core of the liberal interventionism of Blair (Brown, 2010). Amongst the Atlantic Alliance, it saw itself as a bridge connecting the United States and Europe and as the leading member of NATO in Europe (Kampfner, 2004; United Kingdom, 1998).

Despite that, the level of ambition and new commitments combined with a reduced budget – the latter a legacy of the Peace Dividend – meant that the British Armed Forces had to do more with fewer resources. It is worth highlighting that in its early years, the Blair Government had a favourable view of maintaining a stable defence budget. Its favourable stance

on the Defence of the Realm was also an electoral opportunity after years of expenditure cuts left by the Conservative Party (1979–1997), particularly under the leadership of John Major (Freedman, 1999). Beyond that, a stable budget was necessary to achieve the objectives of the new Government in London: a Britain with flexible forces, centred on expeditionary units with increased presence overseas (United Kingdom, 1998), able to sustain the ‘neoliberal interventionism’ of Tony Blair.

A favourable geopolitical scenario for the country internationally supported the ambitions of the British Government in the 1990s and 2000s. Freedman (1999) argued that ‘Britain was unusually secure, even amongst its allies, far away from most trouble-spots and not needing to worry about balancing a would-be hegemonic power in Europe’, easing the expansion of British strategic attention beyond the framework of the Cold War and NATO. Nonetheless, the expenditure limits remained present, even if the decline no longer occurred in relation to its peers. Reductions to the defence budget were minimised initially by a British Government with direct interests in reformulating the Armed Forces organisation for a new era of power projection. Despite that, even in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review that set the tone for an expeditionary Britain, there was the recognition that the economy was growing faster than the defence budget, which would result in a contraction of the Ministry of Defence’s share of Government expenditure (United Kingdom, 1998).

Even though the resources allocated to the Ministry of Defence appeared relatively stable as a share of GDP between 1997 and 2010, it must be noted that the 2.6% of GDP in 1997 covered fewer commitments, especially in Europe and elsewhere, while the same share in the early 2000s had to sustain global deployments and interventions (SIPRI, 2023). Criticism regarding underfunding and overstretch – a legacy of the John Major Government (1990–1997) – was compounded by complaints about increasing demands placed on the Armed Forces without proportional budgetary increases, even though there were no significant service-wide reductions (Self, 2010). However, the relatively stable period of around 2.5% GDP expenditure (1997–2007) was later followed by further cuts, which eventually placed the UK close to breaching NATO’s 2% minimum spending benchmark (Rogers, 2017).

In response to the 2007–2008 Financial Crisis, the Conservative-led coalition under David Cameron (2010–2016) launched a new Defence Review in 2010, resulting in significant budget reductions (United Kingdom, 2010), comparable in scale to those under the Major Government. In 2010, Britain spent 2.6% of GDP on defence, maintaining its position as the world’s third-largest spender after the United States (4.9%) and China (1.7%). By 2015, following a new Defence Review aimed at reversing some earlier cuts (United Kingdom, 2015),

defence spending had fallen to 2% of GDP, almost a 25% real-term reduction over five years. In comparison, France experienced a slight decrease from 2% to 1.9%, Germany reduced from 1.3% to 1.1%, while Russia's spending rose sharply from 3.6% to 4.9%. China's spending increased marginally, while Japan's remained stable at 0.9%. The United States also cut its defence budget, from 4.9% to 3.5% (SIPRI, 2023). When including Saudi Arabia (whose SIPRI data counts public order and safety spending), the UK was overtaken by Saudi Arabia in 2013, ranking fifth globally by 2015.

Strategic shifts in the global arena prompted a modest but sustained rise in UK defence expenditure. By 2020, the British defence budget had risen to 2.2% of GDP after dipping to 1.9% in 2018 and 2019. G7 countries followed a similar trend of slight increases, while China maintained stable spending and Russia enacted minor cuts (SIPRI, 2023). India's total defence expenditure surpassed Britain's in 2016, placing the UK sixth globally if Saudi Arabia is included. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), which excludes Saudi Arabia's internal security spending, the UK ranked fourth in 2020 (61.5 billion USD), ahead of Russia but behind India, China, and the United States (IISS, 2021). In 2021, IISS data indicated that the UK (71.6 billion USD) overtook India (65.1 billion USD), returning to third place globally for the first time since 2012 (IISS, 2022). However, in 2022, Russia (87.9 billion USD) regained third place due to war-related spending in Ukraine, pushing the UK (70 billion USD) and India (66.6 billion USD) down (IISS, 2023). SIPRI (2023b) presents a different picture for 2022, placing India (81 billion USD) ahead of Britain (68.5 billion USD).

The long-term trend from 1990 to the early 2020s illustrates rising defence spending among Asian powers – particularly China and India – alongside a resurgent Russia. Britain's defence budget, though reduced in relative terms, remained among the top global spenders throughout the 1990s and 2000s. From 2002 to 2008, it ranked second only to the United States. However, the global weight of British military capabilities declined relative to Russia, India, and especially China. While still a significant actor in global military terms, the strategic environment of the 2010s and 2020s became more competitive. Importantly, this relative decline was not unique to Britain; other Western powers, including the United States, faced similar trends (IISS, 2013; 2022; 2023). Overall, despite budgetary reductions, Britain retained the economic-industrial base to sustain a substantial defence budget and strategic assets, underpinning its role as a global player.

Regarding military assets, Britain has been a nuclear weapons state since 1952 and is one of the five recognised nuclear-weapon states under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (Mills, 2023). Since 1958, it has maintained close cooperation with

the United States under the US–UK Mutual Defence Agreement (Renwick, 2016), a model for later arrangements such as the 2021 AUKUS security partnership with Australia. Successive British Governments have reiterated their commitment to maintaining a “minimum, credible, independent nuclear deterrent”, which covers NATO members and British Overseas Territories (United Kingdom, 2023).

Historically, Britain’s nuclear arsenal has been smaller than that of the US and the Soviet Union/Russia but comparable in size to France and China, and larger than the arsenals of Pakistan and India. Since the Cold War, Britain has undertaken disarmament initiatives in line with the NPT, including the withdrawal of all nuclear strike systems except the submarine-launched Trident II system by the 2010s and 2020s. The 2010 Defence Review projected a 65% reduction in Britain’s overall nuclear stockpile from its Cold War peak of around 520 warheads. However, in 2021, in response to perceived security challenges, the UK Government announced an increase in the nuclear warhead cap from 225 to 260, reversing the previous disarmament trend. Moreover, London stated it would cease public disclosure of its nuclear stockpile, deployed missile numbers, and warheads. This decision marked the first major expansion of a Western nuclear arsenal since the 1990s, placing Britain alongside China as the only NPT-recognised nuclear powers actively growing their arsenals. Britain also rejects a “no-first-use” nuclear policy, considering it incompatible with NATO’s deterrence posture. Successive Governments have supported the continuous modernisation of nuclear capabilities, with the Dreadnought-class SSBNs set to replace the Vanguard-class by the 2030s (Mills, 2023).

Beyond its nuclear forces, Britain’s conventional military and power projection capabilities merit attention. As outlined earlier, the UK’s defence budget contracted from 4% of GDP in 1990 to around 2% by the late 2010s. Consequently, the British Armed Forces downsized while preserving their technological edge. In this period, Britain and France – Europe’s two major military powers – shifted from continental defence-focused forces to expeditionary warfare and power projection models. Hyde-Price (2007) observes that “Power projection has always been an element of British and French military thinking given their residual overseas interests, but it has now moved centre stage.”

For Britain, personnel reductions were significant. In 1990, the Army comprised 153,000 troops, the Royal Navy 63,000, and the Royal Air Force 90,000, totalling 306,000 active personnel (United Kingdom, 2017). In comparison, France had larger Army and Navy contingents at the time. By 2000, after a decade of the Peace Dividend, the UK’s active forces had reduced to 208,000: 110,000 in the Army, 55,000 in the RAF, and 43,000 in the Royal Navy. The 2000s remained relatively stable, except for the RAF, which saw a 20% reduction from

2000 to 2010 (United Kingdom, 2017). By 2010, the Army had 109,000 personnel, the RAF 44,000, and the Royal Navy 39,000, totalling 192,000 across all services. However, the 2010 Defence Review triggered further reductions: by 2015, the Royal Navy and RAF had about 33,000 and 34,000 personnel, respectively, while the Army fell to 87,000. This left Britain with 154,000 active personnel; half the size of its forces in 1990 (United Kingdom, 2017). Although France and other powers followed similar post-Cold War trends, the UK's reductions were particularly marked during two periods: the 1990 "Options for Change" review and the post-2010 austerity-driven cuts, concluding with the 2015 Defence Review (Brooke-Holland, Mills and Walke, 2023).

When considering data from 1998 to 2010 and 2016 to 2023, the underlying view is that relative stability prevailed, in contrast to the more severe reductions between 1990 and 1997 and again from 2010 to 2015. For example, between 1998 and 2010, the Armed Forces decreased from 211,000 to 192,000 personnel, representing a 9% contraction over a longer timeframe than the 1990–1997 Peace Dividend period, during which personnel levels fell by 31%. From 2010 to 2015, cuts reached 20%, with total personnel dropping from 192,000 to 154,000 (United Kingdom, 2017). Between 2016 and 2023, the size of the British Armed Forces remained relatively stable: from 151,000 in 2016 to 152,000 in 2023, even though the Government planned further reductions in the Army, signalling a shift towards air and naval capabilities (Kirk-Wade; Mansfield, 2023).

For comparison, in 2022, France maintained 203,000 active personnel (IISS, 2023), a significant reduction considering that in 1989–1990, the French Army alone numbered 300,000. France's Reserve force stood at slightly over 41,000 in the early 2020s, whereas Britain retained a larger reserve strength of between 72,000 and 79,000 personnel (IISS, 2021; 2023). In the same year, Germany's active force totalled around 183,000, while Italy's stood at 161,000 (IISS, 2023). Overall, Britain's defence cuts reduced active personnel proportionally less than France. However, the British Armed Forces – like their French and German counterparts – remained, by the 2020s, dwarfed by the sheer size of the forces fielded by the United States (1,400,000), China (2,000,000), and Russia (900,000) (IISS, 2021). Therefore, Britain's global network of military bases and its technologically advanced, flexible force structure remain essential to sustaining its status among the leading military powers, even if ranked as secondary to the two Primary Great Powers of the 2020s.

Regarding the strategic assets that enable Britain to project global influence – and contribute to the ongoing debate about its classification as a "medium power with extra clout" (Kampfner, 2022) or other similar labels – the country maintains a network of overseas military

installations, territories, and air-naval capabilities that survived the broader trend of post-war decline. Concerning territorial possessions, the remnants of the British Empire were gradually reorganised as British Overseas Territories (BOTs). The British Overseas Territories Act 2002 replaced the earlier designation of “British Dependent Territories” (established in 1983), granting full British citizenship rights to the residents of these territories. Although largely self-governing and dispersed across nine time zones – from the North Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean – the BOTs are not legally part of the United Kingdom, each having its own constitution. Nonetheless, London retains exclusive responsibility for their defence and foreign affairs (United Kingdom, 2019). By the early 2020s, the BOTs numbered fourteen, with a combined population of approximately 270,000 and a total land area of 18,110 km², slightly larger than Northern Ireland. This total is dominated by the Falklands/Malvinas, which accounts for 12,173 km² of the overall territory²³. Thus, the Territories have a small land area and demographic weight, contributing little to the total numbers of the UK. Instead, the BOTs’ main contribution to the British relative position is their strategic value and expressive Exclusive Economic Zones²⁴ (EEZs).

As noted by the European Parliament, the majority of the retained possessions are geographically located in areas of significant geostrategic relevance, making them ideal for power projection and for maintaining a permanent military presence, even if on a relatively modest scale, allowing for operations within their surrounding regions (European Union, 2009). In the European context, the United Kingdom and France are the principal holders of such territories, while the United States is the only other Power with a comparable, though larger-scale, global power projection infrastructure. In the British case, nearly all of the 14 Overseas Territories have some degree of military utility for power projection (Castro, 2002).

Throughout the first three decades of the post-Cold War era, the main British territories used for military purposes were Gibraltar, the Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) of Akrotiri and Dhekelia in Cyprus, Ascension Island (Hastings; Jenkins, 2010), the Falklands/Malvinas, the British Indian Ocean Territory, and, to a lesser extent, Bermuda. It is worth noting that some of these territories host locally raised land regiments, particularly those in the Caribbean, as well as the Falklands/Malvinas and Gibraltar. Beyond the Overseas Territories, between 1991 and the early 2020s, the United Kingdom also maintained significant military bases in, but not

²³The calculations presented do not include the British Antarctic Territory.

²⁴Britain’s EEZ is ranked as the fifth largest in the world due to its Overseas Territories with 6,805,586 km² out of which only 773,676 km² are the EEZ of the United Kingdom itself. The United States (11,351,000 km²) and France (10,186,624 km²) benefit in the same way, having the largest and second largest EEZs worldwide, respectively.

limited to, Canada, Belize, Germany, Cyprus, Kenya, Bahrain, Oman, Singapore, and Brunei. By the early 2020s, including small detachments and facilities, the British Government sustained a network of more than 145 military sites across 42 countries. Of these, 60 were directly operated by the United Kingdom, while allies managed the remaining 85; most of these facilities do not host large numbers of troops, as their primary role is to provide logistical or operational support for British forces when needed (Miller, 2020). Effectively, this global network functions as a system of pillars sustaining British military activities in various regions.

It is important to highlight that the specific characteristics and strategic rationale behind Britain's overseas military bases and territorial presence in the Indo-Pacific will be analysed in the next chapter. This will help illustrate the broader argument of how London transitioned from retrenchment to renewed expansionist policies, as reflected by its military interventions in the 1990s and 2000s and the establishment of new bases and commitments in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific during the 2010s and 2020s. In short, overseas military bases – whether in foreign countries or in British territories – remain crucial enablers of power projection. Till (2009) observes that such outposts extend naval operational ranges, provide support for merchant shipping, and can often be defended almost exclusively through naval power. Kennedy (2004) similarly recognises the role of overseas territories and bases in sustaining the military reach of a Great Power. While many of these possessions have little value in isolation, they have historically played key roles as strategic outposts. Indeed, much of Britain's historical acquisition and retention of these locations was tied to their utility for maritime commerce, the protection of national trade, and the pursuit of elite economic interests.

For Alfred T. Mahan (1890), Britain's nineteenth-century primacy rested on the world's largest and most technologically advanced navy, which itself depended on an extensive global network of supporting bases. Mahan understood that control of strategically important territories was essential not only for warfighting but also as a source of national reassurance during peacetime. Notably, many of Britain's major strategic possessions in the 2020s can trace their origins to this Victorian-era strategy of safeguarding imperial trade routes—carried by what was then the largest merchant fleet in history, requiring an equally expansive Royal Navy supported by a global system of bases (Gray, 2014; 2017).

Maintaining these bases and territories, once the backbone of British naval primacy, became a secondary factor compared to the air and naval assets that they enable. These capabilities remain crucial for any power projection efforts. Therefore, before advancing to the next chapter, which will cover Britain's military presence in the Indo-Pacific, it is necessary to provide a concise overview of the country's overall naval power projection capacity. As

previously discussed, the national economic base remains the fundamental source of a state's military power, including its capacity for overseas operations. According to Coutau-Bégarie (2006), the pillars of maritime power include a strong, technologically advanced industrial base, an ability to mobilise resources nationally, an extensive sea-based trade network, and the necessary port and shipyard infrastructure. Like Corbett (1988), Coutau-Bégarie does not consider territorial size as essential for maritime power, but both stress the central role of technology. In sum, effective overseas power projection requires a combination of economic strength, technological capacity, and infrastructure to overcome what Mearsheimer (2001) has described as the "stopping power of water."

The "blue-water navies" are those belonging to an exclusive group of states capable of meeting the requirements to establish naval forces with few or no global equivalents. Some authors propose a tiered classification system for navies, aligning their military strength and power projection capabilities under the categories of "blue-water," "green-water," and "brown-water" navies (Batton and Till, 2012). Although a universally agreed definition remains elusive, these categories remain useful for identifying and analysing the leading naval forces of the post-Cold War era. According to Batton and Till (2012), a brown-water navy is capable of defending only its immediate coastal area, a green-water navy operates within its "regional sea," and a blue-water navy has the "capability to operate across the deep waters." Other scholars propose more precise geographic metrics: Athwal (2007) defines brown-water navies as operating no more than 100 nautical miles from the coast, green-water navies as reaching the next significant landmass, and blue-water navies as possessing a minimum operational range of 1,500 nautical miles (approximately 2,780 km). Despite definitional variations, operational range remains the baseline criterion for classification. Additionally, a true blue-water navy must possess capabilities such as Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), protection from surface and air threats, sustained long-range operational endurance supported by a robust logistical tail, and the ability to project power both at sea and ashore, generally through the operation of aircraft carriers (Vidigal, 2010).

Despite these classification efforts, significant variation exists within each category. Batton and Till (2012), for instance, classify both the United States and France as blue-water navies but stress that American naval capabilities are vastly superior. Their classification seeks primarily to identify which countries maintain strong navies capable of power projection beyond their home regions. Within this context, the United Kingdom's Royal Navy is consistently categorised as a blue-water navy, broadly comparable to France's Marine Nationale. Although precise rankings differ depending on methodology, there is general

academic consensus regarding the principal naval powers since the end of the Cold War. The United States has remained the dominant maritime force, followed by the United Kingdom and France, and, from the 2000s and 2010s onwards, China and Russia (Barber and Sipos, 2004; Grove, 1990; Kirchberger, 2015; Lindberg and Todd, 1996). The principal distinction between the two European powers (the UK and France) and the United States lies in their capacity to sustain multiple, simultaneous, and prolonged power projection missions globally. While the United States can undertake such operations on a large scale, the UK and France can sustain at least one comparable mission, providing them with global reach, albeit on a reduced scale relative to the United States (Kirchberger, 2015; Lindberg and Todd, 1996). This aligns with their broader classification as Secondary Great Powers, contrasted with the United States as a Primary Great Power.

It is noteworthy to highlight the naval rankings established by Lindberg and Todd (1996) and updated by Kirchberger (2015), which identify China by the mid-2010s as the principal emerging blue-water navy, in a process of consolidation. Regarding the operation of aircraft carriers – the quintessential symbol of naval power projection – China surpassed Britain in absolute numbers during the 2010s. Following the 2010 Defence Review, the Royal Navy was left without an operational carrier between 2014 and 2017 for the first time since such vessels were first commissioned in the early twentieth century (Tossini, 2021). Nevertheless, Britain maintained its commitment to a new class of aircraft carriers, with two Queen Elizabeth-class vessels entering service between 2017 and 2019. Consequently, by the early 2020s, Britain rejoined the group of carrier-operating nations alongside the United States, China, India, Russia, and France. Moreover, only the United States, China, India, and the United Kingdom operated more than one carrier in the early 2020s (IISS, 2023), a distinction previously shared only by the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain during the 1980s.

3.3 Defence Industry

In the first three decades after the end of the Cold War, Britain's defence sector remained robust, capable of supplying a considerable part of the British Government's demands for cutting-edge assets to the Armed Forces. During the peak of operations in the Middle East, the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) considered that the national defence industry was "a successful and sophisticated industrial base with a broad range of capabilities and which delivers a large proportion of our defence equipment and services" (United Kingdom, 2005). In the view of the Ministry, the British defence sector faced competition mainly from its American

counterpart in the 2000s. The MoD argued that Britain provided a “unique environment for the defence industry”. It stated that Britain had a comparative advantage due to “a greater proportion of our overall business is available to [defence] industry than in any other major defence nation, and growing expertise in the combination of systems engineering skills, agility and supply chain management required to deliver through-life capability” (United Kingdom, 2005). In addition, this unique environment was closely supported by the British Government through “targeted MoD investments”, which granted leadership in science and technology (Idem).

Despite the Ministry of Defence classifying the British defence industrial base as able to provide a large portion of Britain’s demands, it recognises that having control and “full cradle” over all critical defence technologies is unfeasible for most countries except for the United States. It points out that even if the British defence sector could supply all the demands of the Government, around 25% of the defence industrial base is foreign-owned. The MoD also recognises that in fields where the British defence industry is no longer capable of supplying the total demand presented to it through Government procurements, measures to ensure operational independence and technology access are the appropriate guarantees when dealing with overseas suppliers. On the issue of foreign investment and ownership of local companies, the British Government’s policy in the 2000s allowed “global competition” in “some projects” (United Kingdom, 2005). However, according to the Ministry of Defence, for “national security reasons”, significant projects have traditionally focused on sustaining a domestic defence industry, exemplified in the procurement of vessels for the Royal Navy and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary that is exclusively granted to companies that can design, develop, build, and support the vessels in Britain (Allison, 2021). Concomitantly, it has been a policy of successive Governments in London to retain the capabilities and skills to design and build critical assets – from ships and nuclear submarines to Armoured Fighting Vehicles and fast combat jets – in Britain (United Kingdom, 2005; 2021b).

The rapid geopolitical and technological changes witnessed since the mid-2000s have left the British Government with renewed concerns about preserving a sizeable defence industry. This led to a Defence and Security Industrial Strategy published in 2021, committing London to “sustain and grow onshore industrial capability” while maintaining continuous investment in research and innovation (United Kingdom, 2021b). Corroborating slightly the perception in London of increased competition, Britain in 2022 had eight companies amongst the top 100 defence enterprises by total revenue, down from ten in 2010 and 2000. Meanwhile, China’s presence on the list rose from none in 2000 to seven in 2022, while Russia had a rapid

ascension in the early 2010s with nine companies at its peak but declined steadily to only one in 2022. France had five enterprises in the Top 100 in 2022 – including the multinational Airbus – down from nine in 2000. Germany had three defence companies among the largest by revenue in 2022, down from four in 2000, while Japan had three in 2022, down from nine in 2000. Lastly, the United States had 47 in 2022 and 46 in 2000, remaining largely stable (Defense News, 2023). Thus, among the largest economies and defence spenders, between 2000 and 2022, British companies lost ground, particularly to China, but to a lesser extent than France, Russia, and Germany.

Still, in 2019, the British Government stated that Britain was the second-largest exporter of defence equipment in the world while being the third-largest in “security exports” (United Kingdom, 2021b). Furthermore, in 2022, the British Government estimated that in the preceding ten years (2012–2021), Britain, with roughly 130 billion dollars in exports, was the second-largest defence exporter globally, behind the United States (more than 460bn), and ahead of Russia (120bn), France (110bn), and Germany (around 40bn). However, the global share of Britain’s exports might have been facing a relative decline between 2012 and 2021, from roughly 15% to 7%. Nevertheless, export values are highly volatile due to being contract-based. Once a contract is signed, a country’s share might grow punctually and fall in the following year. In the British case, the 7% share for 2021 is an exception in the 2012–2021 period. For example, in 2019, the share was approximately 16%, indicating stability instead of decline. It is worth noting that Britain, France, and Russia have historically vied for second place – behind the United States – in market share. On this issue, the British market share in that period was more significant in North America, accounting for almost a third of the region’s defence imports, and in the Middle East with slightly more than one-sixth. Consequently, Britain’s primary markets (2012–2021) were the Middle East (51% of its defence-related exports based on contracts and orders signed) and North America (16%), followed by Europe (13%) and Asia-Pacific (7%) (United Kingdom, 2023b).

Lastly, the British defence market remained one of the largest in the world in the early 2020s and only slightly behind Russia’s in Europe, indicating a continuous source of demand not dependent entirely on exports but mainly on Government procurement (Mordor, 2023). The British Government’s traditional involvement is seen through its Industrial Defence Strategy of supporting, investing in, and protecting critical industries of the sector (United Kingdom, 2005; 2021b). London is willing to block acquisitions of national companies by foreign enterprises for “national security” reasons, including sectors associated with critical technology and infrastructure, not only those directly linked to defence industries. Renewed concerns about

dependence on foreign and unreliable sources have reinforced this policy of retaining national assets that generate key technologies. Growing anxiety over Chinese links to these critical sectors of the economy spiralled into various fields, resulting in the blocking of a Chinese company from acquiring Britain's largest producer of semiconductors in 2022 (Jolly; Badshah, 2022).

Additionally, the Government is a source of subsidies for research and development, implying that the “developmental state” – once criticised in the debates on British relative decline during the 1970s and 1980s – persisted in some areas for “national security” concerns. In 2023, a report by the think tank Common Wealth stated that the defence industry is “supported by the state in a way no other sector is”, indicating a form of “corporate welfare” for arms manufacturers. Through the report, Common Wealth indicated that the British Government directly subsidises up to 90% of defence companies' research and development spending. Within this context, the British defence giant BAE Systems paid just 14.35% of its own research and development (R&D) in 2022. It is worth noting that BAE Systems has consistently been among the ten largest companies in the sector by revenue in the first three decades after the end of the Cold War. Another major British defence company, QinetiQ, paid a mere 4.5% of its R&D budget (Kersley, 2023).

Thus, even though the British defence industry is “a vital national hub generating science, technology and skills within the national workforce” (Dorman; Uttley; Wilkinson, 2015), the hand of the British state is ever present and unwavering and plays a crucial role in sustaining the sector's global competitiveness. Lastly, it is necessary to highlight succinctly the British security sector. In the period analysed, Britain still possesses a “large and innovative domestic ‘security industry’”, able to address demands covering homeland security – a field dominated by “counterterrorism” services and products –, law enforcement, critical national infrastructure protection, cyber security, consultancy, and other services and products that saw their relevance expand in the post-Cold War years. The defence industry does not overshadow the security industry – more focused on military equipment and technology, primarily supplied to the Ministry of Defence and authorised foreign governments – especially because of its similar economic weight in the British economy. Both the defence and security industries directly create almost the same number of jobs while being significant contributors to British national security demands (Dorman; Uttley; Wilkinson, 2015).

3.4 The Commonwealth of Nations

The “Commonwealth of Nations” has its origins in the changes – or “evolution” as defined by its early members – of the British Empire, marked by the increasingly equal status of the Dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa vis-à-vis Great Britain. Rather than being a simple institutional creation, the “British Commonwealth of Nations” was recognised as an already existing structure part of the Empire when the 1926 Imperial Conference formally cited its existence as comprising members²⁵ formed “equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown”. Through the declaration, also known as the 1926 Balfour Declaration, the Commonwealth was formally part of British imperial politics (United Kingdom, 1926). Its formalisation occurred through the Statute of Westminster in 1931, which also increased the autonomy of, and significantly reduced the authority of, the Parliament in London to legislate over the Dominions (Darwin, 2011).

Initially, a mirror of a select club of self-governing Dominions and Britain to discuss imperial policy, the organisation adapted and evolved as decolonisation began to fragment the Empire (Srinivasan, 2005). In 1949, as India moved to become a republic and wished to maintain its association, the London Declaration removed the restrictions around the shared links through the British Head of State. As the organisation stated, 1949 marked the “beginning of the modern Commonwealth”, with eight equal members (Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka and the UK) “freely co-operating in pursuit of peace, liberty and progress” (Commonwealth, 2025). In the following decades, beyond a name change to reflect a more diverse and equal association – by renaming it simply the “Commonwealth of Nations” in 1949 (Srinivasan, 2005) – the organisation quickly expanded to address the concerns of its increasing number of members from former imperial possessions.

Throughout the Cold War, mainly between 1949 and 1990, the Commonwealth included forty-nine members with varied needs and sizes, most countries outside the traditional “North” or systemic centre. Onslow (2015) noted that the Commonwealth’s “heterogeneous membership included: NATO countries; ANZUS; the Non-Aligned Movement; the OAU; CARICOM; and the Organisation of East Caribbean States”. Additionally, its members established an organisational structure and bureaucracy, and engaged in a combined economic, technical,

²⁵However, the first imperial statutory mention of a “British Commonwealth of Nations” occurred in Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 (Pakenham, 1972).

scientific, and financial association, while championing the role of diplomacy. The grand themes that dominated Commonwealth forums during this period were pursuing racial justice – mainly in South Africa and Rhodesia – and “social justice through the promotion of development”, emphasising nation-building in newly independent members. Notably, these themes are regarded as demonstrating the Commonwealth as a forum that was influenced, but not defined, by the Cold War, and as an example of collaboration between the West and the South, rather than confrontation between West and East (Onslow, 2015).

Moreover, the protection and promotion of human rights gradually assumed a prominent role within the work of the Commonwealth, gaining strength after the 1971 Singapore Declaration – the result of the first Heads of Government Meeting – which set out the core principles and membership criteria of the organisation, reaffirmed and expanded by the 1991 Harare Declaration. These declarations also confirmed the Commonwealth’s commitment to good governance, the rule of law, and democracy (Bourne, 2010). The 1991 Harare Declaration was followed by the Millbrook Programme in 1995, in response to the Nigerian military dictatorship’s execution of political opposition leaders, just as the Commonwealth convened for a summit in Auckland. This action added pressure to ongoing criticism over Nigeria’s membership in an organisation that professed the Harare Declaration. It was seen as a diplomatic affront to the Commonwealth and to appeals by South Africa and Britain for clemency. The Millbrook Programme introduced the possibility of suspending members for breaching the Harare principles, with the authority entrusted to a new committee of Foreign Ministers, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). However, coups d’état became the main reason for suspension, rather than human rights violations. In the following decades, the Action Group would suspend members for violating the Harare Declaration and keep their status under review. Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia were among the first to be suspended (Idem).

These developments and membership rules changed the character of the Commonwealth, shaping the association beyond its historical British influence. Suspension also added a further dimension to the Commonwealth’s standing and prestige. At first glance, given that it is not an organisation with resources for economic aid nor one intended as a military alliance, losing full membership primarily results in the withdrawal of technical assistance and exclusion from political meetings and events. Nevertheless, as Bourne (2010) argued, suspension by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group was deeply unpopular with governments, which usually sought to return to full membership as quickly as possible. In other words, the effect of suspension extended beyond its immediate consequences for the targeted

state: “suspension was an affront to their status and became part of the evidence which could adversely affect their attraction to tourists and outside investors” (Bourne, 2010).

By the 2000s, the Ministerial Action Group’s main concern had been overseeing political rights and free elections within the Commonwealth. However, the Commonwealth’s efforts to ensure elections were free from political interference and inadequate conduct – such as in Nigeria in 2003 and 2007 – did not reach the same intensity as enforcing suspension following coups. In 2006, Fiji experienced a military coup and was suspended in September 2009 after refusing to call elections. Thus, Fiji’s suspension in 2009 exemplified the Action Group’s course of action in response to violations of political rights and undemocratic governance. On this issue, the Commonwealth clearly influenced the Pacific Islands Forum, which adopted a similarly hostile stance towards coups and suspended Fiji in May 2009. The Forum even created its own Ministerial Action Group in 2000. Notably, the Commonwealth’s policy of refusing membership to dictatorships also inspired the Organisation of African Unity in 1999 (Bourne, 2010).

Even before the Harare Declaration, particularly through developments during the Cold War, the Commonwealth developed a “distinct identity”, valued by the leaders of its member states from the then recently independent nations in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Furthermore, despite Britain’s *de facto* leadership, the association’s role and activities were considered non-aligned. This perception is shared by former heads of state, diplomats, and politicians once involved in Commonwealth affairs. Its promotion of nuclear disarmament and contribution to resolving the issues of Rhodesia and South Africa, while adopting a policy of non-alignment in Cold War disputes, served to reinforce the view of the organisation as prestigious and neutral, transcending its origins as a by-product of imperial transformation. Thus, during those decades and beyond, the Commonwealth of Nations embodied “‘soft/smart’ power”²⁶ (Onslow, 2015).

Despite its apparent utility for Britain as a forum to abridge the distance between itself and its former colonies, particularly in Africa and Asia, while distancing itself from the geopolitical competition between the primary great powers, the Commonwealth was often seen by successive British governments in the 1960s and early 1970s as a possible liability and diplomatic headache. Friction emerged gradually with the “new Commonwealth” establishing itself in 1965 with the formation of the Commonwealth Secretariat, in addition to the growing admission of members from the “Third World”, Rhodesia’s unilateral declaration of

²⁶ Soft Power in the British case is covered in the next section of this chapter.

independence in 1965, Britain's first application to join the European Economic Community in 1961, and the departure of apartheid South Africa in the same year. This point would further generate intra-Commonwealth tensions. The creation of a Secretariat, a central machinery for the organisation, was seen by the recently independent nations as the only way to "ensure for themselves a full share in the management of the association" and the best opportunity to influence the policies of all members, with shaping Britain's policies as the main objective, which was viewed unfavourably in London (Ashton, 2007).

The forum witnessed inflamed quarrels between Britain and peripheral states over the apartheid regime in the Union of South Africa (and South West Africa). Perceived British inaction over white minority rule in Rhodesia and its 1965 unilateral independence led to key African members repeatedly threatening to withdraw from the Commonwealth in the following years, with Nigeria and Tanzania as leading examples (Bourne, 2010). Moreover, the decreasing economic weight of the Commonwealth countries on the British economy and the challenges of maintaining and expanding Commonwealth trade preferences and the sterling area contributed to the disillusionment in London regarding the organisation (Ashton, 2007). These factors culminated in rows over Rhodesia and South Africa, particularly about the latter during the Thatcher years.

Hence, the British position on the Commonwealth at the height of the Cold War was complex and multilayered. Despite the benefit of offering Britain a respected connection to several countries with varied characteristics and geopolitical standings, scepticism and disappointment were frequent – possibly due to British government expectations leaning towards greater alignment with Britain's interests within the organisation – and an indication of the challenges in adequately exercising soft power. By the early 1970s, government officials in London were placing more value on bilateral relations with members rather than prioritising Commonwealth forums and multilateral engagement. Reservations over the Commonwealth's role for Britain grew to the extent that Cabinet ministers agreed that, in economic or political conflicts with Commonwealth members, only British interests would shape British policy (Ashton, 2007).

Although the question of Rhodesia reached its conclusion in 1980 with direct British and Commonwealth action, the Margaret Thatcher government (1979–1990) further strained the organisation over the apartheid South Africa crisis. The 1985 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Nassau revealed the divide, as Britain opposed the adoption of sanctions, prompting criticism from African members and even Canada and Australia. The 1986 meetings saw similar disagreements. Thatcher relented at the subsequent 1987 Commonwealth

Heads of Government Meeting in Vancouver but refused to join the observer committee on Southern Africa created at that meeting. She repeated her opposition at the 1989 Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, breaking lengthy negotiations on a possible accommodation over sanctions against the apartheid regime. In this context, the Prime Minister's preferred strategy was constructive engagement with South Africa to achieve a peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy. Regarding the Commonwealth, Thatcher remained unimpressed by the organisation, including its perceived "moralism" over South Africa (Onslow, 2013). In short, South Africa remained a stumbling block for Britain's interest in the Commonwealth during the Cold War.

Following the end of the Southern African question, the advent of the post-Cold War era, and the new Labour government ending sixteen years of Conservative rule in Britain, the Commonwealth gained renewed interest from London (McIntyre et al., 2007). In 1995, Mozambique became the first country with no constitutional or historical link to the British Empire to be admitted. It was granted membership due to its contribution to the Commonwealth's policies towards South Africa. Two years later, the Edinburgh Declaration stated that Mozambique was a unique case and that future applications would need to follow usual criteria (Velde-Ashworth, 2005). In this context, the Blair government announced a "Year of the Commonwealth", and the 1997 Edinburgh Heads of Government Meeting was innovative: it included the Queen addressing leaders for the first time, the first Business Forum (which originated the Business Council), and the first Commonwealth Youth Forum and Centre for civil society. Despite early enthusiasm, geopolitical events in the early 2000s shifted attention. In 2001, the 9/11 attacks led to the cancellation of the Business Forum – even as some delegates were arriving – and the postponement of the 17th Heads of Government Meeting in Australia (McIntyre et al., 2007), indicating that Britain's geopolitical priorities lay elsewhere.

Thus, the 2000s left the Commonwealth with unfinished aspirations after Labour's initial enthusiasm. This resulted in renewed pessimism about the organisation's future, with criticism over the lack of British interest and leadership, and apathy defining the perception of British leaders and the public. The Commonwealth's utility was also questioned, and its lack of visibility cited as a sign of decline (Srinivasan, 2005). These criticisms, however, lacked the perspective that the Commonwealth had experienced greater setbacks during the Cold War, and that its work remained attractive to its members and applicants. Many states, even in the 2000s and later, saw the Commonwealth as a valuable asset, gathering multiple actors with different interests and alignments, and as an organisation that countries still wished to join and had no reason to leave (McIntyre et al., 2007).

Interest in the Commonwealth never completely faded. Just as the organisation suffered from shifting priorities in London during the War on Terror, it soon returned to work and attracted new applicants. In 2005, at the 19th Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Valletta, it was agreed that membership norms should be reviewed, with results discussed at the next summit in 2007, indicating that increased membership was under consideration (Commonwealth of Nations, 2005). Membership criteria were made more flexible at the 2007 Kampala summit, effectively allowing countries with no historical links to the British Empire to join the organisation “in exceptional circumstances” and “considered on a case-by-case basis” (Commonwealth of Nations, 2007). The practical result of this flexibilisation was seen at the 2009 Heads of Government Meeting in Port of Spain, which admitted Rwanda as the 54th Commonwealth member and the second without historic links to Britain (Robbins, 2009).

Rwanda’s membership occurred amid controversy within the Commonwealth ranks over human rights violations. Nevertheless, geopolitical considerations overruled concerns, leading to Rwanda’s ascension. Strong support from neighbouring Uganda was related to the close personal association between the countries’ leaders, returning to the Ugandan Bush War (1980–1986). Meanwhile, events during the genocide had tarnished France’s image in Rwanda, and English-speaking elites became increasingly hostile to France (Bourne, 2010). Rwanda severed diplomatic relations with France over indictments of Rwandan officials by the French judiciary, which worsened after a report accused France of direct involvement in the genocide and material support to Hutu militias (Porter, 2008).

Britain was also eager for Rwanda’s membership: in one stroke, it could help Rwanda overcome the genocide while fostering democracy, strengthening relations with Uganda, and cementing Rwanda’s break with France. Despite Commonwealth missions indicating persistent issues – including restrictions on media, civil society, and freedom of association, contrary to Harare commitments – both major British parties supported the new membership. Rwanda’s case showed that geopolitics remained paramount to Britain’s Commonwealth policy. This became evident as Sri Lanka remained a member despite mounting allegations of severe violations (Bourne, 2010).

In the 2010s, the Commonwealth witnessed renewed British interest and increased institutionalisation. Adopting an official charter in 2012 (Commonwealth of Nations, 2013) outlined members’ values and commitments, reinforcing the organisation’s role as a democratic club promoting development, human rights, environmental protection, international peace and security, among other aims. The Charter also strengthened the Commonwealth’s stance against rights abuses, empowering the Ministerial Action Group. Notably, the Maldives left the

organisation in 2016, anticipating suspension due to violations, and was readmitted in 2020 after reforms (McBride, 2020). As the 2010s progressed, Britain's attention to the Commonwealth increased amid growing Euroscepticism. Some Brexit supporters viewed the Commonwealth as a potential – even if partial – substitute for the EU (McBride, 2020; Plummer, 2015). Leaders like Boris Johnson claimed that Britain had betrayed Commonwealth nations by joining the EU in 1973. Supporting closer ties, the Commonwealth's own 2015 Trade Review highlighted the “Commonwealth effect”: partners trade 20% more and generate 10% more FDI than otherwise, with bilateral trade costs 19% lower on average (Plummer, 2015).

Following Brexit, however, negotiations with the EU dominated British political attention under Theresa May (2016–2019), Boris Johnson (2019–2022), and Rishi Sunak (2022–2024). Critics argued that Britain neglected Commonwealth ties – despite using them as a Brexit argument – and African relations more broadly. Cuts to international aid and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's merger with the Department for International Development reinforced perceptions of incoherence. The Monarchy stepped in to uphold symbolic ties. Yet the Commonwealth persisted. In June 2022, Gabon and Togo, both former French colonies, joined as the 55th and 56th members, the first since Rwanda (Commonwealth of Nations, 2022). These admissions came amid declining French influence in Sub-Saharan Africa and rising anti-French sentiment. Seeking new partners, Togolese officials cited their aim to forge links with the “Anglophone world”, expand trade and diplomacy, and attract investment. In 2024 alone, trade between Togo and Britain rose 94%, and ministers highlighted benefits such as digital and linguistic training, vocational education, and governance cooperation (Eklo; Mivedor, 2025). Meanwhile, Gabon was suspended in 2023 after a military coup and readmitted in 2025 following general elections (Commonwealth of Nations, 2025).

Interest in the Commonwealth also returned in a long-standing member. After its Prime Minister missed the 2024 Ministerial Meeting in Samoa, Canada sought to revive Commonwealth-UK ties amid the second Trump administration, even as Britain broke off trade talks with Canada and Canada resisted Britain's CPTPP membership. Canada also pursued closer ties with Australia and New Zealand (Tasker, 2025), all “Old Commonwealth” members. This suggests that the organisation retains utility – even if secondary – as a diplomatic fallback.

The decade after the 2016 Brexit vote, Britain pursued bilateral trade agreements with Commonwealth partners as part of its “independent trade policy”. EU membership had contributed to the already declining share of British exports to Commonwealth markets—from 19% in 1970 to 9% in 2019—while the EU's share rose from 22% to 46% (Brown, 2021). Britain again chose bilateralism to pursue its objectives. While the Commonwealth was not

prioritised, it remained valued for its long-standing networks (Elliot, 2018). Thus, the Commonwealth holds a unique place in British foreign policy—important, but constrained by other priorities. Nonetheless, it contributes to British soft power. It functions as “an international network that cuts across the multi-polarity that risks dividing the world”, offering dialogue among countries with diverse geopolitical and economic standings, on climate change, institutional reform (Westcott, 2024), rule of law, human rights (Bourne, 2010), sustainable development (United Kingdom, 2021a), and non-alignment (Onslow, 2015).

In conclusion, Britain may have gradually adopted a less instrumental approach to the Commonwealth, recognising that attempts to dominate it have had diminishing returns. Its imperial legacy also tempers any push to assert leadership (McIntyre et al., 2007). As noted, the Commonwealth played a role in negotiations over Rhodesia and South Africa, but also supported Britain in the Falklands War, the Nigerian Civil War, the independence of Bangladesh and Mozambique, the 1983 Grenada crisis, and the end of Amin’s rule in Uganda (Onslow, 2015). In the post-Cold War era, the UK enjoyed a Commonwealth that remained attractive to new applicants and was relevant to most members. It reinforces bilateral ties, especially with realms sharing the same monarch, and offers a flexible platform for Global South countries seeking alternatives to traditional partners.

In short, the Commonwealth is “not the ‘vertebrate with teeth’ originally envisaged, neither was it ‘a jellyfish without a sting’”, but rather “a subsidiary diplomatic global player which skilfully exploited its filigree of formal and informal networks” (Onslow, 2015). The Commonwealth’s core features reflect Britain’s calculations and limits. Steering the organisation away from hard power enabled bilateral engagement, while broader issues could be addressed through the association, though not without political and diplomatic headaches. For instance, the 2024 Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa saw Britain facing growing calls for slavery reparations (Hendriks, 2024). Ultimately, Britain appears to delegate liberal values and norms to the Commonwealth while engaging strategically elsewhere to avoid scrutiny and division within the diverse organisation.

3.5 Soft Power

Before advancing into the British position when considering Soft Power, it is necessary to explore the concept itself briefly. Joseph Nye popularised the term “Soft Power” in the late 1980s and early 1990s, mainly through his work on the changing nature of American power. According to Nye, “when one country gets other countries to want what it wants might be called

co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants” (Nye, 1990). Nye’s Soft Power concept was further developed in the following years, with a simple definition being “(...) soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them.” (Nye, 2009). Although the author remains the leading scholar on the issue, and although many arguments are juxtaposed against this background, the concept of Soft Power was not invented by him. Nye’s Soft Power can be seen as a framing of long-standing practices, adapted to the context of the dominant contemporary view of world politics (Bakalov, 2019).

The concept has received definitions with slight adjustments since its modern coinage. However, Nye’s central delineation of Soft Power includes the idea of a power capable of achieving its goals through attraction: “This power tends to arise from such resources as cultural and ideological attraction as well as rules and institutions of international regimes.” (Nye, 1990a). Despite not rejecting realism (Nye, 2021), possessing military prowess and the capacity to order others to do what the actor desires does not necessarily make an actor a “powerful player” in world politics. Thus, a powerful actor in the international system needs Soft Power to facilitate the attraction of others to act in line with its preferences (Nye, 1990a). Only sticks and carrots are not enough. Sometimes, a magnetic pull is necessary for optimal results (Nye, 2021).

This ability to attract “tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions” (Nye, 1990a). As Bakalov (2019) argues, conceptually, Nye separates power resources from the exercise of power, establishing “a close, yet indeterminate (‘tends to be associated’)” link between “intangible resources and soft power” on the one hand, and “tangible resources and hard power (...) on the other”. In part, Bakalov (2019) states that this occurs because if resources are considered as a variable of Soft Power, “the possibility of capturing certain differences in behaviour (e.g., between coercion and persuasion) is impeded”. However, Nye’s later definitions of Soft Power imply connections with tangible resources, for “the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes” (Nye, 2011), indicates that even if intangible resources remain the base of Soft Power, at least part of this intangibility must be supported by tangible means. Within this context, Bakalov (2019) notes that in his work *The Future of Power*, Nye leaves unresolved the issue of the relationship between resources and the distinction between hard and soft power. This issue is further complicated by Nye’s suggestion that “many types of resources can contribute to soft power” (Bakalov, 2019; Nye, 2011). In line with this, Nye (2021) also does not reject the idea of military power contributing to Soft Power.

Nye (2009; 2011; 2021) frames the concept of power in relational terms. In other words, power lies in the interaction between actors. The power of a country is not a constant across all relationships but specific to each individual relationship (Bakalov, 2019). Moreover, this implies that Soft Power is better suited for long-term objectives, as opposed to hard power, and tends to benefit broader rather than narrower goals. In Nye's words, when a country attempts to promote "general value objectives, such as promotion of democracy, human rights, and freedom, it is often the case that soft power turns out to be superior to hard power" (Nye, 2011). Lastly, Soft Power is not, to the same extent, an almost exclusive power exercised by governments. Civil society and the state share stakes in Soft Power, and much of what might constitute this power is separate from the governments that benefit – or not – from its attraction capabilities (Nye, 2009). Thus, Soft Power can only partially respond to a country's diplomatic agenda (Bakalov, 2019; Nye, 2009).

In the case of the United Kingdom, in the 2020s, there have been arguments indicating that Soft Power has received exceptional attention from the British governing class and is ever-present in foreign policy discourse (Ellwood, 2023; Rawnsley, 2018). The 2015 and 2021 Defence Reviews also focus on the concept and demonstrate that the Government is aware of Britain's privileged position as one of the leading countries in any measurement of Soft Power (United Kingdom, 2015; 2021). While there is a consensus that the British Government recognises the country as a significant source of Soft Power – equalled by few Great Powers and outclassed by even fewer – the support provided by the Government is often subject to criticism. This has led to several arguments in favour of renewed attention to the concept and to the global promotion of British Soft Power (Beadle; Hill, 2014; UK Soft Power Group, 2023). Furthermore, the debate is permeated by the traditional reliance on hard power by successive British Governments to expand and sustain influence overseas, despite the outcomes of such efforts. As Clarke (2021) puts it, "Ministers like to talk about Britain's soft power, but when it comes to policy, they naturally gravitate towards the harder end of the spectrum." This argument gains force when considering that Soft Power is not entirely generated or controlled by the Government and may only partially support its foreign policies.

Nevertheless, despite its limitations and criticism, Britain is one of the main sources of Soft Power worldwide. The "assets" supporting British Soft Power include its scientific and technological base, sporting institutions, culture with globalised icons (from the monarchy to television), language, education and national health system, participation in international institutions dealing with economic aid and other issues, and the British ability to create regulations and governance models. Many of these assets and others are constantly "exported"

and consumed globally. Meanwhile, competition mainly comes from a rising China, which, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, invested heavily in expanding its own Soft Power. Strategic Western partners, including Germany and France, also challenge Britain's position as a leading Soft Power nation. Britain's exit from the European Union has likely had adverse effects, weakening British Soft Power globally, particularly within Europe. The "Global Britain" narrative, created by Theresa May's Government (2016–2019), which shaped British foreign policy in the aftermath of Brexit, was an attempt to reframe the country's orientation with a global focus, circumventing the possible – though difficult to measure – loss of attraction in relation to Europe (UK Soft Power Group, 2023).

Attempts to rank nations based on their Soft Power consistently place Britain among the top three (Allison, 2023; McClory, 2016; United Kingdom, 2021) or classify it as a "superpower" (Ellwood, 2023). The leading positions are typically contested by the United States, France, or Germany, although China's rise is also notable. Demonstrating strong self-confidence on this matter, the British Government, in its 2021 Integrated Defence Review, stated that Britain was a "soft power superpower" with a privileged but not guaranteed position. Thus, London acknowledged that even though much of Soft Power lies outside direct governmental control, action was necessary to protect and expand the sources of this influence (United Kingdom, 2021). In accordance, the Government pledged to increase investment in the creative industries, in cultural and sporting excellence, and to raise Research and Development (R&D) spending after years of contraction (Clarke, 2021; United Kingdom, 2021). Despite the Government's confidence in Britain's Soft Power status, the 2021 Review explored the topic only briefly, with geopolitics, geoeconomics, and science and technology dominating the agenda (Ellwood, 2023).

Within this context, the British Government's "management" of Soft Power has been subject to criticism, with commentators arguing that all the rhetoric in London is not matched by the necessary policies to maintain Britain's leading position. For example, in 2013, Britain committed to spending 0.7% of its Gross National Income (GNI) on Official Development Assistance (ODA), becoming the first G7 country to achieve the target set by the United Nations General Assembly in 1970 (Gautam, 2021?; United Kingdom, 2023a). However, in 2020, amid a renewed emphasis on defence spending and an economic downturn due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government announced a temporary reduction in ODA to 0.5% of GNI (United Kingdom, 2023a). In absolute terms, Britain slipped from being the third to the fourth-largest international aid donor. While the defence budget increased, the Government signalled that it had no plans to restore the ODA commitment to 0.7% of GNI before the late 2020s (Brien; Loft,

2022). The main recipients of British aid were countries in Africa and Asia. In 2022, Europe overtook the Americas as the third-largest aid destination, largely due to British support for Ukraine (United Kingdom, 2023a).

Additionally, it is argued that Britain's ministerial approach to Soft Power is marked by "short-termism" (Ellwood, 2023) and "the absence of a shared strategic vision" (UK Soft Power Group, 2023). These characteristics have hindered the Government's efforts to coordinate Soft Power as a national asset (Ellwood, 2023). The situation is further complicated by the very nature of Soft Power, which is not entirely under governmental control. As Beadle and Hill (2014) noted, while London "has a range of significant soft power assets, its ability to mobilise them on a day-to-day basis is limited". This limitation may lead ministers to rely more heavily on hard power. However, this is not a uniquely British problem, as all states face varying challenges in employing Soft Power as a tool of government. As such, Soft Power raises fundamental questions of agency for it cannot be controlled, may rebound if attempts to do so are made, and it exacerbates structural advantages that support long-term influence but are difficult to convert into policy. Beadle and Hill (2014) state that "soft power is not only difficult to convert into concrete action, but it can also be damaged if government interferes with its sources too much". Paradoxically, "it [Soft Power] can all too easily backfire if a state fails to take into account the impact of its other, more assertive, external policies when hoping to benefit from the 'power of attraction'" (Idem).

Therefore, a delicate balance between intervention and support is required for the long-term success of a nation's Soft Power. Despite intensifying great-power competition in the early decades of the twenty-first century, Soft Power retains the potential to remain a vital factor in the international order, a factor that would only be truly diminished in the event of major global conflict (Beadle; Hill, 2014). Lastly, Britain's broad participation in international organisations – beyond security alliances – including an expanding Commonwealth of Nations and its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (Beadle; Hill, 2014; McClory, 2016), remains part of what Gamble (1999) once described as some of the remaining "props to British grandeur" when reflecting on the country's relative decline. Although diminished, Britain continues to be one of the leading sources of Soft Power among Primary and Secondary Great Powers. Nevertheless, difficulties in using it effectively as a tool of foreign policy may limit its short-term returns, prompting policies that ultimately weaken its long-term appeal.

4. THE BRITISH STRATEGIC RELATIONS WITH OTHER POWERS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC (1991–2023)

Having explored the characteristics that have sustained the United Kingdom as a Secondary Great Power in the first three decades since 1991, this section analyses the characteristics of British strategic relations with other countries in a strategically relevant region that garners the attention of all Great Powers – Primary or Secondary – in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Aiming to understand bilateral dynamics between Britain and relevant partners with different relative standings, the selected Powers are the United States, Japan, and Australia. This sample of countries incorporates two essential factors for analysing British power. Firstly, it provides a selection that includes a range of Britain's key regional partners. Secondly, the classification and position of the three countries offer cases through which to analyse how Britain, as a Secondary Great Power, interacts with a Primary Great Power (the United States), an peer Secondary Great Power (Japan), and a Middle Power (Australia). Hence, it will be possible to observe that the UK's influence shifts from that of a junior partner when dealing with the United States, to an equal partner with Japan, and a senior partner when engaging with Australia. These bilateral explorations reinforce the argument that the UK's position is too significant to be considered a Middle Power, while not as dominant as that of a Primary Great Power. They also illustrate the general standing of the British diplomatic network with key regional actors in the Indo-Pacific.

The Anglo-American “special relationship” is global (Renwick, 2017), and its extension to the Indo-Pacific positions the United States as Britain's leading ally in the region. Consequently, the close strategic ties between Washington and London are crucial to comprehending the British position in the Indo-Pacific. The Anglo-Japanese bilateral relationship has seen increased interest from both parties, particularly since the 2010s. Moreover, Brexit reinforced Britain's reorientation towards regions beyond the Euro-Atlantic axis, leading to greater strategic and economic engagement with Japan. The “Tokyo Consensus” (Taniguchi, 2017), which frames Brexit as a potential gain for Japan's regional security, plays a role on the Japanese side. Lastly, the Anglo-Australian relationship evokes echoes of Britain's past as an imperial world power and as a long-standing partner to Australia, despite the centrality of the United States. Similarly to Anglo-Japanese relations, the case of British engagement with Australia experienced renewed momentum in the decades following the end of the Cold War, culminating in defence agreements and the 2021 AUKUS security initiative.

Therefore, analysing the strategic bilateral relationships of the United Kingdom with three different types of Indo-Pacific Powers – regarded in London as partners or allies – enables a clearer understanding of Britain’s relative position in the region. The first bilateral relationship examined here is with the United States. The Anglo-American “special relationship” in the Indo-Pacific features several core themes, including long-standing agreements that permit American use of British Overseas Territories in the region, the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing agreement, the coordination of policies towards China, and the AUKUS partnership. Anglo-Japanese relations are analysed next. The main themes include enhanced defence cooperation since the 2010s, Japan’s role in Britain’s ambitions to re-establish itself as the leading European Power in the region, and the Japanese interest in a renewed British presence as a counterbalance to China and to mitigate the overwhelming dominance of the United States in Japan’s defence policy.

Lastly, regarding Anglo-Australian bilateral relations, the key issues include Britain’s re-emergence from the 2010s onwards as one of Australia’s principal strategic partners following nearly three decades of relative disengagement, particularly after Britain’s withdrawal from East of Suez in 1971. The Five Power Defence Arrangements, the 2013 Defence Agreement, the Anglo-Australian dimension of AUKUS, and the Commonwealth will be considered in this section. Thus, Britain’s position in the Indo-Pacific is contextualised through its relationships with three distinct Powers – Primary, Secondary, and Middle – illustrating that British preponderance increases as the scale of power tilts in its favour: from a relatively junior partner of the United States to a senior partner in relation to Australia. In the next chapter, this analysis will be expanded to include Britain’s military presence in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on countries – and one territory that might be handed over to Mauritius – where the UK’s relative position is even stronger than in its relationship with a Middle Power such as Australia. This will also highlight the preference of successive British Governments for engagement with smaller or minor actors in the region.

4.1 Anglo-American relations

Despite the “special relationship” between the UK and the United States being characterised by its deep level of cooperation in strategic and foreign policy, its long history is more complex than the label coined by Winston Churchill in the 1940s might suggest. Over the following eight decades, the Anglo-American relationship was marked by recurring moments of strain. The MacMahon Act, the Suez Crisis, Britain’s refusal to partake in American military

endeavours in Vietnam, and the 1983 American invasion of Grenada – a Commonwealth member – are some highlights of the tensions and disagreements within the relationship. Moreover, since 1945, the dynamics of the special relationship have changed considerably. Britain declined from a Primary Great Power to a Secondary Great Power, while the United States consolidated its hegemony and experienced the so-called “unipolar moment” in the 1990s, facing the prospect of a new rival in China only in the early decades of the twenty-first century. That change means the special relationship has become increasingly American-led and “special” mainly for the British (Renwick, 2017), even if the UK remains a crucial ally within American strategic planning in the post-Cold War era.

Although the Anglo-American bilateral relationship entered a path of rapprochement in the late nineteenth century, it was the cooperation between the countries during the Second World War that played a central role in establishing the *modus operandi* of the “special relationship” that persevered with frequent obstacles throughout the Cold War (Burk, 2018; Renwick, 2017). The uniqueness of the US-UK relationship lies in the degree of cooperation and exchange of critical information on strategic matters not seen in any other bilateral relationship between Primary or Secondary Great Powers. The prevailing view within the British Government and political elites is that the special relationship benefits both countries: “The UK benefits from US resources and economies of scale; the US from British niche capabilities, the UK’s global reach and its willingness to defend its values” (United Kingdom, 2023c). Moreover, maintaining close ties with Washington is seen in London as a way of influencing the policies of the American behemoth (Renwick, 2017). Similarly, the official stance of successive American administrations remains aligned with that of their British counterparts. In 2022, the Department of State highlighted Britain’s position by stating, “The United States has no closer Ally than the United Kingdom” (United States, 2022). Furthermore, echoing UK statements, the Department of State declared that a robust Anglo-American relationship “reflects our common democratic ideals and values, which are reinforced through cooperation on political, security, and economic issues.” (Idem).

Thus, the official discourse on the “special relationship” presents a stable and frictionless partnership with strong commitment from both parties. Nevertheless, frictions are relatively frequent. Criticism is not uncommon in either London or Washington. As Britain declined, maintaining the “special relationship” became increasingly more important to the British than to the Americans (Renwick, 2017). Despite this, the closeness of Anglo-American relations has been a pillar of British defence policy from the onset of the Cold War through to the early twenty-first century (Dockrill, 1991; Self, 2010). The end of American diplomatic

“isolation” in the 1940s and its subsequent commitment to international cooperation in the post-war era are regarded as achievements of British diplomacy (Webley, 1989). For Britain, the central objective was ensuring that the United States assumed a leading role in the emerging world order. With Britain’s relative position severely weakened by the two World Wars, a like-minded partner would be essential for maintaining British influence in shaping the post-war system.

Within this context, in 1946, British diplomat Thomas Brimelow argued that “The one quality which most disquiets the Soviet government is the ability which they attribute to us to get others to do our fighting for us (...)” (Coker, 1992). Hence, the argument that the special relationship is the greatest example of Britain’s “ability to collect friends” left an impression within Soviet diplomacy of Britain as the most politically astute of its former allies – even if no longer the strongest. Moreover, for many British decision-makers and the Foreign Office, the special relationship became part of the framework that enabled the country’s “graceful retreat” from its top position in global power. In line with this view, attaching the United States to Britain and Western Europe – and vice versa – became one of the Foreign Office’s main objectives after 1945 (Coker, 1992).

Accordingly, in 1946, the British and American governments formalised the special relationship by signing what became one of its key pillars: the United Kingdom–United States of America Agreement (commonly known as the “UKUSA Agreement”). Under this framework, both parties would continue the wartime cooperation on signals intelligence (SIGINT). Built upon the 1943 UK-US Communication Intelligence Agreement, and after initial American hesitation, the agreement was extended to Canada in the late 1940s and to Australia and New Zealand in 1956 (Norton-Taylor, 2010), forming the so-called “Five Eyes”, which functions globally as a mechanism for intelligence collection and sharing among its members. Its existence remained secret, and the Five Eyes – as well as the UKUSA Agreement before 1956 – went officially unacknowledged until 2005, when the foundational agreement was first released to the public five years later (White, 2010). With the publication of the 1946 UKUSA Agreement and its subsequent amendments in the 1950s, it became possible to identify the initial areas of cooperation or “products” exchanged among members. These include: (1) “collection of traffic”; (2) “acquisition of communications documents and equipment”; (3) “traffic analysis”; (4) “cryptanalysis”; (5) “decryption and translation”; and (6) “acquisition of information regarding communications organisations, procedures, practices and equipment” (United Kingdom, 1956). The scope of these exchanges expanded significantly in the subsequent decades (Cox, 2012).

Although it initially focused on signals intelligence, the Five Eyes evolved into a broad intelligence-sharing arrangement encompassing SIGINT, military intelligence, security intelligence, geospatial intelligence, and human intelligence. Reflecting the depth of cooperation, each member operates through at least four principal agencies under the Five Eyes framework. In the United States, these include the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), and the National Security Agency (NSA). The UK contributes via the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), Defence Intelligence (DI), the Security Service (also known as MI5), and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6). Australia, Canada, and New Zealand also contribute their primary agencies in the areas of military, signals, human, and security intelligence – including the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (Cox, 2012).

Beyond that, according to retired Brigadier-General James S. Cox (2012) of the Canadian Forces, each Five Eyes member assumes a lead role in collecting and processing intelligence in specific global regions. In this division of labour: Australia covers South and East Asia; New Zealand, Southeast Asia and the South Pacific; Canada, Latin America, the North Pacific, and interior regions of Russia and China. The UK focuses on Europe and Western Russia, while the United States oversees Africa, the Middle East, China, Russia, and the Caribbean. However, leaked NSA documents suggest that this division is neither strict nor universally applied. For instance, data gathered by Australian listening posts across the Asia-Pacific – not only South and East Asia – were reportedly shared with the United States (Farrell, 2013). Third-party partners of the Five Eyes include NATO members, Singapore, and South Korea, expanding the network's reach (Cox, 2012). Nevertheless, intelligence sharing outside the core Five Eyes is not automatic, even associated partners are not exempt from surveillance (Poitras; Rosenbach; Stark, 2013). The issue of whether the Five Eyes members spy on one another is not addressed in the UKUSA Agreement, and any restrictions depend on additional arrangements or assurances (Cox, 2012; Farrell, 2013).

Therefore, through the Five Eyes, its members benefit directly from a pooling of resources, primarily from the United States and, to a lesser extent, from Britain. The renewal of wartime intelligence cooperation with the United States was a significant success of British diplomacy. While it enabled Britain to access the growing intelligence-gathering capabilities of the United States, it also contributed to cementing the Anglo-American relationship as “special”. The inclusion of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand helped Britain to establish additional links with its former Dominions beyond the Commonwealth of Nations, while

demonstrating that the old country could still play a role in their shared security concerns. For the United States, the Five Eyes functions as a key tool for binding important partners into its intelligence and security networks, ultimately contributing to the maintenance of a global status quo in which the United States remains the hegemonic actor. These preliminary conclusions offer a glimpse into the broader nature of the special relationship. While Britain benefits from it, the United States remains the senior partner, largely due to the shared objective of preserving the status quo – one that places Britain as a Secondary Great Power, but ensures the United States retains its position as the world’s leading Primary Great Power.

The 1958 UK–US Mutual Defence Agreement is another cornerstone of the special relationship. Originating from collaboration on developing nuclear propulsion for submarines and their ballistic strike systems, the Agreement laid the foundation for further cooperation throughout the Cold War. However, the path leading to the 1958 Agreement demonstrated the challenges faced by a secondary actor in dealing with a Primary Power. In 1946, the United States terminated nuclear cooperation due to the passage of the Energy Act of 1946 (also known as the “McMahon Act”). Having mastered the technology to produce atomic weapons, the American legislative and executive branches sought to preserve the nation’s monopoly. Disregarding extensive wartime cooperation with Britain and Canada – which had merged their research into the American programme during the Second World War – the United States passed legislation blocking further exchanges, effectively denying Britain access to years of joint research (Ball, 1995). Although the secret 1944 Hyde Park Aide-Mémoire between the two countries had established that wartime cooperation would continue after hostilities ended, it was not binding on the incoming Truman administration (Paul, 2000). Despite the British belief that the atomic bomb was a joint achievement (Goldberg, 1964), the United States showed no intention of elevating Britain to the nuclear club.

The Labour Government in London under Prime Minister Clement Attlee (1945–1951) informed its American counterpart that Britain would pursue atomic weapons independently despite the McMahon Act. In January 1947, the British Cabinet resumed its atomic programme (Lee, 2022). The rationale behind the decision rested on three main motivations. First, national security was paramount. Without nuclear weapons, Britain would remain vulnerable to postwar threats. The Attlee Government did not trust that the United States would offer unconditional assistance in the event of Soviet aggression. Second, the Government believed that mastering nuclear technology and acquiring such weapons was essential for preserving Britain’s status and prestige as a Great Power (Hironaka, 2017; Lee, 2022; Reynolds, 1990). Within this context, Attlee stated, “We ought not to give the Americans the impression that we cannot get

on without them; for we can (. . .) and, if necessary, will do so” (apud Bennett, 2022), signalling Britain’s determination not to appear dependent on the United States for international status and security. Third, as a nuclear power, Britain would be in a better position to negotiate the restoration of high-level nuclear cooperation with Washington (Lee, 2022).

The renewed programme resulted in Britain detonating its first atomic weapon on 3 October 1952 in the Monte Bello Islands, Western Australia, becoming the third country to join the nuclear club after the United States and the Soviet Union (Goldberg, 1964). Nevertheless, in terms of Britain’s short-term aim of restoring cooperation with Washington, the success of its atomic test was overshadowed by the American detonation of a thermonuclear weapon in November 1952. Britain eventually succeeded in conducting its own thermonuclear tests five years later, in late 1957, which continued into the following year. To dispel any doubt regarding British mastery of both fission and fusion technologies, London invited American observers to witness the 1957–1958 thermonuclear tests. Ultimately, following the Soviet launch of Sputnik 1, which demonstrated Moscow’s technological advancements, the United States agreed to resume high-level nuclear cooperation with Britain through the 1958 UK–US Mutual Defence Agreement (Baylis, 2009; Younger, 2009). The Agreement became a powerful symbol of the special relationship, due to the unique comprehensiveness of its provisions regarding the exchange of classified information aimed at enhancing the “atomic weapon design, development, and fabrication capability” of both countries (United Kingdom, 1958).

Lastly, the 1958 Agreement covered, among other matters, Britain’s acquisition of an American nuclear submarine propulsion plant and enriched uranium to fuel it for ten years (Idem). It also enabled the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement – and later, the Trident system in 1980 – which included the sale of the Polaris nuclear-armed submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), as well as fire control systems and launch tubes. Britain, for its part, would manufacture the submarines and nuclear warheads. The United States did not possess a veto over the use of British nuclear weapons launched via Polaris. However, British leaders were not entirely comfortable relying on American goodwill to approve such strategic sales, even with the inclusion of technical know-how. This concern for sovereignty contributed to Britain secretly undertaking independent upgrade projects in the 1970s, including the Chevaline Programme. Nonetheless, this did not prevent Britain from acquiring Polaris’s replacement, the Trident system, from the United States in 1980 (Priest, 2005).

Britain showed its peers that it would remain relevant in the nuclear age through its nuclear programme. However, the desire and efforts to resume cooperation with its American counterparts also indicate a British recognition that the costs of maintaining its status as a

nuclear power would be significantly reduced through collaboration with the United States. The result was a reliance on the United States to supply the missiles for British warheads, along with American influence over Britain's nuclear programme. Within this context, the Government in London operated on the basis of balancing the necessity of an "independent" nuclear deterrent with an "interdependent" one (Priest, 2005), while simultaneously benefiting from agreements with Washington.

The US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement and its ramifications exemplify Britain's position as a Secondary Great Power capable of extracting favourable terms from a Primary Great Power. Nevertheless, domestic reverberations can be observed in Britain through attempts to minimise American influence over its nuclear policy while ensuring that the "special relationship" remained sufficiently beneficial to justify its costs. Decades later, the 1958 Agreement would serve as the foundation for the creation, in 2021, of the AUKUS tripartite security initiative – involving Australia, Britain, and the United States – which resulted in the Anglo-American agreement to elevate Australia to the status of an operator of nuclear-powered submarines (Gallardo; Prince, 2023).

Beyond the two foundational agreements of the special relationship, Britain and the United States are linked through a myriad of arrangements that bind both countries globally. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) remains the principal assurance that Britain and other members have of American commitment to their national integrity and security. However, exclusivity is a hallmark of the special relationship, and British cooperation with Washington through NATO is not sufficiently unique (Renwick, 2017). Therefore, a network of secondary agreements or informal "understandings" ties both countries together on a global scale. In the Indo-Pacific, the most prominent expression of the special relationship is increasingly represented by AUKUS, with Australia acting as a gateway to Anglo-American ambitions of strengthening their regional influence while enhancing Australia's military capabilities (Rogers, 2022).

As the new face of the Anglo-American special relationship in the Indo-Pacific, the ambitions underpinning AUKUS go beyond elevating Australia to the status of a nuclear-powered submarine operator. AUKUS is structured around two key pillars. The first pillar – and the partnership's centrepiece – is the aforementioned support for Australia's acquisition of conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs). The second pillar consists of the joint development of "advanced military capabilities to promote security in the Indo-Pacific" (United Kingdom, 2023d). According to the British Government, the second pillar encompasses eight "advanced capabilities": (1) undersea capabilities; (2) information sharing; (3) quantum

technologies; (4) artificial intelligence and autonomy; (5) advanced cyber; (6) hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities; (7) electronic warfare; and (8) innovation. Moreover, the AUKUS nations announced a new “Submarine Rotational Force (West)” (SRF-West), which provides for rotational visits by one British and up to four American SSNs to Australia. The rotation is expected to be fully operational by 2027. Thus, beyond developing Australian SSNs derived from Anglo-American technology, AUKUS also aims to build reliable supply chains and industrial capacity, while functioning as a forum through which members share sensitive intelligence and technological developments (United Kingdom, 2023d).

Lastly, AUKUS offers a glimpse into the dynamics between the United States and the UK, and between the UK and Australia, revealing the underlying power asymmetries within the partnership. For instance, the British position benefits significantly from the first pillar due to the advanced state of Britain’s defence industry and the extent of its involvement in the submarine acquisition, including securing the rights to design the SSN-AUKUS, rather than fully ceding this role to the American military-industrial complex. Nevertheless, the United States’ share remains evident through the incorporation of American technologies into the original British design (United States, 2023). Similarly, under the second pillar, Britain benefits from an additional layer of strategic technological exchange with the United States, supporting the development of modern defence capabilities and contributing to reduced research and industrial costs. At the same time, reflecting Britain’s status as a Secondary Great Power, the exchanges are not entirely one-sided. Britain is expected to share its technologies with both the United States and Australia, while primarily receiving technological inputs from the Americans.

In other words, for Britain, as a Secondary Great Power, the second pillar – and AUKUS as a whole – functions as an “access and share” gateway: primarily accessing American technologies, benefiting its defence industry, and exerting influence over Australia’s defence policy. For the United States, a Primary Great Power, the same gateway leans heavily towards the sharing side, drawing primarily on British technologies while enhancing its influence over both British and Australian defence policy. Lastly, for Australia, a Middle Power, the gateway is situated on the receiving end, acquiring modern military equipment, though with a potential handicap in terms of incomplete technological sovereignty, as illustrated by the SSN programme, in which Australian personnel are expected to “conduct intermediate-level maintenance on nuclear-powered submarines” (United Kingdom, 2023e). In exchange for enhanced military capabilities and strategic assurances from the United States and Britain, Australia adopts a strategic posture increasingly aligned with Anglo-American priorities and interests.

Despite the relevance of AUKUS, the Anglo-American relationship in the region can also be encapsulated by their long-standing 1966 agreement on basing rights for the American military in the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), located on the island of Diego Garcia.²⁷ A series of bilateral arrangements govern this centrepiece of the American military presence in the Indian Ocean. In short, Britain purchased the archipelago from the then self-governing colony of Mauritius. London created the BIOT in 1965, amid ongoing discussions with Washington over the establishment of a military base on the newly formed overseas possession (Sand, 2009). The 1966 Agreement paved the way for gradual but sustained increases in military infrastructure, from an initial British authorisation in 1972 for the construction of a “limited naval communications facility”, to a third similar decision in 1973, and ultimately to the establishment of a US Navy Support Facility which, when completed in 1986, “included a large aircraft runway and berthing facilities for ships” (United Kingdom, 2014b).

By the mid-2010s, Diego Garcia was home to 16 separate military commands and capable of berthing large vessels, including aircraft carriers. Although Britain retained the right of access to the military infrastructure, British personnel on the base amounted to no more than 80, led by a Royal Navy commander (Meijer, 2022; United Kingdom, 2014b). Developments between 2024 and 2025 meant that Britain would transfer the sovereignty of the territory to Mauritius in exchange for continued control and administrative rights over Diego Garcia for 99 years, with possible extensions (Loft, 2025). More broadly, beyond the strategic relevance of the arrangements over the BIOT, a key feature of the 1966 Agreement is the British Government’s willingness to demonstrate the UK’s usefulness to the United States. This pattern is discernible in the issue of basing rights. The BIOT is only one such arrangement, with Ascension Island in the South Atlantic as another example (Tossini, 2021), while the American use of British military bases in Cyprus (Kennard, 2023) illustrates the *modus operandi* of the special relationship beyond specific formal agreements. Overall, one of the advantages the United States derives from its close relationship with Britain is its extended global reach, “facilitated by its overseas bases” (United Kingdom, 2023f).

Lastly, in June 2021, the UK and the United States signed a “New Atlantic Charter”, eighty years after British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and American President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued the original Charter. The new declaration follows the essence established in 1941, including the defence of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity (United

²⁷The British Indian Ocean Territory, also known as the Chagos Archipelago, and the Anglo-American military presence on Diego Garcia is explored in the next chapter that covers the British military and territorial presence in the Indo-Pacific in the first three decades of the post-Cold War period.

Kingdom, 2021c). Although labelled the New Atlantic Charter, the declaration can be seen as reinforcing the bilateral relationship between the two countries, while seeking to uphold an American-led, rules-based international order; one that benefits Britain's relative position to a lesser extent than America's. Hence, the New Atlantic Charter is a declaration of shared interests and an attempt to reaffirm one of the alliances that forged the post-Second World War order. For competing powers, the Charter represents a list of unfeasible or negotiable tenets rooted in Western values and designed for a Western-led world order.

In conclusion, it is necessary to briefly summarise the main characteristics of the post-Cold War Anglo-American bilateral relationship, with a focus on the Indo-Pacific. Firstly, before the advent of AUKUS in 2021, London and Washington had no formal joint security initiatives in the region. By contrast, Britain and Australia remained linked through the Five Power Defence Arrangements, which contain loose assurances to consult each other "immediately" if one of its members were attacked (United Kingdom, 2013a). Thus, most Anglo-American positions in the region have been formulated through the close diplomatic channels shaped by cooperation and agreements established since the Second World War. In other words, the US and Britain operate in the region by globally extending their bilateral network of strategic exchanges and agreements. Secondly, since the British withdrawal from East of Suez in 1971, the UK's strategic engagement in the region remained limited and sporadic until the 2010s, leaving the Indo-Pacific secondary to issues in the Euro-Atlantic axis and even to the South Atlantic, especially after the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982. Changes in Britain's – and the United States' – strategic priorities led to the creation of AUKUS, the first region-exclusive initiative involving both the British and the Americans.

Thus, the framework established by the UKUSA Agreement, the US–UK Mutual Defence Agreement, the Five Eyes, and several minor bilateral arrangements extends the Anglo-American relationship globally and defines its *modus operandi*. At the same time, AUKUS is "purpose-built" for the Indo-Pacific. The dynamics between a Primary and a Secondary Great Power are visible in the efforts of the latter to secure concessions from its "partner". For instance, these struggles are evident in the UKUSA Agreement, which followed Britain's attempt to convince the Americans of its equality in nuclear matters. The concession of basing rights in the South Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Indian Ocean similarly reflects efforts to make the Secondary Great Power relevant to the Primary one. However, the UK's ability to secure extensive agreements from the United States also reveals the relative value and strategic assets Britain brings to the table. The UK's bargaining position still enables it to sustain a high-level "special relationship" with the United States, even if that means pushing back and resisting

American influence when such influence is not perceived as aligned with British national interests.

4.2 Anglo-Japanese Relations

Different from the Anglo-American strategic relationship, which has had global ramifications and reverberations since the 1940s, with general agreements covering operations and cooperation worldwide, the bilateral relations between Britain and Japan in the post-Cold War decades have remained relatively localised within the Indo-Pacific region. This means that Britain bears the larger share of political and material costs in sustaining close defence ties to support a regional order that, according to political discourse, benefits both countries. However, these characteristics do not imply that the relationship favours Japan over Britain, nor that the post-Cold War relationship lacks ambitions integrated into broader global geostrategic interests, as was the case with the Anglo-Japanese Alliance a century earlier.

Close strategic ties between London and Tokyo began shortly after the end of the Victorian Era. In 1902, Britain and Japan signed a military alliance that would last until 1923, tested during the First World War. The alliance was forged amid rising tensions in Europe, as Britain grew increasingly concerned about the growing power of the German Empire, which was the underlying cause of the then-ongoing Anglo-German naval race. As competition with Germany intensified between 1911 and 1914, British leaders highlighted the importance of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (Lowe, 2003). Therefore, by removing the threat of Japanese aggression, the arrangements with Japan enabled Britain to concentrate its forces closer to home while acknowledging that British naval power alone would struggle to sustain unmatched global dominance, as it had done in the previous century (Kennedy, 2004).

By the end of the Paris Peace Conference, British leaders had grown suspicious of a potential Japanese threat to British colonies and interests. Contributing to the rising mistrust, the Empire of Japan had already demonstrated territorial ambitions in China and refused to extradite Indian revolutionaries to British authorities, while Japanese propagandists were reportedly active in British India and Malaya. Furthermore, Britain sought closer cooperation with the United States, which was equally suspicious of Japan's intentions in Asia. Washington perceived Japan as using its alliance with Britain "as a shield under whose protection it could infringe the 'open door' in China" (Best, 2006). However, within both the British and Australian Governments, there remained support for maintaining the alliance, largely due to concerns over

Japan's potential threat. In other words, renewing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was seen as a potential way to influence and contain Japan's ambitions.

Divisions within the British Empire, with some Dominions supporting the alliance and others opposing it, led the 1921 Imperial Conference to agree on a compromise: Britain would invite the United States to join the alliance. However, by 1921, the United States and Japan were engaged in a naval arms race, and Britain had begun ordering new capital ships to retain its advantage. The Americans promptly rejected the idea of a trilateral alliance. After extended diplomatic negotiations, the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 was signed by Britain, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy, establishing limits on naval armaments. The treaty compensated for the strategic disadvantages posed by the impending termination of the alliance, preserved amicable relations with the United States, and helped to avoid further division within the British imperial system. Consequently, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance expired in 1923 without renewal (Best, 2006).

Less than twenty years later, in 1941, the Empire of Japan launched a military offensive against Britain, initiating a period of continuous conflict that ended with Japan's surrender in 1945. The war, and the treatment of Commonwealth prisoners of war (POWs) by Japanese forces, remained a source of public distrust towards Japan for many years (Dobson; Nobuko, 2009). Coupled with this public sentiment, during the early decades of the Cold War – particularly through the 1950s – British leaders resented Japan's role in Britain's decline, especially following early defeats in 1942. Additionally, in the first decade after the Pacific War, Britain feared a potential re-emergence of Japan as both a security threat and an economic competitor capable of undermining its own recovery. Britain also resented what it perceived as the lenient treatment extended by the United States to Japan during the Occupation years (1945–1952) (Lowe, 2003).

However, economics was the main issue shaping British and Japanese perceptions of each other. The rapid recovery and rise of Japan's economy between the 1950s and 1980s, alongside Britain's relative economic decline – particularly until the 1970s – painted a picture of two countries with diverging economic prospects (Dobson; Kosuge, 2008). During the decades of relative decline, successive British Governments were encouraged to learn lessons from Japan or replicate certain policies and institutions of the Japanese developmental state. Following initial efforts to shield British industry and trade from foreign competition, the Conservative Governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990) and John Major (1990–1997) sought to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from Japanese companies as a way to improve British industrial competitiveness. As a result, in the 1990s, the UK was the destination for 53%

of Japanese FDI within the European Union (Towle; Kosuge, 2009). It is worth recalling that by the late 1980s, Japan's GDP was more than twice the size of Britain's and held strong economic growth prospects, which would later dissipate during the 1990s.

Concurrently, during the 1990s, as Britain freed military and diplomatic resources from the constraints of the Cold War and faced damaged relations with China following the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, it expanded its engagement with key regional powers, particularly Japan and Australia. Thus, the decade after the Cold War saw strengthened Anglo-Japanese relations, including arrangements for "bilateral politico-military consultations" (Meijer, 2022). In the early 1990s, cooperation was characterised by peacekeeping operations involving personnel from both nations. In 1991, Japanese vessels took part in mine-sweeping operations in the Persian Gulf under Royal Navy coordination. Programmes of cooperation in peacekeeping and peacebuilding occurred sporadically in 1997 and 1998. In 1999, London and Tokyo signed a framework for cooperation in security and peacekeeping. After the British intervention in the Sierra Leone Civil War, both sides sent a joint mission to explore ways to contribute financially to the reconstruction of the African country (Drifte, 2007).

The American and British invasion of Iraq in 2003 revealed the limitations of Japan's cooperation with Britain – or with any other country – in cases that did not involve Japanese self-defence, due mainly to the post-Second World War military restrictions placed on the country. Although Tokyo provided political endorsement and financial support, other forms of material involvement, such as deploying the Self-Defence Forces, were not under consideration. Nevertheless, since 2002, British and American warships operating in the Indian Ocean had relied on Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) for refuelling support in the "fight against terrorism". The agreement underpinning those refuelling operations was expanded following the onset of the invasion of Iraq and remained in effect in 2005 and 2006 (Drifte, 2009; Kosuge; Towle, 2007). Supporting the continued presence of Japanese vessels in the region, the MSDF was granted permission by Britain to use the Anglo-American base at Diego Garcia during command handovers.

Nevertheless, the main reason behind Japan's support for the British and American position on Iraq was the country's perception of insecurity prompted by renewed nuclear tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Japan viewed its political, economic, and humanitarian contributions to the Anglo-American presence in Iraq as "insurance not only that the USA but also major countries like Britain will come to Tokyo's help" in addressing the Korean crisis (Kosuge; Towle, 2007). Therefore, these concerns motivated Japanese openness and reciprocity toward Britain's growing interest in strengthening security and defence cooperation.

British interest in fostering close security and defence relations with Japan would continue to grow in the following decade. As Meijer (2022) notes, in 2006 the British Government created a new bilateral strategy for Japan. The following year, London and Tokyo agreed to deepen cooperation in several areas, including “defence procurement, peace support operations, naval cooperation – which dated back to the end of the nineteenth century – as well as arms sales” (Meijer, 2022). In 2012, following Japan’s relaxation in December 2011 of certain post-Second World War restrictions on its participation in “international research, development and trade” in defence equipment (Shetler-Jones, 2012) and “overseas transfer of defence equipment”, the two powers signed a Defence Cooperation Memorandum (United Kingdom, 2012a). London viewed this flexibilisation as a political and economic opportunity to deepen its expanding defence ties with Japan. As the then-Defence Secretary, Philip Hammond, stated: “(...) we are keen for the UK to become Japan’s partner of choice, alongside the US, for defence industrial collaboration.” (United Kingdom, 2012a). According to Shetler-Jones (2012), through the 2012 Memorandum, Britain became Japan’s only “defence technology partner” besides the United States. From a strategic perspective, the agreement can be viewed as one of Britain’s early efforts to signal that it could play a role in the ongoing reshaping of the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific and that it was beginning to focus more seriously on the region than it had in the previous decade.

In Tokyo, the official view was that the Memorandum was a modest start but opened the pathway and framework to strengthen the expanding scope of bilateral Anglo-Japanese defence cooperation (Shetler-Jones, 2012). According to Japan’s Ministry of Defence, a memorandum is the first significant step in “concrete initiatives” of defence cooperation and typically follows a previous phase of “defence exchanges”, which includes “high-level and working-level exchange among defence officials and service-to-service exchange”, “mutual visits to vessels and aircraft”, and “goodwill training”. The subsequent phases involve “capacity building assistance”, “cooperation in non-traditional security areas”, and formal agreements related to defence cooperation, among others. This process culminates in arrangements that resemble Japan’s defence ties with the United States, such as the Japan-U.S. Bilateral Exercises, which are “joint training on the premise of joint response” (Japan, 2019). Therefore, the 2012 Memorandum placed Britain within the spectrum of countries with which Japan maintains formal “defence cooperation” involving “concrete initiatives”, amid a context of planned increases in bilateral engagement.

Strategically, as Shetler-Jones (2012) observed, Japan’s pursuit of new security relationships represents a step to avoid isolation and reduce “sole dependence upon the United

States”. Concerns in Tokyo regarding the long-term future of American dominance in the region contribute to Japanese efforts to seek alternative partners. It may be argued that Britain has emerged as a preferred partner due to Japan’s perception of Britain’s relative position and its special relationship with the United States. Specifically, Britain is seen as “a major power that has influence not only in Europe but also in the rest of the world”, and both nations are considered “important allies of the United States” (Japan, 2019). This highlights how calculations involving the Primary Great Power shape the foreign and defence policies of both Secondary Great Powers, even when they are engaging with one another rather than directly with the United States. Reinforcing this point, the 2017 UK–Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation explicitly recognised the close alliance both nations maintain with the United States. Both prime ministers expressed openness to strengthening cooperation with Washington, acknowledging that Britain and Japan are the United States’ primary allies in their respective regions (United Kingdom, 2017b).

In the following decade, defence cooperation intensified, assuming a more prominent role within Anglo-Japanese bilateral relations, with both countries “becoming each other’s closest security partners in Asia and Europe respectively” (Meijer, 2022). An Agreement on the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology entered into force in July 2013. In essence, this agreement involved the “Transfer of Arms and Military Technologies necessary to Implement Joint Research, Development and Production of Defence Equipment and Other Related Items” (United Kingdom, 2013b). Months later, in January 2014, the two countries signed the “Japan–U.K. Information Security Agreement”, which established the legal framework for the exchange of classified information. For Japan, these developments laid the groundwork for cooperation in information-sharing, technology, and defence equipment (Japan, 2019).

A Japan–UK Summit Meeting followed the security agreement in May 2014, during which both parties agreed to hold regular “2+2” Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meetings. Negotiations on an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) were also launched during the summit. The ACSA would allow each country to access and supply logistical assets to support the needs of deployed personnel on each other’s territory, reducing logistical challenges. The first “2+2” Meeting took place in January 2015, followed by a second in January 2016, resulting in agreements on joint exercises, further cooperation in defence equipment and technology, and security assistance to Southeast Asian countries (Japan, 2019). Meanwhile, a trilateral agreement on naval cooperation was signed by Britain, Japan, and the United States (Meijer, 2022), and the Royal Air Force conducted its first joint drill in Japan with the Air Self-Defence Force (Brattberg; Le Corre, 2019).

In January 2017, after three years of negotiations, the ACSA was signed. It covered, among other things, supplies for joint exercises, United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, “internationally coordinated peace and security operations”, humanitarian relief efforts, and routine activities. When the ACSA entered into force in August 2017, it became the first of its kind between Japan and a European country. It was followed, later that month, by a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation issued at that year’s Japan-UK Summit Meeting, where both nations agreed to develop an action plan outlining “bilateral security cooperation between relevant authorities” (Japan, 2019).

During the third “2+2” Meeting in late 2017, Britain and Japan reaffirmed their commitment to joint military exercises and announced progress in Anglo-Japanese research on air-to-air missiles. One year later, the British Army participated in its first bilateral exercise on Japanese soil, named “Vigilant Isles”, while the Royal Navy engaged in two separate exercises with the Maritime Self-Defence Force. In December 2018, underlining the continuing role of the United States, the first trilateral military exercise involving Japan, the United States, and Britain took place, followed by another in 2019 (Japan, 2019). Again, highlighting America’s centrality, Britain renegotiated the deployment of a British liaison officer to Japan to serve with the Maritime Self-Defence Force and the US Seventh Fleet (Meijer, 2022). This pattern of deepening bilateral and trilateral engagement culminated in 2021, when the British Carrier Strike Group conducted joint exercises with American and Japanese naval forces and visited Japanese ports (United Kingdom, 2021d). That same year, Britain and Japan signed a Maritime Security Arrangement, agreeing to share maritime domain awareness to enhance the safety of international shipping between Europe and the Indo-Pacific (United Kingdom, 2021e).

By 2020, fourteen years after Britain first envisaged a renewed partnership with Japan in 2006, Anglo-Japanese cooperation continued to attract political attention and commitment from both British and Japanese leaders. The strategic importance of close ties with Japan was reaffirmed in the 2015 British Defence and Security Review, which identified Japan as Britain’s “closest security partner” in Asia (United Kingdom, 2015). This designation has since become commonplace within British official discourse when referring to deepening ties with Japan (United Kingdom, 2023g). By the end of the decade, Britain’s efforts to enter the Japanese defence market had yielded tangible results, following the 2007 cooperation agreement and the 2012 memorandum. Britain emerged as Japan’s second-largest arms supplier of the 2010s, behind only the United States (Meijer, 2022). In parallel, Royal Navy ships began visiting Japanese waters with a frequency not seen since the Korean War. After 2016, these visits assumed new strategic functions beyond exercising docking rights for UN sanctions

enforcement against North Korea. Increased naval and maritime cooperation required updated docking arrangements, which led to new agreements in the 2020s (Brattberg; Le Corre, 2019). In 2020, reflecting the strength of bilateral cooperation, London reportedly considered inviting Tokyo to join the Five Eyes intelligence alliance (Meijer, 2022).

The 2020s began with the deployment of the British Carrier Strike Group to the Indo-Pacific and Mediterranean in 2021, the first clear symbol of the “tilt to the Indo-Pacific” outlined by the Boris Johnson Government (2019–2022). The Strike Group conducted military exercises with Japan, the United States, and 38 other countries in the region, followed by port visits in Japan during August and September 2021 (United Kingdom, 2021d). Notably, the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth made a port call at the US Navy’s Yokosuka Base, becoming the first British carrier to dock in a Japanese port (Kosuke, 2023). American influence continues to shape UK–Japan relations even as Japan seeks additional partners. As previously discussed, both Secondary Great Powers factor their proximity to the United States into foreign policy calculations, a factor that also facilitated Japan’s acceptance of Britain’s expanding strategic overtures during the 2010s and 2020s.

Adopting the same language used since Japan was labelled Britain’s “closest security partner in Asia” in the 2015 Defence Review (United Kingdom, 2015), and earlier in a 2012 joint prime ministerial statement (Brooke-Holland, 2023), the then-Defence Attaché to Japan, Captain Simon, declared: “The Carrier Strike Group’s deployment to Japan and the Indo-Pacific as part of its maiden operational voyage demonstrates the UK’s commitment to work with Japan, our closest security partner in Asia” (United Kingdom, 2021d). The Defence Command Paper *Defence in a Competitive Age*, which complemented the 2021 Integrated Review, also repeated the same terminology, reinforcing the label that Britain had effectively conferred on Japan (United Kingdom, 2021a). By contrast, the 2010 Defence Review had mentioned Japan only once, as part of a list of countries with which the UK was “deepening” bilateral security relations (United Kingdom, 2010).

It is possible to identify a growing strategic importance attributed to Japan by Britain, recognised not only as a close Asian partner, but as a main partner in Asia. This evolution appears to result from over a decade of sustained British efforts and reciprocal Japanese engagement to strengthen and diversify bilateral defence and security ties. These efforts began gaining traction in 2006–2007 and were elevated through the 2012 Memorandum, followed by further developments. As Drifte (2007) argued, both countries had already shown interest in diversifying their strategic partnerships and reducing reliance on the United States as early as the mid-2000s. Shifts in British perceptions regarding the implications of China’s rise since the

mid-2010s also contributed to Japan's increased relevance in British foreign and defence policy. A similar trend occurred in Japan, where Britain began to be valued more prominently, even if the United States remained central (Meijer, 2022).

Nonetheless, the following years brought further progress in bilateral security cooperation. As part of the 2021 Integrated Review's implementation, two Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) – HMS Tamar and HMS Spey – were forward-based in the Indo-Pacific, sailing from Britain in September 2021, just as the Carrier Strike Group neared the end of its deployment. These OPVs are on extended assignments in the region, returning to British-controlled ports only after five years for major refits. In the interim, crew rotations and local maintenance are handled in theatre. In December 2022, the two vessels visited Japan and participated in joint naval exercises (Brooke-Holland, 2023). Between 2021 and 2023, Britain expanded its naval presence in the Indo-Pacific to include permanent deployments for the first time since the 1970s, with the OPVs in late 2021 and a Littoral Response Group deployed to Oman in 2023.

In September 2021, the British Government announced the launch of formal negotiations with Japan on a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) aimed at enhancing bilateral defence cooperation. According to the UK Ministry of Defence, "The aim is to create the conditions for a deeper, more regular and complex defence engagement programme, setting out the terms and conditions for UK and Japanese personnel undertaking activity in one another's countries", thereby facilitating joint military operations as regular events (United Kingdom, 2021f). On 11 January 2023, the two countries signed the RAA in London, granting reciprocal access for deploying armed forces, expanding defence and security cooperation, and enabling "larger scale, more complex military exercises and deployments" (United Kingdom, 2023h). The British Government described the RAA as a landmark agreement, the most important defence treaty between the two countries since the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 (United Kingdom, 2023h).

At the time of signing, Britain became the third country to conclude an RAA with Japan. The United States operates in Japan under a long-standing Status of Forces Agreement, while Australia signed an RAA in early 2022 after eight years of negotiations (Brooke-Holland, 2023). For Britain, the RAA aligns with its objective, as outlined in the 2021 Integrated Review, of becoming the European nation with the "broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific" (United Kingdom, 2021), giving substance to the UK's Indo-Pacific tilt. For Japan, the RAA is part of a broader strategy to strengthen national security through diversified partnerships with like-minded and capable states. While such partnerships may not amount to formal

alliances, they reinforce deterrence by demonstrating solidarity against perceived threats from China, Russia, and North Korea. Among European partners, Britain has taken the lead even though Japan continues to seek a broad network of cooperation, aiming to signal that it neither faces threats alone nor relies solely on the United States (Shetler-Jones, 2023).

Within this context, nearly a decade after the 2016 agreement on joint exercises, the RAA serves as an administrative framework that reduces barriers to British and Japanese military deployments on each other's territory. It enables a more persistent British military presence in Japan and contributes to Tokyo's vision of deterrence through the amalgamation of security and defence partners. Consequently, there may be greater incentives — within both London's and Tokyo's policies — for increased British deployments to Japan than vice versa. As Shetler-Jones (2023) notes, in this regard, the Reciprocal Access Agreement is less “reciprocal” than it appears. Furthermore, the RAA elevates the Anglo-Japanese security and defence relationship beyond the level of standard cooperation between friendly actors, while remaining “below that of a NATO-type mutual defence treaty”. Nonetheless, the agreement contains elements that may be inferred as constituting an alliance (Idem). Thus, the cooperation between the two Secondary Great Powers²⁸ reached a new instance in 2022, reaffirming the trend of cooperation that began timidly in 2007.

Another example of close cooperation between Japan and Britain is their collaboration on next-generation combat aircraft. The British Government's 2018 Combat Air Strategy outlined plans to develop the “Tempest”, a sixth-generation combat aircraft intended to replace the Eurofighter Typhoon in the 2030s. The Typhoon itself had been the product of a multinational effort involving Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Japan and Italy expressed interest in the Tempest programme in the same year it was announced, with Italy formally joining the project in 2019 (Brooke-Holland, 2018; 2023). Although not initially included Japan's interest in such collaboration had been evident even prior to the Tempest announcement, with Anglo-Japanese discussions on co-developing a fighter aircraft dating back to 2017 (Gady, 2017). In late 2021, London and Tokyo agreed to develop a joint demonstrator for a fighter aircraft engine, as well as further air combat technologies (United Kingdom, 2021g). A few months later, in early 2022, they agreed to collaborate on a fighter jet sensor project known as “Jaguar”, with demonstrators being built separately in both countries (United Kingdom, 2022a).

²⁸It is worth noting that Shetler-Jones (2023) places the two countries at the “sub-superpower level”, which might – or not due to a lack of definition – be close to the category used in this work.

Following years of exchanges and increasing collaboration, Japan decided to join Britain and Italy in the development of a new multirole fighter aircraft. In December 2022, the three governments announced the creation of the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), which would replace the British and Italian Typhoons and Japan's Mitsubishi F-2 aircraft by the mid-2030s (Brooke-Holland, 2023). In the joint statement from the prime ministers of Britain, Italy, and Japan, the leaders affirmed that GCAP would operate under the principle of equal partnership, with shared costs and benefits. The declaration also committed to ensuring future interoperability with the United States, NATO, and other partners across Europe and the Indo-Pacific. In addition, the three countries pledged to integrate their supply chains and "strengthen" their respective industrial bases (United Kingdom, 2022b). Japan's choice to join GCAP marked a departure from discussions around potential participation in the American future combat aircraft programme. Officially, reasons cited included better alignment in development timelines and greater opportunities for exports to Asian markets (Brooke-Holland, 2023). Nevertheless, it may be argued that a key motivation for Japan's decision was the desire to reduce its reliance on the United States, a recurring theme in Anglo-Japanese cooperation throughout the 2010s and 2020s (Brooke-Holland, 2023).

On 18 May 2023, just over four months after the signing of the Reciprocal Access Agreement, Britain and Japan took a further step in their strategic partnership. The Hiroshima Accord was signed to expand cooperation across economic, technological, and security domains, with the goal of "upholding stability in the Indo-Pacific" (United Kingdom, 2023i). The British Government stated that "the UK's relationship with Japan has grown further and faster than with any other international partner, reflecting Japan's pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific and their centrality to the UK's security and prosperity", and that the Accord would "cement" this bilateral relationship (Idem). The document described the partnership as standing at "a turning point in history", amid increasing geopolitical competition that demanded a "consistent and shared response". Britain and Japan reaffirmed that they are "the closest of partners", united by shared values and interests and committed to addressing global challenges together. The Accord also called on China to act as a responsible member of the international community (United Kingdom, 2023j).

In the security domain, the two countries committed to increasing the scale, frequency, and complexity of joint military exercises and operational planning. They announced the establishment of a UK–Japan Cyber Partnership to strengthen cyber capabilities and launched a new high-level defence dialogue. Both governments reiterated their commitment to resolving the issue of North Korea's nuclear arsenal through irreversible dismantlement (United

Kingdom, 2023j). Britain also pledged to double the number of personnel participating in joint exercises and reaffirmed plans to deploy the Carrier Strike Group to the Indo-Pacific in 2025. A formal “Consult Clause” was introduced, providing mechanisms for both countries to engage in consultations on relevant regional and global security matters, and to consider potential responses when appropriate. Another important element of the Accord was the creation of a Semiconductor Partnership, with plans to collaborate on research and development, strengthen domestic capabilities, and build more resilient supply chains (United Kingdom, 2023i). Lastly, the British Government reiterated its support for United Nations Security Council reform and endorsed Japan’s bid for permanent membership (United Kingdom, 2023j). One of the first concrete results of the Accord was the deployment of additional British troops to participate in the Vigilant Isles 23 joint military exercise, which was labelled the most extensive Anglo-Japanese drill to date. Notably, participating personnel included members of the 1st Royal Gurkha Rifles (United Kingdom, 2023i), stationed in Brunei, highlighting how Britain’s regional basing network is already supporting its bilateral efforts with Japan, while simultaneously benefiting from the partnership.

In conclusion, for Japan, the Hiroshima Accord reflects a continuation of its strategy to cultivate partnerships as a means of deterrence against perceived threats, namely China, Russia, and North Korea (Shetler-Jones, 2023). The objective of expanding bilateral relations with key international actors, even outside formal defence alliances, found a willing counterpart in Britain. From the British perspective, the Accord represents another step in efforts to consolidate geopolitical influence in the Indo-Pacific, with Japan – alongside Australia and the United States – identified as one of its most important regional partners. Furthermore, the relative positions of Britain and Japan enable a relationship between equals, as demonstrated in strategic cooperation initiatives that seek mutual benefit, without a clearly dominant party. By 2023, the UK–Japan defence and security partnership had grown significantly since the mid-2000s, and the notion that it constituted a “quasi-alliance” – or even an alliance – was gaining traction in both London and Tokyo (Kosuke, 2023), particularly on the Japanese side (Shetler-Jones, 2023a) and later in by British analysts (Gregory, 2025).

By 2025, continued cooperation on the GCAP, artificial intelligence, defence investment, and joint research demonstrated that the two countries were developing a partnership centred on co-dependency. The Japanese alliance with the United States remains a “superior hard power relationship”, providing existential deterrence to Tokyo. Nevertheless, the UK has embarked on a path that is pushing its relationship with Japan towards security co-dependency, a feature traditionally reserved for Japan’s ties with the United States. Although

Anglo-Japanese security and defence cooperation was partly influenced by both countries' proximity to the United States, it has also aimed at diversifying partners as a core, and often explicit, objective. It is worth noting that short-term policies of the United States during the first and second Trump administrations may also have contributed to further British and Japanese willingness to "think the unthinkable about the reliability of US hard power security guarantees" (Gregory, 2025).

Another dimension of the strategic partnership extends beyond defence. In March 2023, two months before the signing of the Hiroshima Accord, Britain secured accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), having first applied in February 2021. Japan played a pivotal role in supporting the UK's bid, facilitating its progress through the bloc's bureaucratic and diplomatic procedures. Japanese officials even visited countries in the region to lobby in favour of Britain's application (Lanktree, 2023; Shetler-Jones, 2023a; Silingar, 2024). Tokyo's search for like-minded partners was motivated in part by concerns over China's growing influence in the region, particularly among CPTPP members such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, and by the possibility of China joining the bloc following its application in late 2021. In this context, Japan welcomed Britain as a counterbalancing presence. Crucially, London's accession also provides Tokyo with a potential veto against China's entry, effectively positioning Britain as a gatekeeper (Lanktree, 2023).

Thus, Britain's accession to the CPTPP – like much of the Anglo-Japanese partnership – can be viewed through the lens of great power competition. Japan and Britain, both Secondary Great Powers, appear to be acting in concert to offset China's growing influence. The move aligns with London's Indo-Pacific ambitions outlined in the 2021 Integrated Review (United Kingdom, 2021). Although joining the CPTPP does not fully compensate for the economic losses associated with Brexit, it serves as a strategic foothold for Britain in the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, it elevates Britain's profile as a political and economic actor in the region, offering opportunities to engage beyond traditional hard power and respond to the rise of China while capitalising on emerging Indo-Pacific markets.

Following the sixth and final ratification required, Britain officially joined the CPTPP in December 2024 (United Kingdom, 2024), with expectations of strengthened economic ties. Japan's efforts to integrate Britain into the bloc enhanced the growing economic dimension of their bilateral relationship, adding a new layer of strategic entanglement. For Tokyo, bringing Britain into the CPTPP ensured another dependable partner in the region. For London, it secured what it had been seeking: political, economic, and strategic relevance in the Indo-Pacific. This dynamic suggests that the UK's CPTPP membership functions as a form of *quid pro quo*

between the two Secondary Powers at a time when Britain is intensifying its Indo-Pacific engagement and Japan is diversifying its security partnerships in response to intensifying regional competition.

Finally, in the realm of trade agreements, it is worth briefly revisiting Japan's position on Britain's departure from the European Union. Taniguchi (2017) coined the term "Tokyo Consensus" to describe the prevailing attitude among Japanese policymakers toward the 2016 Brexit vote and its implications. From a strategic perspective, Brexit offered Japan more benefits than drawbacks. Although the economic cost was acknowledged, Japan saw geopolitical opportunities in Britain's departure. According to Taniguchi (2017), this position was echoed by officials from other Indo-Pacific powers, including Australia, India, New Zealand, and the United States. The underlying rationale was straightforward: outside the EU, Britain would be more inclined to look beyond Europe for new partners to maintain its global role. Japan anticipated that post-Brexit Britain would seek to project diplomatic and military influence more actively across different regions in order to sustain its status as a "leading world power" (Taniguchi, 2017).

As previously discussed, the strategic bilateral relationship between Britain and Japan grew substantially and consistently in the years following the Brexit vote. In economic terms, the same trend was evident. The UK's accession to the CPTPP may help mitigate some of the economic consequences of Brexit for both countries albeit partially. Notably, total trade in goods and services between the UK and Japan remained relatively stable between 1999 and 2015, but from 2016 to 2019, it grew at an average annual rate of 9.4%. This growth translated into an overall increase of just over 50% in total trade value over four years. To maintain momentum, London and Tokyo signed the UK–Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2020, which succeeded the EU–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) after Brexit. Shortly before CEPA's signing, the UK Department for International Trade projected a 50% increase in bilateral trade over the following 15 years (United Kingdom, 2020a). However, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, trade between the two countries stagnated between 2020 and 2023. By the end of that period, trade levels stood at approximately 92% of their 2019 peak (United Kingdom, 2024?).

Lastly, Japanese investment in Britain remained robust, continuing a trend that began in the 1980s and 1990s. By the late 2010s, the UK had become the second-largest destination for Japanese outward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). In 2018, Japan was the sixth-largest investor in Britain, with a total FDI stock of £89.2 billion. In turn, Britain was the fourth-largest investor in Japan, with £17.5 billion (United Kingdom, 2020a). In early 2025, the first UK-

Japan “Economic 2+2” ministerial meeting, known for their breadth, took place with the presence of British and Japanese foreign, business and trade secretaries. Notably, until that meeting, Japan had only held such “Economic 2+2” meetings with the United States. At the event, the British and Japanese officials covered economic and energy security, open international trade and greater engagement with the “Global South”, which was seen as an attempt to expand the Hiroshima Accord and provide great policy alignment between the two governments (Ward, 2025).

In conclusion, the period analysed witnessed a significant enhancement of the Anglo-Japanese strategic bilateral relationship, driven by sustained efforts from both London and Tokyo. From the discreet, economically focused cooperation of the 1990s, the relationship evolved in the late 2000s and, more markedly, in the early 2010s, to the point where the two actors were described as “quasi-allies” by the 2020s. This transformation appears to be linked to a set of key factors. The growing economic weight of Asia and the rise of China as a Primary Great Power reshaped perceptions within Japan, Britain, and other international actors regarding how this emerging behemoth would fit into the existing international order. Additionally, Brexit played a role in redirecting the course of UK–Japan relations.

As China’s rise became increasingly assertive in the 2010s, matching its material power with political ambition, other relevant players, including Britain and Japan, reassessed the strategic landscape and began to frame China as a competitor, challenger, or rival (Meijer, 2022). Heightened threat perceptions in London regarding Beijing’s assertiveness prompted the hardening of British policy and, in turn, the development of new strategic tools aimed at securing interests in the Indo-Pacific. In parallel to strengthening relations with major regional actors – such as Australia, Japan, and the United States – the UK also sought to expand its military and strategic presence across smaller nations and territories in the region. This shift involved reengaging with the Indo-Pacific and gradually abandoning the China policies of the post–Cold War decades, when Beijing was viewed as a peaceful rising power and engagement was shaped primarily by economic interests. By the 2010s and early 2020s, British policy increasingly prioritised national security considerations and demanded region-specific strategies (Meijer, 2022).

The UK’s decision to leave the European Union further influenced its posture toward the Indo-Pacific. In the post-Brexit context, Britain required new political and economic partners and therefore sought renewed engagement with regions beyond Europe. Japan, in turn, welcomed British overtures, as it too sought to diversify its strategic relationships and reduce overdependence on the United States. The “Tokyo Consensus” proved beneficial to Japan’s

objective of encouraging a stronger British military presence in the region while also fostering broader cooperation in economic, technological, defence, and security domains. Japan's support for Britain's accession to the CPTPP reflected this broader strategy. By integrating the UK into the trade bloc, Japan hoped to tie Britain more closely to the region beyond military cooperation alone. The inclusion of Britain added geopolitical weight to the CPTPP and offered Tokyo a potential counterbalance to China's growing political and economic influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Overall, in the three decades following the end of the Cold War, Britain and Japan found common ground for cooperation across several domains, particularly in trade, through the CPTPP, and in defence and security, through a series of agreements enabling the joint development of military assets and technologies, bilateral exercises, strategic consultations, personnel exchanges, and logistical access and support for each other's forces. Reflecting their similar standing as Secondary Great Powers, these accords envision a partnership of equals, with both parties offering concessions and expecting reciprocal benefits, while stopping short of formally committing either side to mutual defence obligations. This perception of parity is further reinforced when considering the economic convergence between the two countries. Whereas Japan held a clear advantage in the early post-Cold War years, the gap narrowed significantly between 1991 and 2024 (IMF, 2024). In 1994, the British economy represented only about 25% of Japan's, but by 2024, it accounted for over 85% (IMF, 2024). Within this context, Japan's prolonged economic stagnation contributed to its relative decline.

Nevertheless, despite the progress achieved in the UK–Japan bilateral relationship, two key factors continue to constrain the level of strategic cooperation possible. Japan's post-war constitution and the overwhelming centrality of its alliance with the United States have historically limited defence collaboration, leaving trade and investment as the dominant features of the Anglo-Japanese relationship for much of the period analysed (Meijer, 2022). Acknowledging these constraints, Tokyo has sought to diversify its strategic partnerships. Simultaneously, Britain emerged as a suitable partner to support Japan's outreach, largely due to the strength of the Anglo-American relationship. However, these structural limitations have been increasingly challenged by domestic political reforms and rising perceptions of insecurity and uncertainty in both London and Tokyo, largely driven by the actions of competitive powers that may challenge the position of these two Secondary Great Powers.

4.3 Anglo-Australian relations

The bilateral relationship between Britain and Australia was historically shaped by a political hierarchy imposed by the British imperial system. As part of the British Empire, the settler colonies that would form the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 were subject to the authority of the metropole and actively defended their place within the imperial structure. Even decades after Federation, the Australian colonies perceived their security as inseparable from that of Britain and the Empire (Fruehling, 2016). In addition to political and economic influence, one of the main reasons for this continued attachment was the Australian perception of its own strategic vulnerability. Since the arrival of the First Fleet at Port Jackson in 1788, carrying colonists and convicts, European communities in what would become Australia harboured anxieties about abandonment or isolation, concerns rooted in their geographic remoteness and relatively small population.

For the settlers, a central question persisted: how could such a small and distant population enforce and protect its claim over such a vast territory, far from both its original homeland and its markets? For roughly a century and a half, the answer for the majority of inhabitants was clear: the United Kingdom. The settler communities developing in Australia considered themselves an equal part of the Empire, no different in essence from those in Britain. The prevailing narrative portrayed Australians as members of an imperial family, children of the “mother country.” Accordingly, Australia's security was seen as indivisible from that of Britain (Gyngell, 2017). Prior to the World Wars, Australia's military commitment to the Empire was already evident, with Australian troops participating in campaigns such as those in Sudan during the 1880s and in the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) (Wilcox, 2002).

One of the early steps towards political autonomy from London came in the 1907 Imperial Conference, where it was decided to confer upon Australia and Canada the status of self-governing Dominions within the British Empire²⁹ (Olson; Shadle, 1996). Occurring approximately every four years, the Imperial Conferences allowed the Dominions to engage in discussions on imperial foreign policy with Britain, even if the mother country continued to set the tone of the conversation (Gyngell, 2017). Within this context, Australian politicians—most notably Alfred Deakin, Prime Minister during the 1910s—lobbied the British Government for increased consultation on imperial foreign policy and supported proposals for an “Imperial

²⁹The Colony of New Zealand received the Dominion status in that same year, with the self-governing colonies of Natal, Cape Colony, Orange River Colony and Transvaal forming the Union of South Africa in 1910 with the same status.

Federation” (Bird, 2008). Moreover, even before the First World War, Australian leaders were aware of diverging priorities between Britain and Australia. Australian perceptions of Japan as a security threat intensified following Japan’s victory over the Russian Empire in 1905 and continued to grow over subsequent decades, despite the Anglo-Japanese Alliance signed in 1902.

Tied to British foreign policy, Australia entered the First World War automatically when Britain declared war on Germany in 1914. The Commonwealth promptly rallied in support of the mother country and the Empire. However, the human and material costs of the war led to increasing pressure from some Dominions – particularly Canada and the Union of South Africa – for greater control over their own foreign policy (Gyngell, 2017). A turning point came in 1922 during the Chanak Crisis with Turkey, when Canada refused to offer automatic support for Britain, marking the first clear assertion of political independence from London. The crisis raised critical questions regarding imperial foreign policy and the autonomy of the Dominions to reject decisions made by the mother country (Arnold-Forster, 1973; Blake, 2013). Subsequently, discussions surrounding the idea of Imperial Federation were largely abandoned following the 1923 Imperial Conference, giving way to a system of Dominion ratification of policies formulated in London (Bird, 2008).

The Balfour Declaration of 1926, issued during the 1926 Imperial Conference, represented a major shift. It declared that Britain and the Dominions were “autonomous Communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs,” while remaining united through a looser arrangement: “a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations” (Hall, 1962). The term “Commonwealth” thus emerged at the forefront of political discourse as a replacement for “Empire.” However, the wording of the Declaration was deliberately crafted by the Inter-Imperial Relations Committee to avoid equating equality of status with full independence or the dissolution of imperial ties. Its intent was to acknowledge the diverse interests of the Dominions while preserving imperial unity through sentimental bonds such as shared ideals, security, progress, and peace (Darwin, 2011).

The major milestone in imperial decentralisation came at the 1930 Imperial Conference, where Britain and the Dominions agreed that legislative independence should be extended to self-governing members of the Empire. This principle was formalised in 1931 with the passage of the Statute of Westminster by the British Parliament. The Statute cemented the equal status of the Dominions, ended the ability of Westminster to legislate on their behalf, and granted them full autonomy in foreign affairs. It effectively ratified the decisions of the 1930 Conference and

the 1926 Balfour Declaration (Cuffe, 2021). While Dominions such as Canada and the Union of South Africa swiftly embraced these changes appointing diplomatic representatives abroad, Australia remained reluctant. Despite the formal legal empowerment, the Australian Government was slow to exercise its newly acquired autonomy (Gyngell, 2017).

For Australia, the changes in imperial arrangements, rather than alleviating concerns about disunity, generated greater anxiety. As early as the Chanak Crisis, Australian leaders were not focused on defining Dominion status and rights, but rather on recognising an Empire with multiple and divergent interests—and on how to incorporate these into a unified imperial foreign policy (Cuffe, 2021; Eccles, 1989). The former Australian Prime Minister, William Hughes (1915-1923), summarised the issue in a speech to the House of Representatives shortly after the 1926 Balfour Declaration: “(...) We claim the right of an equal voice with Great Britain in moulding British foreign policy (...) Britain’s foreign policy conditions our very existence, and we should insist upon our right to have an effective voice in shaping it.” (Hughes apud Cuffe, 2021).

Australia’s concerns delayed the adoption of the Statute of Westminster until 1942, during the Second World War and amid the growing strategic relevance of the United States (Gyngell, 2017). Furthermore, the Australian Government’s opposition to the imperial changes introduced by the 1926 Balfour Declaration and the 1931 Statute of Westminster reflected a broader reluctance to embrace greater autonomy in foreign policy. Australia sought to strengthen the imperial framework upon which it relied heavily for security, prioritising consultation and a voice in imperial affairs. In other words, the Dominion aimed to participate in a cohesive imperial policy capable of encompassing the Empire’s diverse interests (Cuffe, 2021). Crucially, this reveals that Britain’s interests no longer fully aligned with those of its Empire and that Australia preferred binding Britain to a unified imperial foreign policy as the most effective means of safeguarding its security and avoiding isolation.

In the 1930s, Australia’s strategic outlook was dominated by concerns about the rise of the Japanese Empire. Despite occasional criticism, Australian leaders continued to support the British-led Singapore Naval Strategy – the cornerstone of imperial regional defence – which envisioned a major naval base in Singapore to host a fleet capable of countering Japanese aggression (Dennis, 2002). Cuffe (2021) notes that Australia had few viable alternatives to accepting this strategy, in part due to the absence of other strategic partners and its entrenched position within the imperial system. Notably, while forging a parallel economic relationship with China in the 2010s, Australia had similarly pursued trade with Japan during the 1920s, despite prevailing threat perceptions. By the mid-1930s, Japan had become Australia’s second-

largest trading partner. However, in response to the Great Depression, Australia joined Britain and the Dominions in the Ottawa Agreements, effectively creating a system of imperial preference. By 1937-1938, Australian exports to Britain accounted for 55.5% of its total exports. The policy restricted trade with non-Empire countries and prohibited agreements that might undermine imperial preference (Cuffe, 2021).

Before turning to the transformations that would ultimately position the United States as Australia's principal strategic partner, it is important to examine the issue of Japanese trade in the 1930s, which aptly illustrates Australia's asymmetrical relationship with Britain. Trade with Japan remained second only to Britain until 1936, when Australia "chose" to prioritise its strategic fears over commercial ties. That year, the Australian Government adopted the Trade Diversion Policy, which imposed protectionist measures against Japanese goods. The stated justification was to reduce the trade deficit, although the trade balance with Japan was, in fact, in surplus. A short-lived trade war ensued (Idem). Several explanations have been proposed to account for this decision, many of which point to Britain's enduring influence over the Dominion.

Firstly, some scholars argue that the Government in Canberra bowed to pressure from London in order to support the British textile industry (O'Brien, 1987; Ward, 2001), reflecting Australia's dependence on Britain for trade and defence and its deep-seated fears of abandonment. Secondly, others (Sissons, 1976; Tsokhas, 1990) reject the notion of British pressure, instead viewing the policy as a domestic political gamble aimed at expanding exports to the British market, with any benefits for Britain seen as a secondary by-product. Finally, a third explanation lies in security concerns: as noted earlier, Australia perceived its own security as indivisible from that of the Empire. Between 1932 and 1936, international developments heightened Canberra's sense of vulnerability, including Japan's withdrawal from the Second London Naval Conference and the Treaty for the Limitation and Reduction of Naval Armament, as well as Germany's remilitarisation of the Rhineland. Australian rearmament began in 1933, signalling a renewed commitment to imperial defence (Cuffe, 2021). These considerations – none of which are mutually exclusive – underscore Australia's asymmetrical position between Britain and Japan, and the extent to which British interests remained dominant. Even when Australia sought to recalibrate its position in a shifting international environment, the outcome often continued to favour Britain. A parallel may be drawn between the 1936 Trade Diversion Policy and Australia's choice to enter the AUKUS initiative in 2021, as both reflect similar strategic dilemmas between competing major powers.

Although a slow process, a political, economic, and defence “decoupling” from Britain would begin in the following decades. The ratification of the Statute of Westminster in 1942 provoked fears among some sectors of Australia’s leadership that Nazi Germany could exploit it as evidence of imperial disintegration, and that public opinion in Australia would be inflamed by its adoption. Others argued that its implementation would, in practice, change little and that the links between Australia and Britain would remain intact. Nonetheless, changes began to emerge, shaping an Australian foreign policy characterised by three responses to the persistent fear of abandonment. Australia would continue to immerse itself in, and align with, its “great and powerful friends”³⁰ – Britain and, increasingly, the United States –, seek to exercise its diplomacy to create a more benign regional neighbourhood in Asia, and support, while attempting to influence, the international organisations and the norms, rules and customs that formed the rules-based international order post-1945 (Gyngell, 2017). Thus, there remained space for Britain as a “powerful friend” within – although behind the United States – Australia’s considerations and strategic thinking into the Cold War.

The three decades following the 1942 ratification of the Statute of Westminster brought new considerations regarding Britain’s and the Empire’s role in Australia’s security, as the Empire itself was succeeded by the Commonwealth and Britain’s interests in the Asia-Pacific correspondingly diminished. The Fall of Singapore in 1942 to Japanese forces reinforced the perception that Australia depended primarily on the United States for its security, even though “strategic dependence” on Britain remained the long-term preference of Australian leaders. The limits of Australia’s power and influence became evident during wartime planning with Britain and the United States. Both Great Powers frequently disregarded Australia’s security concerns, accommodating them only when they did not conflict with their main interests (Gyngell, 2017). Notably, the negotiations over the San Francisco Charter, the creation of the United Nations (UN), and the status and privileges of the permanent members of the UN Security Council once again demonstrated that the two Great Powers would not prioritise Australia’s interests. Importantly, Britain, the United States, and the other permanent members opposed Australian efforts to establish an intermediate category conferring institutional privileges on the Middle Powers within the new world order (Holbraad, 1984). Therefore, the shift in Australian foreign policy towards prioritising the United States as its main “great and powerful friend” did not

³⁰Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, referred to Britain and the United States as “great and powerful friends” in the 1950s and 1960s (Menzies, 1958; 1964).

imply that the nature of the relationship differed significantly from the one previously maintained with Britain.

Despite its pivot towards the United States, Australia remained embedded within the British orbit until the 1960s (Bell, 1993). The outbreak of the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) saw Australia ship weapons and deploy troops to assist the British in suppressing the armed wing of the Malayan Communist Party. By 1957, the Emergency had largely been resolved, and the new Federation of Malaya was granted independence (Scurr, 2005). Through the Australian – and New Zealand – commitment to base military assets in Malaya in 1955 (Gyngell, 2017), one of the building blocks of the 1957 Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement was established, which would become the precursor to the 1971 Five Power Defence Arrangements. Reflecting its persistent fears of isolation, Australia’s commitment was “both a way of reinforcing a British commitment to Asia and a signal to the United States that Australia was prepared to carry some of the burden of its own defence” (Gyngell, 2017). Further cooperation occurred during the Indonesia–Malaysia confrontation (1963–1966), with Australia supporting Malayan proposals for the creation of a larger state comprising British colonial territories, including Singapore, Malaya, Brunei, and the territories of Sabah and Sarawak in North Borneo. Canberra believed that forming such a state would best serve its principal regional objective: maintaining a British presence in the area (Idem).

Although Anglo-Australian strategic cooperation remained close and Britain continued to factor into Australia’s strategic calculations until the announcement of Britain’s withdrawal from East of Suez, the drift from Britain towards the United States occurred despite Australian efforts to preserve ties with both major powers. In the 1940s and 1950s, Australia expected that it would not have to choose between its “great and powerful friends” (Gyngell, 2017). Nevertheless, British policy decisions in the 1960s – both economic and strategic – revealed that Australia had limited visibility in British strategic thinking, even though Britain continued to occupy a prominent position in Australian policy. As Bell (1993) observed, Australia had developed a “triangular relationship” with Britain and the United States, “an asymmetrical triangle in the psychological as well as the strategic sense, in that first the UK and subsequently both the UK and the USA have been very highly visible for Australia” and central to its strategic thinking. Bell argued that this asymmetry exemplifies the relationship between a middle power and a great one: “The patron is high on the client’s horizon: the client (except in special circumstances) is low in the patron’s horizon.” The decision to choose between the two powers was ultimately unnecessary for two reasons. First, in 1968, Britain unilaterally announced its strategic retrenchment East of Suez (Peden, 2012). Second, by the mid-1960s, Australia’s

growing security dependence on the United States had rendered any such “choice” obsolete (Gyngell, 2017), particularly as Britain was no longer a viable strategic partner in the region.

Australia’s transition from Britain’s sphere of influence and imperial ties to a position of dependency on the United States during the Cold War is generally described as smooth and inevitable, marked by the 1951 signing of the ANZUS Treaty and the 1957 decision to standardise military equipment in line with the United States (Millar, 1968; Renouf, 1979). However, this interpretation oversimplifies the evolution of Australian foreign policy (Beaumont, 2003). Until the late 1950s, Australia underwent an “uneven transition” into the American-led order, constantly assessing which relationship best served its interests. The country even attempted to forge a trilateral partnership between the United States and the British Commonwealth based on the shared goal of regional security. Yet, it quickly became apparent that Australia lacked the capacity to coordinate American and British priorities in the region. In Canberra, the perception of Britain’s declining global power led to the recognition that Britain could no longer provide the patronage and protection it had once offered. These factors prompted Australia to accept the American vision for security in Asia and the Pacific, with the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) emerging as one of the early indicators of this strategic shift (Cuffe, 2021).

Displaying the ongoing changes in power distribution East of Suez, Britain’s exclusion from the ANZUS was viewed in London as a deliberate blow to its influence, aimed at weakening the Commonwealth. Britain saw the ANZUS as a possible primary planning forum in the case of conflict in the region, which would leave it without a voice (Umetsu, 2004). Australia and New Zealand supported Britain as a member of ANZUS, but the United States rejected association with the British due to fears of being engulfed in colonial issues. At the same time, the imperial preference established by the Ottawa Agreements was reviewed in the late 1950s, with Australia seeking more flexibility to pursue its trade policy. The Commonwealth, as an economically integrated bloc, was coming to an end. The then-Chancellor of the Exchequer and future Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, recognised that Britain could no longer fulfil the role of provider of capital demanded for the development of Australia and the Commonwealth. Macmillan concluded that re-examining the relative importance of trade with the Commonwealth, Europe, and other markets was necessary (Cuffe, 2021). During Macmillan’s premiership (1957–1963), Britain’s first and unsuccessful application to join the European Economic Community (EEC), due to a veto from France in 1963, reflected the government in London’s reassessment of Britain’s trade priorities towards Europe instead of the Commonwealth (Lamb, 1995). The British Government knew that its

bilateral trade with Australia and the Commonwealth was increasingly exposed to competition from the United States and that Britain could no longer sustain its position as the primary buyer for many Commonwealth countries. In the 1940s and 1950s, Britain remained Australia's primary export market, with a 37% share approximately, down from the 50% mark reached in the 1930s. The average for the 1960s was roughly 19%. After the country joined the EEC, Australian exports declined further to around 5% for the rest of the century, remaining relatively stable in the three decades after the end of the Cold War (European Union, 2022). Britain's application to join the EEC generated alarm in Australia, not only for economic reasons—as Britain represented 26% of Australian exports in 1960—but also due to political concerns over the "Mother Nation" abandoning her family. When Britain bid a second time to join in 1967, the shock had dissipated, and Australia had shifted its priority from protecting the economic relationship to preserving the strategic one (Gyngell, 2017).

Therefore, strategic cooperation between Britain and Australia would continue in the 1960s. However, the British 1967-1968 decisions under the Harold Wilson Government (1964-1970) to withdraw from East of Suez by the 1970s were criticised in Australia (Godovanyuk, 2022). After the first announcement in 1967, the Australian Government expected the retention of a reduced British presence in Southeast Asia during the withdrawal years and the maintenance of a general capability after the mid-1970s (Benvenuti & Dee, 2010). Nevertheless, domestic retrenchment in Britain ultimately prevailed, overruling attempts to maintain a prominent strategic role in the region. A remaining strategic role was considered in the defence of Malaysia and Singapore. It was attained by the Conservative Government of Edward Heath (1970-1974), which desired to uphold the connections with regional Commonwealth members (Benvenuti & Dee, 2010). Signed in 1971, the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) replaced the automatic guarantees of the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement with the commitment of its members to consult one another in the event of a threat or armed attack against Malaysia and Singapore (Benvenuti & Dee, 2010; Gyngell, 2017). Through the FPDA, Britain maintained its presence in the system of defensive alliances in Southeast Asia during and after the Cold War (Godovanyuk, 2022). In part due to the flexibility of the Agreement, it outlasted SEATO and would sustain strategic ties between its members – Australia, Britain, New Zealand, Singapore, and Malaysia – receiving renewed attention from Britain in the 2010s and 2020s.

The British strategic withdrawal led to a change in defence thinking in Australia. With the Conservatives under the leadership of Edward Heath ascending to power in London, the pledge to maintain a small British force East of Suez was met with caution by Australia and

interpreted through a different lens (Benvenuti & Dee, 2010; McDougall, 1997). Additionally, it was a period of expanding military commitments in Vietnam and the peak period of dependence on the American connection, already seen as the sole reliable Australian lifebelt (Bell, 1993). The shock of 1967 and 1968 led Australia to point out to Britain in 1970 that a renewed British presence should not hinder an independent Australian regional foreign policy that had emerged from the adjustments to a post-British presence. Even though Australia welcomed the opportunity to renew defence connections with the British, it also manoeuvred to ensure that Britain's commitments in Southeast Asia should not be perceived as shared with Australia (Benvenuti & Dee, 2010). As Benvenuti and Dee (2010) argued, the Australian position did not mean a move away from the traditional reliance on its more powerful allies. Still, it was based on the premise that Australia had a responsibility for its strategic backyard that was seen as independent from its main allies. However, the British managed to include Australia in the Five Power Defence Arrangements, but the commitment of the latter to military assets in Malaysia and Singapore dwindled within two years, and it began disengaging from the area. Changes in government in London in 1974 also led to a further reduction of British military commitments by 1976. The British strategy of maintaining close ties with Australia through the FPDA and defence cooperation proved to be unfounded (Idem), even though the Agreement endured, providing a discreet British strategic link with key Commonwealth members. For Bell (1993), Britain faded from Australian political calculation after retreating strategically from East of Suez while no recommitment to the region could be seen in the foreseeable future.

In short, the 1970s witnessed a widening diplomatic and economic distance between Britain and Australia. However, the factors of change occurred largely due to decisions made in Britain. Economically, the British accession to the European Economic Community in 1973 meant the end of the long-standing special trade relationship with Australia and the remnants of the imperial preference policy. In the 1980s, loosening the economic, political, and strategic links between the two countries was already significant and only advanced further. Australia sought trade alternatives in Asia while the British market turned towards Europe. By the early 1980s, Singapore had overtaken Britain as a destination for Australian goods, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) had surpassed Europe as a whole (Bell, 1993). Politically, the most significant change since the 1942 enactment of the Westminster Act happened in 1986. At the request of Canberra, the British and Australian parliaments simultaneously passed legislation known as the Australia Act, ending the remaining legislative and legal ties between the two countries. Most importantly, the Australia Act 1986 ended the possibility of Britain legislating with effect over Australia and of appeals to the Privy Council

(Gyngell, 2017). The two countries would continue to share a Head of State in the form of the Monarch, even as the 1990s was marked by a strengthening of republicanism in Australia and the prerogative powers of the Australian Crown rested in the Governor-General as the representative of the Monarch. The Governor-General retains the power to dismiss Australian ministers, including the Prime Minister, which occurred as part and culmination of the 1975 Australian Constitutional Crisis (Brown, 2002). Despite those changes, by the 1980s, Britain persisted as one of the two largest sources of capital investment in the country (Bell, 1993). Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the mid to late 1980s was marked by tensions between Britain and Australia regarding Commonwealth policy concerning apartheid in South Africa, due to Australian efforts to jointly apply a regime of Commonwealth sanctions and British opposition (Gyngell, 2017). South Africa left the organisation in 1960; however, British financial investments were guarded by the apartheid regime (Gildea, 2019).

Strategically, for Britain, the first decade of the post-Cold War era was marked by the reallocation of resources away from commitments in continental Europe, a return to the expeditionary approach (United Kingdom, 1997), and the adoption of a liberal interventionist foreign policy under Tony Blair (1997–2007), which was characterised by renewed military action overseas aiming to place the country at the forefront of the world order in the 1990s and 2000s (Kampfner, 2004). For Australia, one of the responses to the end of the Cold War was to ensure that the United States remained tied to the Asia-Pacific. Canberra feared that Washington would disengage from the region. These concerns were bipartisan and demonstrated that Australia still viewed the United States as its primary strategic partner, with Britain as a secondary and powerful friend. As the Cold War faded and tensions over the Iraq occupation of Kuwait led to the Gulf War, Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke (1983–1991), aiming to meet the expectations of the United States, committed a small naval detachment to support the American-led efforts, demonstrating that strategically, the “new world order” would continue to reflect old practices and considerations (Gyngell, 2017).

Meanwhile, the remaining links with Britain through the Monarchy were challenged further. The attachments of Australian elites and society – increasingly diverse and less “British” and connected with Britain, in part due to immigration restrictions imposed by London between 1953 and 1960 and the end of the White Australia policy – were drifting away from the “mother country” (Gyngell, 2017). The Labor Party, in particular, had a republican element within its ranks for decades, and many of its Prime Ministers worked to forward Australian republicanism. Similarly, the Commonwealth was also targeted by the Labor Party due to its British origins, being labelled as anachronistic, even if by the 1980s the majority of its members were from the

so-called “Third World”, and the Commonwealth forum remained part of Labor foreign policy under Bob Hawke (Bell, 1993). During the premiership of Paul Keating (1991–1996), which, among other things, expanded Australia's economic and political engagement with Asia, the push for an Australian republic reached new heights. In 1993, Keating created a Republic Advisory Committee to develop alternatives for Australia to become a republic. The Committee recommended the norms and rules for an Australian republic. As part of the ongoing discussions on constitutional change, a referendum on the issue was held in 1999 by the John Howard Government (1996–2007), a monarchist Prime Minister, and the republic was defeated (Gyngell, 2017). Even with the preserved integrity of the Monarchy and the continued symbolic “personal union” between Britain and Australia, the British connection was relatively fragile not just in the material cooperation in the security and defence fields – mainly between the 1970s and 1980s as the British accommodated their retrenchment policies – but also weakening in the so-called “empires of the mind”.³¹ The overall connection of the Australian elites with Britain had changed since the 1970s, and the trend seemed to decline. However, as the 1990s gave way to a new power distribution, the alignment of the two countries, the limits of Australian power, and the British desire to expand its global influence in the late 1990s and 2000s would pull each other together again.

As put by Bell (1993), in the time of Paul Keating in the early 1990s, the security links were reduced to the Five Powers Defence Arrangements, the economic links that remained were expressive only in British investment, the immigration connection was declining, and the monarchy appeared to be in question even in Australia and Britain. Among other things, republicanism could be regarded as the “final milestone in the history of the connection between Australia and Britain”. Nevertheless, the second half of the 1990s would prove slightly different, a discreet turning point; the republic proposal was defeated by popular vote in 1999, and the British and Australians were remaking high-level defence cooperation due to military operations in the Middle East, but mostly due to their shared American connection.

The importance attached by Australia to Britain and its limitations could be seen through the John Howard Government's 1997 Strategic Policy paper stating that the defence links with

³¹In 1943, Winston Churchill stated in one of his speeches that “the empires of the future would be the empires of the mind”. As Gildea (2019) argues, Churchill meant that the future empires would not be armed behemoths at war with each other “but rather universal empires living in peace and harmony”. In any case, the term “empires of the mind” also points to the fact that imperial domination comes in many forms, from military conquest to cultural hegemony. Most importantly, “When it failed in one form or one domain, it did not withdraw but was reinvented, reconstructed in a different way.” (Gildea, 2019), which is the case of the British influence and links with Australia, the fragility of the empire of the minds might provoke reinvention.

Britain “remains a valuable strategic asset to Australia, although it is not an alliance in the sense that there are no undertakings to come to one another’s help in a crisis.” Britain is placed as part of Australia’s “alliances” – although informal – alongside the United States and New Zealand, which are formally tied through the 1951 ANZUS agreement. Additionally, Canberra regarded the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and the Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) as an “effective symbol of the strength of our engagement in Southeast Asian security” while functioning as a framework to support British and New Zealander “involvement in the region” (Australia, 1997). So, in the Anglo-Australian strategic relationship of the 1990s, which was marked by the FPDA, Britain was not entirely eclipsed by the United States and regional Asian partners to Australian decision-makers. On the contrary, the FPDA meant that Australia could still rely on Britain for specific security concerns in Southeast Asia, even if the eventuality of a crisis remained remote in the 1990s. In short, it was a form of attaching the remnants of British strategic interests in the region to channels of communication that involved Australia and other Commonwealth members. However, as already mentioned, the Anglo-Australian strategic relationship would gain pace on the eve of their involvement in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq.

The following years would witness a return of high-level security exchanges as Britain, under the leadership of Tony Blair (1997-2007), and Australia, with the John Howard Government (1996-2007), came together to support each other’s position on the Iraq War. A practical Anglo-Australian “working relationship” reemerged after an absence of decades. The fact that the two countries acted as the closest international allies of the United States under the Bush Administration (2001-2009) contributed to the development of this new bilateral relationship. Increased exchanges led to the creation of an annual meeting of foreign and defence ministers of Britain and Australia, known as the AUKMIN – an equivalent of the AUSMIN between Australia and the United States – which became, in the following years, an important event in the Australian diplomacy calendar (Gyngell, 2017). The two countries continued to work through the Five Power Defence Arrangements and the Five Eyes, which also contributed to a relationship characterised as “more intimate and easy than with almost any of Australia’s other international partners” in areas of foreign and national security policy (Gyngell, 2017).

The case of the Iraq War shows a glimpse of the changes that occurred to the Anglo-Australian relationship in the late 1990s and, particularly, in the 2000s. Those years are a turning point for the fading bilateral relationship between the two countries. One of the reasons behind the rapprochement was the War on Terror, bringing London and Canberra to support their main ally in Washington in Iraq and Afghanistan. Before that, in 1999, Gurkhas of the British Army

were among the first deployed to support Australian troops in East Timor. Furthermore, the economic drift and relative decline of trade and investment had flattened or reversed. In the early 2000s, Britain remained Australia's fourth-largest trade partner and second-largest investor. Britain was second in foreign investment in its former Dominion (Bridge, 2006). British and Australian interests and priorities were coinciding once again. The shared outlooks in London and Canberra began to weigh in calculating national interests (L'Estrange, 2004) in the regions East of Suez once more for regional strategic outcomes that would gradually lead to the British strategic re-engagement with the area in the 2010s and 2020s. In short, the Anglo-Australian bilateral relationship experienced a rapprochement during the Blair and Howard years, ending a trend of strategic diversion that had dominated the relationship in the past decades since the 1940s and 1970s.

Despite the advances towards closer strategic cooperation in the early 2000s, the War on Terror – an American policy – was one of the leading forces pushing the two actors together (Bridge, 2006; Elijah, 2006). A discreet British focus towards Australia materialised in foreign policy only in the 2010s. At the 2011 AUKMIN meeting, Britain and Australia committed to a bilateral defence cooperation treaty (United Kingdom, 2013c). In the fifth AUKMIN in 2013, the two countries moved to establish a formal and overarching strategic framework for their defence relationship, announcing the results of roughly two years of negotiations. Through the “Australia-United Kingdom Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty”, their bilateral defence relationship was formalised for the first time, paving the way for an expansion of defence cooperation (Davies; Jennings; Schreer, 2013; United Kingdom, 2013c). According to the then British Secretary of State for Defence, the treaty was an “umbrella arrangement” covering the breadth and depth of existing cooperation while providing a “platform from which to drive the relationship forward” (United Kingdom, 2013c). However, the efforts to increase strategic collaboration with Australia failed to consolidate Britain as the main European strategic partner of the country without challengers. In 2012, France signed a Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership with Australia. In 2016, the Australian Government announced that the French would provide the future submarines of the Royal Australian Navy (Gyngell, 2017), which the 2021 AUKUS initiative would derail.

Between the late 2000s and early 2010s, however, London's perceptions of the geostrategic scenario of the Indo-Pacific changed rapidly. The view of British policymakers of China's rise as a peaceful power contributed to policies driven by economic considerations in the 1990s and 2000s. During the premiership of David Cameron (2010–2016), the Government was divided into two central positions that would directly influence British engagement and

cooperation with Australia and the Indo-Pacific. Policymakers from Her Majesty's Treasury and the Department for Trade and Investment believed that China did not pose an imminent "hard security challenge" and argued in favour of increased economic engagement with the Chinese in various fields, including trade, energy, banking, technology and investment. Their position was supported by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne (2010–2016), and became known as the "Golden Era" of Sino-British economic relations. Despite that, the Golden Era emerged precisely when dissidence within the British Government increased. Officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Ministry of Defence, and the intelligence agencies had already shifted their stance on China, particularly due to Chinese advancements into British "critical national infrastructure and its cyber and industrial espionage practices" (Meijer, 2022). However, until the mid-2010s, the economic view prevailed over those highlighting security preoccupations.

Under the leadership of Theresa May (2016–2019), Britain's policy shifted from economic engagement to strategic balancing. British concerns over China's newfound hard power posturing in the Indo-Pacific concluded that the Asian country had embarked on the path to become a challenger to the "rules-based" international order, generating instability and affecting British interests. Thus, seeking an Asia-Pacific policy beyond the focus on China as in the 2000s, Australia and Japan became prime targets of British foreign policy in the region. It is worth noting that after China, Japan and Australia were already the other two regional players with which Britain most pursued diplomatic and economic engagement in the decades after the end of the Cold War (Meijer, 2022). Similarly to the case of Anglo-Japanese relations after 2016, leaving the European Union also meant that Britain had additional motivations beyond the perceived Chinese challenge and the growing economic weight of the Indo-Pacific to adopt a foreign policy willing to renew and expand strategic links with Australia. Likewise, considerations in Canberra led to a position similar to the Japanese "Tokyo Consensus". In 2017, shortly after the Brexit vote, Australia published a Foreign Policy White Paper stating that the British exit from the European Union was "an opportunity to re-invigorate cooperation as the United Kingdom maintains a global role on security and economic issues" (Australia, 2017). It is worth noting that the push for policy changes in Britain regarding China and Asia occurred after the United States first announced its "Pivot to Asia" in 2011, but with gradual increases in British strategic engagement with the area culminating in a formal policy only in 2021, labelled as the "tilt to the Indo-Pacific", also seen as a way of supporting the American strategic presence in the region (Jie; Niblett; Vinjamuri, 2021).

Therefore, the 2010s witnessed an Anglo-Australian strategic relationship being revisited by Britain and Australia. The previous two decades were characterised by the continued development of strategic ties through the Five Eyes and, mainly, the Five Power Defence Arrangements. Despite that, by 2013, Britain had secured several security agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoU) with Australia (Meijer, 2022). According to the British Government, in the region, Australia held the largest number of “principal military agreements and arrangements” with Britain, totalling nine accords from treaties to memorandums of understanding, some of which include the United States. In 2013, the Defence Cooperation Treaty – signed in that same year – was part of the Anglo-Australian arrangements. The list consists of (1) “Defence Cooperation Treaty”, (2) the “Australia-UK MOU on Military Capability Harmonisation and Equipment Cooperation (AUMICE)”, (3) the “Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA)”, (4) the “Military Geospatial Information and Services MOU (MGIS)”, (5) the “Strategic Policy Partnership, Government Quality Assurance MOU”, (6) the “American, British, Canadian, Australian Armies Programme (ABCA)”, (7) “Air and Space Interoperability Council (ASIC)”, (8) the “Exchange Programme LONGLOOK” – with New Zealand and Australia – and (9) the “Anglo-Australia MOU on Science and Technology (AAMOST)” (United Kingdom, 2013d). Additionally, Britain has several memoranda of understanding on information sharing with Australia and New Zealand (Idem). According to Meijer (2022), the 2013 Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty “boosted collaboration” in various areas of security and defence, including weapons procurement, personnel exchanges, facility usage, further sharing of information, and joint research. Notably, some of these areas of cooperation are the basis of the 2021 AUKUS initiative. Therefore, although the Anglo-Australian strategic relationship had waned from the 1970s to the 1990s, this decline was not total, with close relations being maintained despite the absence of Britain as a major regional actor between the mid-1970s and the 2000s and the consolidation of the United States as Australia’s main “great and powerful friend”.

Through these agreements and arrangements, it is possible to argue that the Anglo-Australian relationship had entered a new phase that, from an Australian perspective, was characterised by attempts to position Britain in a way to instrumentalise it as a Great Power committed to Australia’s security preoccupations in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific. These Australian concerns could mingle easily with Britain’s, as the European power ventured into the Middle East alongside the United States, while Australia followed suit. In the 2010s, Australia would seek to instrumentalise British power in its strategic neighbourhood in the Indo-Pacific. The governments of John Howard (1996–2007) and Tony Abbott (2013–2015)

attempted to instrumentalise Britain while reinforcing it as a key part of Australian cultural and strategic identity. Another approach to Britain was performed during the premierships of Kevin Rudd (2007–2010, 2013) and Julia Gillard (2010–2013). Both Rudd's and Gillard's governments aimed to instrumentalise Britain as a player committed to Australian strategic concerns, but less as a major power that Australia should be enhancing cooperation with "in its own right". Instead, Britain was a partner Australia should work with as it moved to influence the global order through the alliance with the United States and engagement with its immediate strategic neighbourhood in Asia. In these years (2007–2013), Australia also sought to reinforce its identity as attached to Asia instead of Britain or the Anglosphere. Hence, concerning Britain, the considerations in Australia had shifted from the dissociation of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s to instrumentalisation and even reinforcing identity links – cultural and strategic – with the British (Triglavcanin, 2023).

The divergences in Britain among Australian prime ministers between 1996 and 2015 were about how special the Anglo-Australian relationship should be. In this period, the premiership of Gillard (2010–2013), a government that had a view on cooperation with Britain through the alliance with the United States and the engagement with Asia, was the one that most advanced the bilateral relationship with the AUKMIN meetings and the 2013 Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty (Triglavcanin, 2023). These moves displayed that Britain had expanded its footprint within Australia's foreign policy considerations, partly due to cooperation in the War on Terror (Bridge, 2006; Gyngell, 2017). Deepening the bilateral Anglo-Australian relationship came to have cross-party support in both countries. In Australia, the bipartisan support for increased cooperation with Britain was back after a long period from the 1970s to the early 1990s when Australian leaders sought to disassociate the nation from Britain. The period starting with the Howard Government (1996–2007) witnessed a "post-imperial normalisation" of the relationship. As Triglavcanin (2023) argues, "Australia had been legislatively fully independent of the UK for some time, and the historical baggage of dependency may have felt less severe". Moreover, in the 2010s, Britain became increasingly relevant as Australia's perception of Chinese behaviour turned worrisome and the British "tilted" to the Indo-Pacific. A strategic convergence between Britain and Australia was underway in the 2010s, pushing Canberra to instrumentalise the British strategic return to the region (Idem).

Bilateral cooperation continued to grow in the following years. As a glimpse of things to come, through the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, the Australian government declared its intention to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement with Britain once it had left the European Union.

It stated that the country was one of Australia's most relevant partners worldwide (Australia, 2017). London disclosed that, for the first time, it would extend the reach of its military satellites to "the eastern Asia-Pacific region" in 2015, aiming to establish secure communications and build a ground station in Australia. Thus, a British satellite ground station opened in Adelaide in 2016 to support Britain's military communications in Southeast Asia using the Skynet 5 satellite system (MacLennan, 2016; United Kingdom, 2015c). In 2018, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding "on activities including communications technologies, space situational awareness and satellite navigation" (United Kingdom, 2018b), marking the development of bilateral cooperation on space. Concomitantly, at the 10th AUKMIN that same year, London and Canberra agreed to expand their cooperation in the South Pacific (Meijer, 2022). On this topic, Australia supported Britain rejoining the Pacific Community – after the British withdrew in 2004 – resulting in the British return to the organisation in 2021 (Britain rejoins major..., 2021) and the opening of three new British diplomatic missions in Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu (United Kingdom, 2018c).

Additionally, London and Canberra established a Defence Industry and Capability Dialogue in 2017, a high-level ministerial dialogue aiming to deepen cooperation in the defence industry sector. The following year, the British defence industry and arms sales sector struck a significant deal that would propel British designs back to the front spot of Australian military assets. The British defence giant, BAE Systems, won the procurement for the future generation of anti-submarine (ASW) frigates of the Royal Australian Navy (Godovanyuk, 2022), worth roughly 20 billion pounds and considered the most significant project for surface military vessels in Australia's history (Meijer, 2022). By choosing a variant of the British Type 26 frigate – also known as the City class frigates – the Australian "Hunter class" brought Britain back to designing Australia's frigate fleet for the first time since the River class, which was built in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Gillett, 1988). In 2020, the two parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding to cooperate on creating and delivering the Hunter class and the Type 26 frigates. Britain and Australia agreed to exchange information on shipbuilding practices and laid down a framework that allowed both sides to utilise the frigate programmes to support Australian and British companies (Australia, 2020). The first steel was cut in June 2024 at the Osborne Naval Shipyard in Adelaide, with the vessels expected to be in active service in the mid-2030s (Australia, 2024). The British involvement in the Australian frigate fleet led to renewed large-scale cooperation in the defence industry sector while entangling Australia within the British military-industrial complex. Therefore, the announcement of an even more complex and

ambitious initiative in September 2021 occurred as the two countries enhanced their bilateral relationship, and Britain formally stated that it was “tilting” to the Indo-Pacific.

In early 2021, the British government under Boris Johnson (2019–2022) published a review of Defence, Security and Foreign Policy titled *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, setting forth the government’s vision for the role of Britain in the world until 2030 and the actions to be taken to achieve that until 2025. In general terms, the British government aimed to secure Britain as “one of the most influential countries in the world” and a “problem-solving and burden-sharing nation with a global perspective” by the early 2030s. To achieve these bold objectives, London pushed to re-engage diplomatically and commercially with areas beyond Europe, taking advantage of its soft power and privileged position in international institutions. Furthermore, Britain’s changed perceptions of China were clear. The Asian country was a “competitor” and a “systemic challenge” to British security, prosperity and values. Meanwhile, Russia was labelled the “most acute threat” to British security. On the other hand, the relationship with the United States was regarded as the most valuable of all bilateral relationships (United Kingdom, 2021).

The government also committed to expanding military capabilities and deepening British engagement with the Indo-Pacific, making Britain the European power with the “broadest, most integrated presence” in the region. Concerning Australia, Britain committed to negotiating a free trade agreement, deepening cooperation between space agencies, and sustaining and making bigger contributions to the Five Power Defence Arrangements (United Kingdom, 2021). In a follow-up command paper, the British government stated that it would return with permanent deployments of Royal Navy vessels to the Indo-Pacific, with two Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) being earmarked for permanent station in the region, with further assets, including frigates and Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels, reinforcing these OPVs in the following years. London also expressed its intention to build a new British Defence Staff in Canberra to mutually support and coordinate defence activities with the British Defence Staff based in Singapore. Officially, the 2021 Integrated Review and Command Paper symbolise the dawn of the British tilt to the Indo-Pacific (United Kingdom, 2021; 2021a), even if Britain had its strategic attention set on the region since before the opening of bases in Bahrain and Oman³². Politically, the agreement of a Free Trade Agreement between Australia and the UK in June 2021, signed in December of the same year, demonstrated for Britain an achievement of renewed attention to the regions beyond Europe (Godovanyuk, 2022).

³²The British military and territorial presence in the Indo-Pacific are extensively covered in the next chapter.

Roughly six months after the announcement of the “tilt to the Indo-Pacific” in September 2021, and during the deployment of the British Carrier Strike Group to the area, the governments of Australia, Britain, and the United States announced the creation of the AUKUS tripartite security initiative. According to its members, the AUKUS creation occurred to face the “challenges of the twenty-first century” (United States, 2021). Even though these challenges are not specified or mentioned, the security concerns are focused on China, and AUKUS is a long-term security commitment to counter the rising influence of the Asian power (Meijer, 2022; Nagata, 2023). Within this context, the primary objective, or Pillar I, of AUKUS is “to support Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy” (United States, 2021). Another equally relevant objective, labelled “Pillar II”, is trilateral cooperation to strengthen joint capabilities and interoperability. Under the auspices of AUKUS, the initial focus was “on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities” as well as increased integration of their supply chains and defence technology. An initial 18-month dialogue on the first steps to achieve and create the basic framework of AUKUS followed (Idem).

Pillar I reached its first milestone in November 2021, when Australia, Britain, and the United States signed the Agreement for the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information, which entered into force in February 2022. With that agreement, Australia would be allowed access to restricted information on American and British nuclear-powered technology and conduct joint training. The degree of technology exchange remained unclear. In 2022, additional plans were revealed, including a statement by the Australian government about plans to build a naval base for the submarines (Satake, 2023). Nearing the first anniversary of the AUKUS, on 1 September 2022, Britain and Australia agreed that personnel of the Royal Australian Navy would board Royal Navy nuclear-powered submarines, initially with HMS Anson³³, for training purposes (Australia, 2022; Satake, 2023). As negotiations between its members progressed in the following three years, it became clear that the British role would be substantial for the future submarines of the Royal Australian Navy, further attaching – alongside the Hunter class frigates, for example – British assets, design and technologies to the military capabilities of Australia.

The advent of AUKUS meant that Australia would abandon the 2016 multibillion-dollar agreement with France on constructing conventional diesel-powered submarines. Once labelled by the then Prime Minister, John Turnbull, as the “50-year alliance of collaboration” that would

³³Australia’s then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Richard Marles, was hosted by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the then British Secretary of Defence, Ben Wallace, at the commissioning of the Astute class SSN, HMS Anson, on 31 August 2022 (Australia, 2022).

transform the France–Australia relationship (Gyngell, 2017), the Australian government had its own pivot towards Britain and the United States, with the promise of advanced SSNs (Sanger, 2021). Canberra’s reasoning can be seen through its 2020 Defence Strategic Update, which recognised that expanding threats were present in its strategic surroundings and demanded additional capabilities, including SSNs, as a response (Australia, 2020). Uncertainty about the French submarine programme led Australian officials to become cautious about a potential capability gap that would leave the country without submarines for several years. Another factor was concern with regional security as the strategic environment continued to deteriorate following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and by 2021, it had become apparent that the inadequacy of the contract with France to meet emerging national security needs led to further cooperation with the two “great and powerful friends” (Sanger, 2021; Satake, 2023). From these considerations, Australia initially proposed to Britain the possibility of acquiring SSNs and improving its naval capabilities. Although details of the negotiations between London and Canberra have not been disclosed, the British agreed to support Australia. The two countries then approached the United States, which agreed to join the initiative (Satake, 2023).

It is worth noting the apparent British role in the establishment of AUKUS. Australia first turned to Britain as a pathway for SSNs and, with British support, brought the United States into the arrangement. Britain alone would have faced difficulties meeting the programme’s industrial demands, particularly due to the need to avoid a capability gap in the Royal Australian Navy. The asymmetry of Australia’s position in relation to the two great powers is evident in its approach to Britain and in the effort to convince the United States to participate in what would become AUKUS. Similarly, Britain’s position as a secondary great power was demonstrated by the industrial and political limitations that might have compelled it to seek American backing. Despite the French political push for greater cooperation with Australia in the 2010s (Gyngell, 2017), AUKUS showed that policymakers in Canberra ultimately considered the diplomatic fallout of the initiative worth the cost, attaching greater importance to Britain and the United States at France’s expense.

Nevertheless, the asymmetric nature of AUKUS came under scrutiny in Australia. As the initiative advanced, an “open letter” to the Australian government was published by concerned scholars in 2023. In the letter, they expressed concern, particularly regarding the issue of nuclear proliferation, the degree of dependence on the United States, the diplomatic consequences, and the cost of the programme. Additionally, the scholars openly recognised that the sovereignty of Australia is not only compromised by AUKUS, but stated that it was not unusual for Australia to have “limited operational sovereignty” over its military assets, and that

AUKUS elevates this dependency “to new heights”. They argued that “the pressure to submit this capability to American strategic interests will be almost impossible to resist” (Concerned Academics and Experts, 2023). On the issue of dependency before AUKUS, the leading motive is the traditional and long-standing expressive imports of American arms, with roughly 70% of Australian arms being imported from the United States, which was also the second largest market for American arms in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Reinforcing this argument, Australian defence officials “have long been dissatisfied with the stringent U.S. regulations on transfer of important military technology and information” (Satake, 2023). Critics also pointed out the billions of dollars spent by Australia on the American and British military-industrial complex with almost no chance of recovery if the project fails, and the entanglement with American military assets when antagonising China (Leckie, 2023). Although AUKUS has critics across sectors of Australian politics – including former prime ministers, academia and public opinion – it has gathered support from the country’s two largest parties. The Labor Party reflects this cross-party support under the Anthony Albanese government, which has advanced the initiative since winning the 2022 elections (Armstrong; Housden; Mao, 2023).

In March 2023, Britain, the United States, and Australia reaffirmed their agreement to support the latter’s acquisition of nuclear-powered strike submarines (SSNs) and outlined the pathway to achieve the objectives set by AUKUS since September 2021. Providing a “free and open Indo-Pacific” also received attention from the three parties. Through a joint statement, the three leaders announced that the nuclear-powered attack submarine sponsored by the trilateral initiative would be based on Britain’s next-generation submarine design, incorporating technology from all members. British and Australian shipyards were scheduled to work on the submarines during the second half of the 2020s (United States, 2023a). The aim was to deliver the first “SSN-AUKUS” to the Royal Navy in the late 2030s and to the Royal Australian Navy in the early 2040s. Additional measures disclosed in the joint statement included embedding Australian civilian and military personnel with the US Navy and the Royal Navy – as had been the case since 2022 – as well as with British and American submarine industrial bases. The United States also committed to increasing nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) visits to Australia beginning in 2023, while Britain agreed to do the same from 2026 onwards (United States, 2023a).

From 2027 onwards, both powers aim to establish “forward rotations of SSNs”, creating the Submarine Rotational Force-West, which will deploy American Virginia class and British Astute class submarines on a rotational basis at the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) base of Stirling. Officially, the purpose of the Rotational Force-West is to accelerate the training of

RAN crews and provide assets to improve AUKUS's ability to ensure regional security (United Kingdom, 2023j). Through the 2023 joint statement, the United States supported the sale of three Virginia class submarines, with the potential for two additional hulls, if necessary, in the early 2030s (United States, 2023a), which would avoid capability gaps in the RAN. Lastly, Pillar II advanced as the members declared that implementing AUKUS would require high-level trilateral cooperation on joint capabilities, technology sharing, and the integration of supply chains and the defence industry (Idem). The Australian government stated that the programme would cost 368 billion Australian dollars – roughly 201 billion pounds in 2023 – over 30 years, making it the largest single investment in military assets in Australian history (Armstrong; Housden; Mao, 2023).

One year later, in September 2024, to mark the third anniversary of AUKUS, the leaders of the three countries reaffirmed their commitment to the initiative and disclosed further progress and plans on Pillars I and II. Overall, the 2024 Joint Statement outlines steps taken by Britain and the United States to elevate Australia as an operator of conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines. Beyond advancing the training of Australian personnel with the British and American navies, the United States increased the frequency of visits by its SSNs to Australia. In a landmark event in August 2024, Australian personnel participated in the maintenance of a US SSN in Australia for the first time. Furthermore, the three parties made significant investments to expand and improve their submarine industrial bases, with Britain initially investing seven billion pounds to advance work on SSN-AUKUS and enhance production output across its Defence Nuclear Enterprise. In contrast, the United States invested 17.5 billion dollars and Australia 30 billion Australian dollars. That same year, Canberra announced that the largest British defence company, BAE Systems, had been selected to build the British-designed SSN-AUKUS (United States, 2024).

The three leaders also signed, in August 2024, an agreement for cooperation on naval nuclear propulsion. The United States and Britain will “go beyond sharing naval nuclear propulsion information” through this agreement. The two nuclear powers will transfer the material and equipment necessary for the construction, operation, and maintenance of the Australian submarines, while reaffirming Australia's continuing obligations regarding non-proliferation and its commitments with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (United States, 2024). According to the British and American governments, to remove the need to routinely access the radiative fuel of highly enriched uranium (HEU), reduce the submarines' fuel consumption, and avoid the maintenance of fuel stockpiles, nuclear material would be provided to Australia in the form of “nuclear material in complete, welded nuclear power units”

with no necessity for refuelling during the SSNs' active service (United Kingdom, 2023j). The agreement made the commitment to the non-proliferation regime legally binding between the AUKUS partners (United States, 2024). The agreement signed between the United States, the UK, and Australia may be viewed as a trilateral arrangement to reassure other countries that the Australian conventionally armed SSNs do not pose a risk to nuclear proliferation. Despite this, even though the three parties argue that consultations with the IAEA continue, the trilateral agreement remains detached from multilateral initiatives and the broader non-proliferation regime, relying instead on a pledge regarding themselves as responsible powers. In the case of the United States and Britain, both consider Australia a responsible player, thereby enabling it to operate SSNs.

Known as Pillar II, the joint development of advanced capabilities, technology, and information sharing also showed signs of progress in the first three years of AUKUS. Aiming at space warfare, AUKUS launched the Deep Space Advanced Radar Capability (DARC) programme in 2023, with a planned "global space radar system" capable of tracking threats "up to 22,000 miles (36,000 km) away from earth" (Comerford, 2023). According to the 2024 Joint Leaders Statement, undersea warfare capabilities, hypersonic missiles, quantum technologies, electronic warfare, and cyber capabilities formed part of the ongoing joint development. The three members initiated collaboration with Japan and held discussions with Canada, New Zealand, and South Korea to identify possible areas for exchange and cooperation under Pillar II. Lastly, London, Washington, and Canberra announced amendments to their export control regimes, easing defence trade and enhancing prospects for innovation and defence collaboration (United States, 2024). AUKUS also launched an industry forum in early 2024 to further increase industrial coordination among the parties (United States, 2024a).

As details emerged, it became clear that the United Kingdom could be considered "the most unambiguous beneficiary of AUKUS cooperation" (Nason, 2024). This is the case because the initiative provides Britain with its future submarine capability – via the British-designed and built SSN-AUKUS class – continuity of shipbuilding, Australian investment into the British industrial base, reduction of workforce obstacles, cost-sharing with its partners, and enhanced access to American technologies (Idem). Moreover, Britain is again entrenched in core Australian strategic thinking, serving not only as a security and diplomatic partner but also as a player that can amplify Canberra's bargaining position in Washington. Hence, British involvement is central to Australia's standing within AUKUS. Britain acted as a stepping stone for Australia to reach the United States in an improved negotiating position, placing the old mother country second only to Australia's greatest and most "powerful friend". Therefore,

Britain's ability to support Australia vis-à-vis the United States strengthens its relative position and illustrates the relevance of the American connection for both Australians and Britons. Although the creation of AUKUS also helps the government in London solidify Britain's "special relationship" with the United States – in line with one of the underlying aims of British policy in the Indo-Pacific (Crabtree, 2023) – the influence gained over Australia contributes to deepening bilateral relations between the two countries. As the junior partner in AUKUS, Australia's contributions are significantly inferior to those of Britain and the United States, including in defence industry and research and development spending (Satake, 2023). Having British support – when possible – may allow Australia to secure additional benefits and avoid potential restrictions from the United States regarding sensitive technologies, as both the United States and Britain may only provide such technology if they expect something in return (Satake, 2023). The British have demonstrated some capacity to mediate negotiations, as appears to have been the case during the establishment of AUKUS in 2021.

Despite that, as argued by Nason (2024), the implications of Britain's AUKUS efforts for Australia have been poorly understood. Attention has been focused on Australia's increased dependence on the United States. On the one hand, the initiative might be considered a sound step toward security integration with the United States, as the alliance with the Americans is becoming progressively more complex in its efforts (Townshend, 2023). On the other hand, AUKUS envelops and subjects Australia to future armed confrontation on the American side (Dean, 2022; White, 2022). Concomitantly, the role of Britain has been inadequately debated and understood. When discussed, British membership is often regarded as associated with the material limitations of the British defence industry (Briggs, 2024). In short, the tendency is to treat AUKUS as primarily an Australia–United States arrangement, with the debate involving Britain being marked by declinist viewpoints. Initially, declinism could be seen in arguments stating that British leaders would aim for "consolation prizes" as part of the initiative. However, perceptions have changed as details emerged on the role played by the British behind the scenes to establish AUKUS and as the country, among other things, managed to secure a central position in the SSN programme, with significant Australian investments being made in the British submarine industrial base (Nason, 2024).

Thus, concerning the Anglo-Australian bilateral relationship, AUKUS only reinforced security and defence cooperation that had already seen renewed interest from London and Canberra over the previous two decades. Within this context, AUKUS is cementing the strategic relevance of Britain to Australia (Nason, 2024), while providing Britain with concrete accomplishments regarding the Indo-Pacific tilt and the "Global Britain" foreign policy

formulated in the aftermath of Brexit. AUKUS symbolises a consensus between Britain, the United States, and Australia that closer defence cooperation and integration are necessary responses to the changing international strategic environment. In the case of Australia, the desire for a favourable strategic environment is a continuation of its long-standing fear of abandonment by its great and powerful friends (Gyngell, 2017).

Within this context, at the 2024 AUKMIN, the British and Australian governments announced a set of cooperative initiatives, including a new Defence and Security Cooperation Agreement, closer collaboration on science and technology and information sharing, and joint efforts to maintain “an open and stable Indo-Pacific” (United Kingdom, 2024k). The agreement facilitates the operation of the British and Australian armed forces in each other’s territory, highlighting Britain’s Carrier Strike Group deployment in 2025 and the Royal Air Force’s participation in Exercise Pitch Black. Australia also committed to ratifying Britain’s accession to the CPTPP before the end of 2024. Furthermore, in the agreement, the two countries codified the practice of consulting on matters sensitive to their sovereignty and regional security while initiating a review of “sub-treaty” level defence agreements to align them with the new treaty. Ministers also affirmed the shared Anglo-Australian understanding that the security and prosperity of the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific are inseparable (United Kingdom, 2024l), a perspective promoted by Australia to tie its partners more firmly to the region. Another bilateral defence treaty between Australia and Britain was announced in late 2024 during a meeting of AUKUS Defence Ministers in London. The treaty will set the “strategic and operational framework for bilateral cooperation under AUKUS with a focus on the core elements of the delivery of SSN-AUKUS” (United Kingdom, 2024m).

In 2025, British and Australian authorities signed another Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty that replaced and updated its equivalent dating from 2014. Through the agreement, Britain and Australia formalised the practice of consulting each other on issues that affect their sovereignty, regional security, and international peace. The treaty also included a “status of forces agreement”, facilitating the operation of their forces in each other’s countries (United Kingdom, 2025a). In the same year, Britain and Australia signed the Nuclear Powered Submarine Partnership and Collaboration Agreement, which, according to the Australian Government, “will underpin the next 50 years of UK-Australian bilateral cooperation under AUKUS Pillar I” (Australia, 2025). The agreement strengthened the bilateral arrangements of the two countries over their joint development of the SSN-AUKUS, which both are expected to operate in the early 2040s (Idem). As London and Canberra announced the agreement, the British Carrier Strike Group, led by the aircraft carrier HMS Prince of Wales, arrived in Darwin

to participate in the 2025 Talisman Sabre multinational military exercises hosted by Australia. Notably, this visit was the first of a British aircraft carrier since 1997 (Doherty, 2025).

Moreover, since the British tilt and the creation of AUKUS, the shared vision of the Indo-Pacific has become a platform through which Australia seeks to deepen cooperation. For Canberra, the discourse and rhetoric of an indivisible Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic, with interlinked security concerns, form part of its goal of internationalising disputes in its regional neighbourhood and gathering external support. The British position aligns with Australia's desires, with cooperation accelerating since 2021 (Triglavcanin, 2023), and even earlier, as previously noted. Nevertheless, since the announcement of AUKUS – particularly under the Albanese government – Canberra has attempted to restrain Britain from adopting a harsh approach in the Indo-Pacific, including an overemphasis on state-based competition and military strength, due to concerns about relations with regional nations. In short, the Albanese government holds the view that an approach sensitive to regional concerns is the most beneficial, aiming to draw Britain into a similar posture. Additionally, it seeks to manage Britain through a pragmatic lens, focusing on its strategic relevance rather than historical or emotional ties (Idem).

In conclusion, the disparity of power has been a constant feature of the Anglo-Australian relationship, with varying ramifications across the decades. Asymmetry has marked the UK-Australia bilateral relationship since its inception, from “mother country” and “family” under the institutional structures of the British Empire to Britain becoming once again one of Australia's “great and powerful friends”. Although the United States has supplanted Britain as Australia's main ally since the 1950s, asymmetry has permeated both major bilateral relationships of the former British dominion. The ramifications of this asymmetric disparity are visible in Australia's post-war desire for British nuclear weapons (ultimately denied), the unilateral British decision to withdraw from East of Suez in 1967–1968, concerns in Canberra about the end of Britain's strategic presence in the region, British accession to the EEC, Australia approaching Britain to establish AUKUS, the desire to keep Britain strategically present in the area, and the enduring fear of abandonment.

Another constant in the relationship is Australia's view of Britain as a trusted partner with shared values. Both countries have frequently highlighted the “shared traditions and values” that underpin the relationship (Triglavcanin, 2023), helping to sustain Britain's role as Australia's closest European partner and, with AUKUS and other agreements, second only to the United States overall. These shared principles have endured – though weakened – despite Australia no longer relying on Britain for prosperity or security. The bilateral relationship was

reforged following a period of attempted disassociation by Canberra from the 1970s to the early 1990s, which was largely a response to Britain's strategic disengagement and Euro-Atlantic prioritisation. The end of the Cold War and especially the War on Terror contributed to a strategic reconvergence from the late 1990s onwards (Bridge, 2006; Elijah, 2006; Gynge, 2017). Notably, the shared alliance with the United States – just as in the case of Japan – played a key role in Britain's and Australia's involvement in the War on Terror and in strengthening bilateral ties during the 2000s.

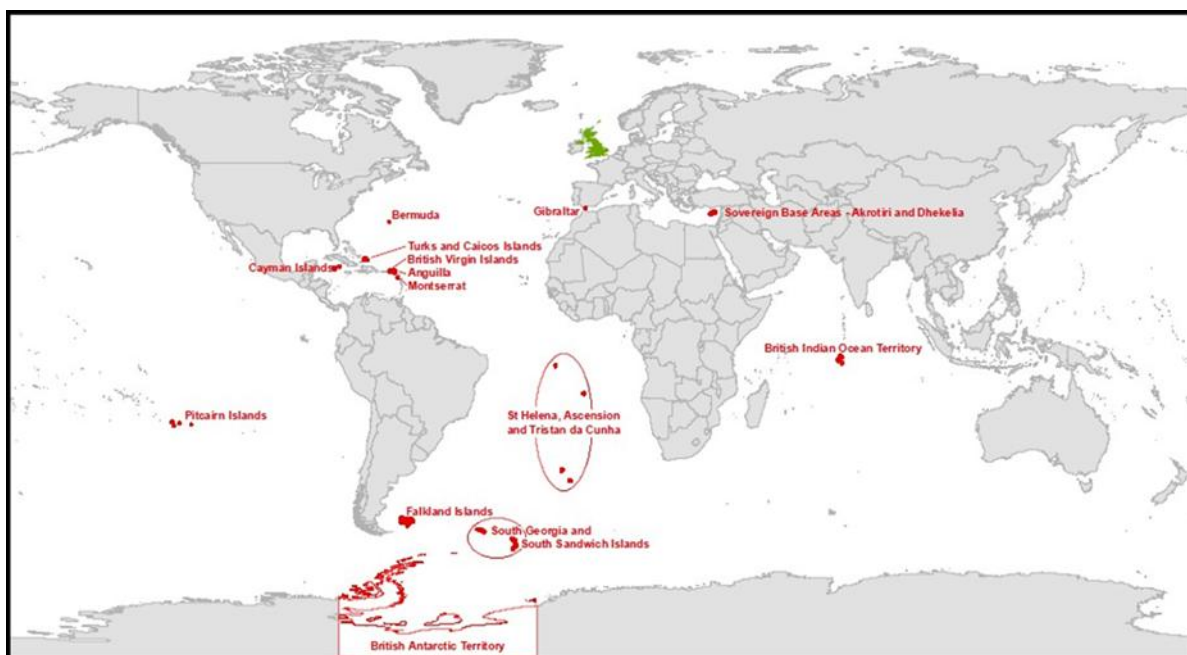
British interest in deeper defence and security cooperation with Australia emerged as its perception of China changed in the 2010s. Reinforcing ties with regional “like-minded” partners became a feature of British foreign policy east of Suez, with Japan and Australia prioritised (Meijer, 2022). The establishment of AUKUS in 2021 might be regarded as the high point of efforts from London to reinvent its regional role and reassert itself as a central partner for both Canberra and Washington, embedding itself in the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape. AUKUS also entwines Australia within the British and American military-industrial complexes and reinforces the country's position as an entrepôt of Anglo-American strategic interests. Strategically, AUKUS eliminated any serious doubts about Australia's inclusion in efforts to preserve the status quo that benefits the United States and, to a lesser extent, Britain. It is tenable to argue that the bilateral strategic relationship, which underwent reconvergence during the War on Terror, has become more resilient due to shared concerns over China's rise. As a new great power emerges with the potential to become a regional hegemon, the current and former hegemons seek to defend the world order they helped shape. For Australia, although not without agency, the limits of its material resources as a middle power are evident, as it lacks the capacity to decisively influence its “great and powerful” allies during times of crisis and global reordering (Holbraad, 1984). In the words of Frederic Eggleston (1875–1954), an Australian diplomat analysing the interwar security system in the Pacific: “(...) unless the United States of America can be relied upon to pull her weight in the same direction as Britain the whole system might break down. Australia (...) can only watch the play of forces upon which her fate depends.” (Eggleston, apud. Cuffe, 2021).

5. THE MILITARY PRESENCE OF UNITED KINGDOM IN THE INDO-PACIFIC SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR

Throughout this chapter the military presence of the United Kingdom in the Indo-Pacific is going to be analysed within the context of its relative decline while attempting to take evidence on the existence of a British “management and containment” of that relative decline. This “relative decline” is often seen through the increasing strain put on the British Government’s budget and commitments to local nations and territories influencing the overall characteristics of the British military presence overseas. Therefore, while analysing successive British Governments’ approaches to the UK’s strategic presence in the region, considerations about the motivations and planning that have led to the outcomes examined during the two-decade scope of this work shall contribute to the understanding of whether there is a British strategy on the containment of the relative decline or not. In addition, the analysis of the UK’s military presence is accompanied by an exploration concerning the infrastructure of the military installations, the increasing or decreasing trends of the size of the personnel deployed, alongside the reasoning and objectives expected to be achieved by the British Government from each of these overseas bases. Thus, to achieve those purposes, this chapter has been divided by territory or state receiving the British military personnel in the three decades after the end of the Cold War.

As can be seen in the map below, the military deployment of the UK in the region is also supported by out-of-area British territories and bases. Both the South Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea have British possessions that support the UK’s Armed Forces. These military bases overseas aid the British power projection, primarily by reducing costs and dependency on other countries. In the Mediterranean, Gibraltar and the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia in Cyprus continue to have a similar strategic role to that noticed by Alfred Mahan (1890) in his works. These territories remain supporting bases for the British sea power, assuring that the Royal Navy can operate overseas at reduced risks while acting as guardians of the regional interests of London (Mahan, 1987 [1890]). The enclaves on Cyprus function as staging points for operations in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and regions East of Suez. In its turn, Gibraltar acts for similar purposes for deployments to the South Atlantic, Caribbean, and Western Mediterranean.

Map 02: The British Overseas Territories (1997-2025)



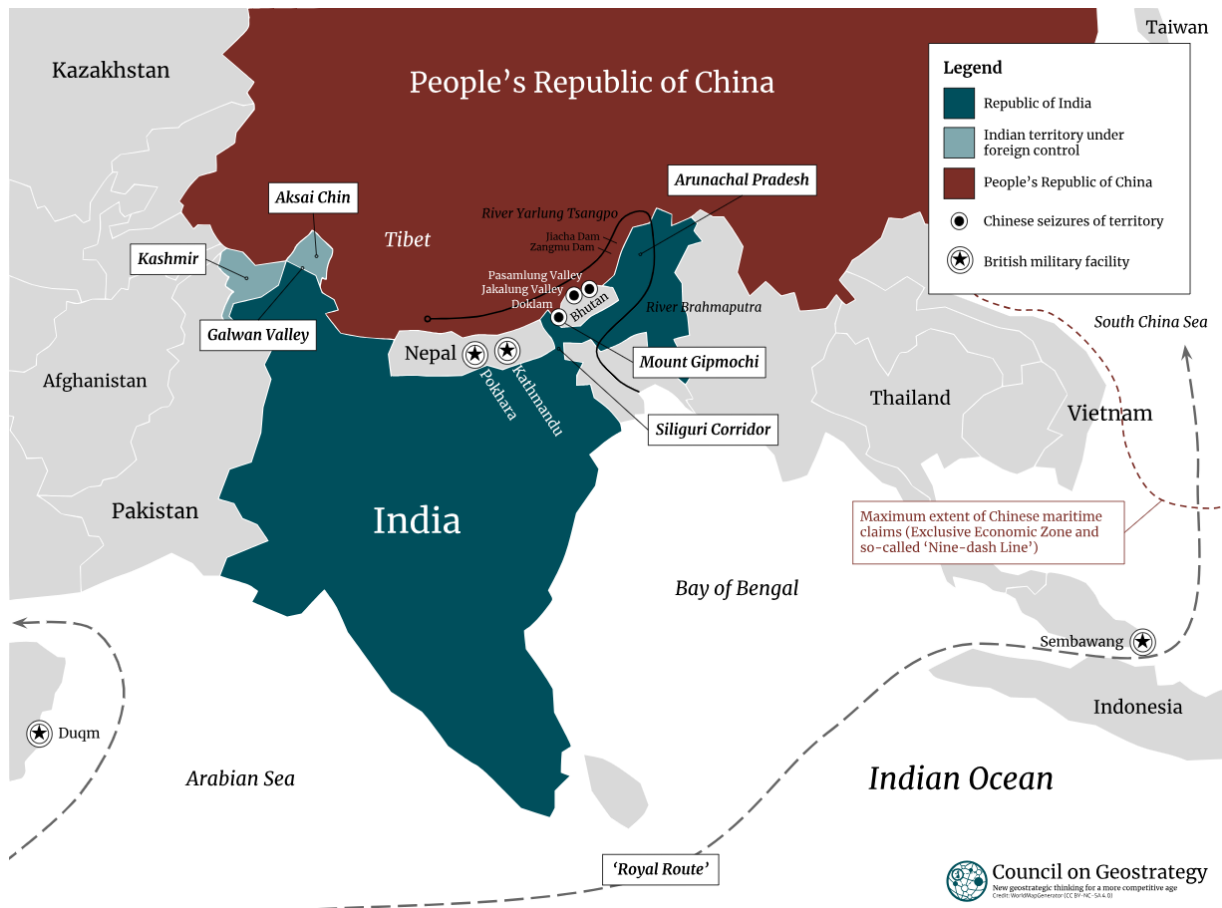
Source: United Kingdom, 2012, p. 2.

Concomitantly, the South Atlantic offers the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force staging points for the Indian Ocean through Ascension and Saint Helena islands. Moreover, as Map 02 shows, the Falkland Islands support deployments to the Eastern Pacific Ocean (European Union, 2009). Within this context, in the days after the Argentine invasion of the Falklands in April 1982, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher stated to the Reagan Administration that the islands were a gateway to the Pacific, mainly if the Panama Canal were to become non-operational or inaccessible to American and allied vessels (Thatcher, 1993). As one of the two territories controlled by London, the Pitcairn Islands are covered by this work and considered the easternmost frontier of the “British Indo-Pacific” south of the Equator. Hence, Britain created a region that includes the western coast of Anglo-Saxon America but is unprecise about the role played by the Pacific part of Latin America within its Indo-Pacific vision.

It is worth highlighting the British presence in Nepal as a unique case for analysing its military presence. During the period examined, it was largely unclear whether the British vision of its presence in the Asian country is part of its Indo-Pacific tilt or not. Only in the Strategic Defence Review 2025 does the British Government highlight Nepal as part of its regional “Indo-Pacific” region (United Kingdom, 2025). Within this context, London has centred its strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific more focused on the maritime rimlands – with cooperation or military bases in Oman, Diego Garcia, Singapore, Brunei, Australia and Japan, for example –, in part due to the geoeconomic considerations and the preservation of the maritime communication lines to the UK (Sergeant, 2022). Despite that, as can be seen below in Map 03,

the British Ministry of Defence maintains two bases in Nepal for recruiting and training Gurkha volunteers to join the British Army, a practice that goes back to 1815 during the rule of the East India Company in India (Nepal, 2019; Sergeant, 2022), and remains the only recruitment for the British Armed Forces outside the UK and the Commonwealth of Nations.

Map 03 – British bases and the Himalayan region in relation to the Indo-Pacific



Source: Seargent, 2022; Council on Geostrategy.

In 2025, the traditional recruitment of Gurkhas at the British bases in Pokhara and Kathmandu represented up to 8% of the British Army (United Kingdom, 2025). Notably, Anglo-Nepalese relations have been marked by the proximity with British officials and royal state visits occurring almost annually between 1993 and 2019, with the frequency increasing in the late 2000s. According to the Nepalese Government, “the United Kingdom remains one of the most significant providers of development assistance to Nepal”, with the annual aid on an increasing trend, and with the Gurkha soldiers as the “most visible bridge” between the two nations (Nepal, 2019). Beyond that, the Gurkhas comprise one battalion of the British Army with two regiments, which traditionally rotate between the UK and Brunei as part of bilateral security arrangements with the Bruneian Sultan (Tossini, 2020), playing a role in the broader British Indo-Pacific strategy. Lastly, Britain’s military presence and relatively close political

and economic ties with Nepal place the country, perhaps unwillingly, in the geopolitics of the Himalayas. The lack of a British regional strategy is met with the apparent growing view in London that to remedy this issue, Britain has to place Nepal as a secondary part of the Indo-Pacific tilt, might lead to a dysfunctional stance as China encroaches in Bhutan's north frontier and Nepal remains a key area to deal with refugees from Tibet and the hydric resources of the Himalayas, affecting regional players, including India, Nepal and Bangladesh (Sergeant, 2022).

Thus, the territories and military bases of the country that will be explored in this chapter include Oman in the Middle East, British Indian Ocean Territory, Singapore, Hong Kong (from 1990 to 1997) and Brunei in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea respectively, and the only country in East Africa that has a British military presence, Kenya. Strategic considerations about the British territory of the Pitcairn Islands are not explored due to the lack of military infrastructure on the Islands, meaning that the British Indian Ocean Territory is the only case that remained under British between the 1990s and early 2020s that has been the target of defence-related investments.

Through these analyses, it is possible to understand the intentions behind the British Government's decisions when establishing or closing military bases and retaining or handing over territories in the Indo-Pacific. In other words, analysing the British military presence in the Indo-Pacific provides evidence for questioning whether the UK has had a grand strategic approach to the region or not and whether there was a planned management of the British relative decline during the three decades after the end of the Cold War.

5.1 The UK's permanent military deployments in the Indo-Pacific (1991-2023)

During the Cold War, the British military presence East of Suez experienced a sharp decline. The Indian subcontinent was the starting point of the post-war wave of decolonisation that culminated in the almost complete dismantling of the British Empire four decades after the end of the Second World War³⁴. Similarly, that process would cease in the region it started with the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, which is regarded as the "end of the British Empire" (Ferguson, 2004). Following the independence of the British Indian subcontinent, the UK no longer had the strategic resources of its foremost imperial possession. As stated by

³⁴The independence of the Indian subcontinent from the UK between 1947 and 1948 is not the first case of successful detachment from the direct control of the Empire. However, the relative position of the UK in the early years of the Cold War was relatively fragile, having nationalistic ideas spreading across the Empire while facing an increasing scarcity of resources to maintain Imperial order and its legitimacy.

Kennedy (2004), the British hegemonic power rested on its navy, commercial and industrial prowess and Empire. The British Indian Empire (or the British Raj) was the “Jewel in the Crown”. During the late nineteenth century, the economic resources of this “Empire within the empire” could only be surpassed by its contribution with manpower for the Imperial forces. It also weighed heavily in favour of the UK’s prestige as the foremost naval power of the century and a relevant land power (James, 1994; 1998) that detained a global reach.

Within this context, as Alfred Mahan (1987 [1890]) noted, Britain pursued an increasing number of supporting bases for its British Indian Empire. After India’s independence, the British strategic position would decline, furthered by Britain’s economic woes. However, considerations within the Government in London concerning the viability of the remaining colonies would refrain from advancing into implementing a “complete withdrawal”. Only in the second half of the 1960s that the British Government decided that holding onto its position as an imperial power East of Suez was unattainable. Therefore, in 1971 the UK withdrew most of its forces and conceded independence for the remaining British protectorates in the Gulf (Darwin, 2011). From 1971 to 1984, Brunei and Hong Kong remained two of the most significant British possessions overseas. After Brunei’s independence in 1984, Hong Kong would remain the last considerable territorial and economic glimpse of the British Empire.

Table 01: British bases in the Indo Pacific and Persian Gulf (1991-2022)

Facility	Location	Basing Arrangement	Nearby Strategic Hotspot
Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia	Diego Garcia	British Territory (est. 1965)	Indian Ocean
British Forces Overseas Hong Kong (up to 1997)	Hong Kong	British Territory (no longer operational)	South China Sea and Taiwan Strait
British Army Training Unit Kenya (BATUK)	Kenya	Defence Cooperation Agreement (est. 1964; renewed in 2020)	Horn of Africa and Western Indian Ocean
British Defence Singapore Support Unit	Singapore	Five Power Defence Arrangements (est. 1971)	Strait of Malacca and South China Sea
British Forces Brunei	Brunei	Bilateral Agreement (est. 1984)	Strait of Malacca and South China Sea
UK Joint Logistics Support Base	Oman	Joint Defence Agreement (est. 2017)	Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf
UK Naval Support Facility (HMS Jufair)	Bahrein	Bilateral Defence Arrangement (est. 2014)	Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf
RAF Al Udeid Air Base	Qatar	Multilateral Agreement (est. 2018)	Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf
Al Minhad Air Base	United Arab Emirates	Bilateral Agreement (est. circa 2010)	Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf

Table based on Girardi, Hooft and Sweijjs (2022)

Thus, considering the scope of this work, in the late 1990s the British presence in the Indo-Pacific was severely diminished. Britain had retained two territories in the area, the Pitcairn Islands and British Indian Ocean Territory. The former has little to no strategic utility due to its geographic position and size, small population, and terrain. At the same time, the latter would become one of the main centres of British and American basing in the Indian Ocean. However, as can be noticed in Table 01, in the 2010s, the British Government reopened military bases in the region, expanding its regional presence for the first time since 1971.

Lastly, through Table 01 is possible to have a brief glimpse at the changes that the British military presence and strategic engagement went through during the three decades since 1991. Moreover, the main inference taken is the noticeable expansionist trend of the British military installations in the Indo-Pacific and the Gulf in the 2010s. Having opened bases in four different countries (Bahrein, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman) since 2010 and renewed its presence in Kenya and Brunei, Britain's strategic footprint surpassed that of France, which has six military bases throughout the area and can be considered as the foremost European power in the region between 1997 and 2010. Thus, purely through a quantitative-only analysis concerning basing infrastructure, in the early 2020s, Britain has more facilities East of Suez than France, Germany, and Italy combined³⁵ (Girardi; Hooft; Sweijs, 2022). However, further qualitative and quantitate analysis is required to have an adequate understanding of the British standing in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in relation to other Great Powers.

5.2 The British Indian Ocean Territory (1965-2025)

The British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) has been under uninterrupted British sovereignty since 1814, when France formally ceded Mauritius and its dependencies to the United Kingdom in the Treaty of Paris after four years of British occupation. Located close to the centre of the Indian Ocean, mid-way between Indonesia and Tanzania, the Territory covers a land area of only 60 square kilometres. The main island, Diego Garcia, accounts for more than half of its land area (CIA, 2022). During most of British rule, the Territory was administered as part of the former Crown Colony of Mauritius. In 1965, roughly three years before the

³⁵Considering the German and Italian "detachments" in Djibouti independently. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in the early 2020s, these two countries used the French facilities in the African nation (Girardi; Hooft; Sweijs, 2022). Lastly, the occasional Italian deployments at the Ahmad al-Jaber Air Base in Kuwait are not considered part of Italy's military installations in the region, mainly because these deployments are not permanent and are located in the Persian Gulf where the British have facilities in Bahrein, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

independence of Mauritius, the Chagos Archipelago - comprising the current BIOT - was detached by the UK from Crown Colony and reorganised into a separate British dependency. The following year, the British and American governments reached an agreement by which the UK made the BIOT's main island, Diego Garcia, available to the United States for military purposes (International Court of Justice, 2018). Three islands (Aldabra, Farquhar and Desroches) were transferred to the Seychelles, which became independent in 1976. Concerning the local population, between 1967 and 1973, "former agricultural workers", permanent residents of the islands, were relocated to the Seychelles and especially to Mauritius (CIA, 2022). By the mid-1970s, the new Anglo-American base was already operational.

Although the British Indian Ocean Territory is the last British Overseas Territories in the Indian Ocean, in the heyday of the British Empire, it was one of several islands under the British flag serving mainly as coaling stations for the Royal Navy. During the late Victorian Era, Diego Garcia – alongside Zanzibar, Seychelles, Calcutta, Cocos Islands and Colombo – was one of the main connecting links between the vast basing stations supporting the British naval power in the Indian Ocean (Gray, 2014; 2017). Thus, its retention by the British Government in 1965 seems to have origins in the Island's strategic position and historical service. Nevertheless, before analysing the current Anglo-American military presence on Diego Garcia and its strategic utility, it is necessary to advance further into the question of the reasoning and motivation behind the British retention of the Chagos Archipelago.

Despite its small size, the United States recognised the BIOT as the home of one of its most strategic bases in the world. This relevance has been growing since the rise of strategic competitors in Asia, especially China (Erickson; Ladwig; Mikolay, 2010). However, in the 1960s, British decision-makers had intense discussions on the utility of retained territories in the region. In other words, although the British Indian Ocean Territory has a strategic location, the rationale behind its retention was not automatically successful in London without debates and opposition. Mainly because of the economic fragility of the UK in the two decades after the end of the Second World War, discussions about military disengagement and defence cuts were dominant within the ranks of the British Government. Hence debate that resulted in the retention of the BIOT had its origins in questioning the economic costs and strategic benefits of renewing the British aircraft carrier capabilities (Brewster, 2018).

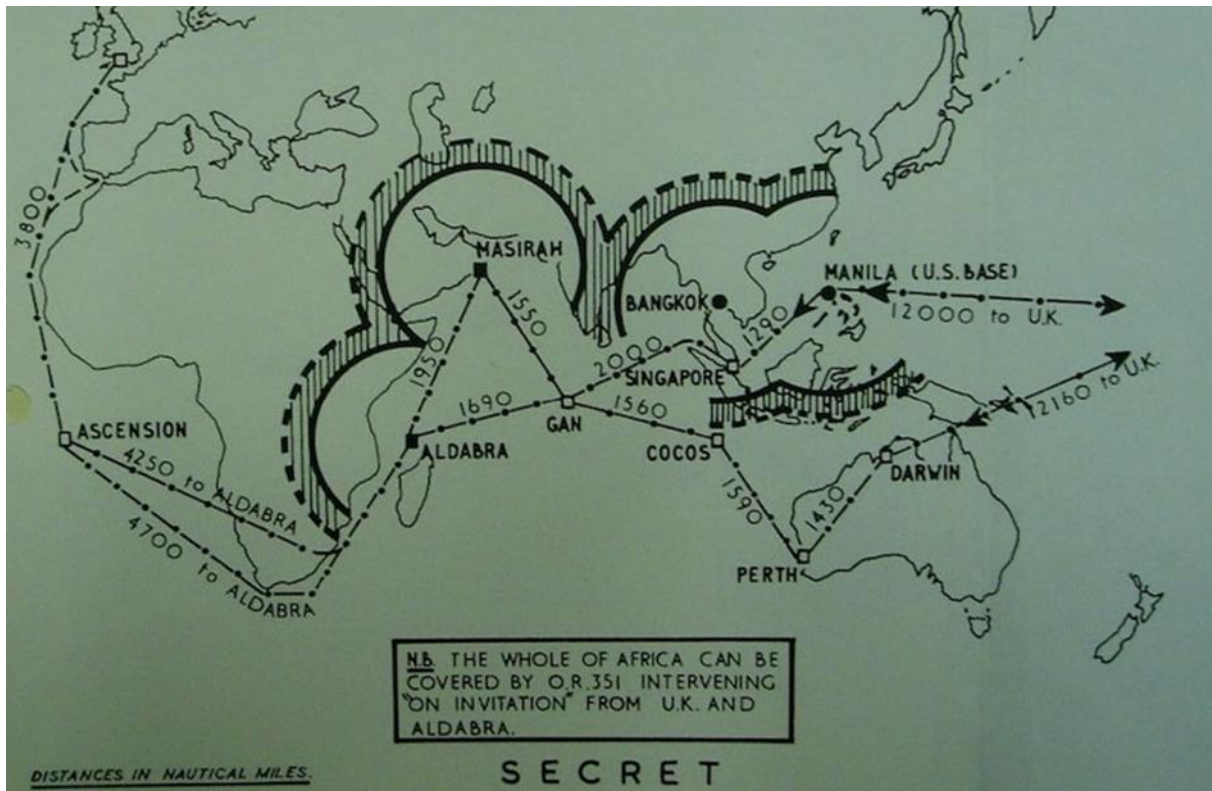
In the early 1960s, with Defence cuts and the advancement of new technologies, the Royal Navy found its position to be fragile. When the British Government initiated discussions about the future generation of aircraft carriers for the naval service, the overall resources were relatively scarce. The unwillingness of the Government to maintain the budget without cuts led

to renewed inter-service rivalry between the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force (RAF). Fearing severe expenditure reductions, the RAF proposed an “Island Strategy” that could be implemented without renewing the nation’s aircraft carrier capability. According to the RAF, carriers had serious limitations, including that they could not operate under “major land-based air threat” and had “limited operational endurance” (Reddy, 2020). The basic objective of the Island Strategy was to retain a British military presence East of Suez at the minimum expenditure (Dyndal, 2016). The Admiralty rebuked the RAF’s plans arguing that the carrier could provide flexibility that was impossible in an Island Strategy. In addition, the Admiralty stated that the strategy of the RAF would be significantly damaged if the UK lost the sovereignty or the rights to use the chosen islands (Brewster, 2018).

Dyndal (2016) noticed that the Island Strategy of the Air Ministry – responsible for RAF affairs until 1964 – was “thorough and of a great magnitude”. The Air Ministry’s conceptual ideas for the employment of land-based air power instead of the carrier-based one are seen through the correspondence with the Ministry of Defence and the Treasury, which surpassed the Admiralty’s exchanges in the same period. Within this context, Dyndal (2016) states that “there are no deep ranging studies dealing with these studies [of the Island Strategy]”. According to the author, the main reason for the absence of studies on the Island Strategy of the Air Ministry can be explained “by the fact that nothing came of the ‘Island Strategy’ proposal”, even though politicians used the essence of its concepts when cancelling the procurements of the next generation of large aircraft carriers for the Royal Navy (CVA-01 to 04) in 1966 (Dyndal, 2016). Nevertheless, contrary to what was argued by Dyndal, at least one thing did come from the Island Strategy or was influenced by it. Its creation occurred during the same period of the inter-service rivalry and intense correspondence between the Air Ministry and other sectors of the British ministerial apparatus. The result is the British Indian Ocean Territory, one of the land-based fields for the Anglo-American air power East of Suez.

Through Map 04, it is possible to visualise the Island Strategy basing points from the British Islands to the Indian Ocean. Notably, the Air Ministry counted on territories in the South Atlantic but gave no highlights to bases in the Mediterranean beside Gibraltar. Hence, the main basing or staging points in the Island Strategy of 1962 are Gibraltar, Ascension, Aldabra (retained in 1965 as part of the BIOT), Masirah, Gan, Singapore and the Australian Cocos Islands and coastal cities of Perth and Darwin. In 1962, Britain had direct control of the Ascension Island, Gibraltar, Aldabra, Masirah and Gan. Meanwhile, Singapore was set to join the Federation of Malaya the following year, but British military installations would remain.

Map 04: The Island Strategy (1962)



Source: Brewster, 2018; British National Archives (AIR 19/997).

However, only four territories or islands were considered essential for the Island Strategy to achieve operational status: Aldabra, Masirah, Gan and Cocos. In short, regular Army troops and land-based air defence systems (radar and land-to-air missiles) were to be deployed to those four islands from Britain. Accordingly, some new bases would be employed as “staging positions, and those closest to a conflict would act as mounting bases” (Dyndal, 2016). The bases would be the departure points for troops lifted in by transport aircraft, forming air links from Britain to South East Asia. Combat aircraft and land-based attack systems would support transport aircraft, which were the “delivery system” of hard power of the Island Strategy. Its sponsors at the Air Ministry argued that the Island Strategy had an operational autonomy of 28 days. After that, seaborne reinforcements would be necessary. Thus, the Air Ministry had two different objectives to achieve. The first one was the establishment of safe routes for military air transportation, while the second was the creation of “staging and mounting bases for offensive operations” (Dyndal, 2016).

The path of the Air Ministry to avoid the renewal of the Royal Navy’s aircraft carriers would be difficult. In February 1960, the Minister of Defence stated that the carriers were the most flexible force that could be deployed “in any place where there might be trouble brewing” (Dyndal, 2016). In November of that same year, the Admiralty stated to Parliament that the

Navy would need to start the planning for the future generation of carriers that would enter service in the 1970s. The investment could be spread over a decade, easing the budgetary constraints. In December 1961, Lord Mountbatten, former Viceroy of British India and then the current Chief of the Defence Staff, declared that the Air Ministry's plans for land-based power projection East of Suez could be unreliable. Other Chiefs of Staff Committee members shared Lord Mountbatten's views on fixed bases. For the Chiefs, the future of that strategy was "uncertain". Adding to the side of the Royal Navy, the Chiefs of Staff and the Minister of Defence believed that the Navy would get its desired replacements. Despite that, initially, in 1961, the Government forced the Air Ministry and Admiralty to co-operate on the issue of new carriers, demanding the identification of "common grounds" between the interests of the two departments (Dyndale, 2016).

In 1961, a divergence between the Admiralty, supported by almost all members of the Chief of Defence Staff Committee, and the Air Ministry concerning the reliability of fixed bases had become apparent. Through the Joint Services Seaborne Force (JSSF), the Admiralty had been planning strategic contingencies for the British power projection to become less dependable on overseas bases. The Navy was foreseeing a scenario when the country might have access to only one significant base East of Suez, likely in Australia (Speller, 2005; United Kingdom, 1961). In this respect, the Admiralty's plans reflected the British Government's policy. Strategic mobility was the countermeasure that the Government would adopt in the 1962 Defence White Paper as a tool to balance future losses of military bases (Speller, 2005; United Kingdom, 1962). The Admiralty also planned to maintain two carriers East of Suez, one in the Indian Ocean or the Middle East, while the other would operate in the Far East (Dyndale, 2016). Accordingly, the renewal of the carrier fleet had to advance.

Concomitantly to this debate, since the Suez Crisis of 1956, the Air Ministry had to deploy solutions to the increasing opposition of Arab nations to allow over-flights of British military aircraft. The RAF Gan in the Maldives was built originally as part of a strategy to counter the air blockade of the Arab nations. Meanwhile, the United States entered negotiations with Britain about the possible development of the airstrip on Ascension Island (Dyndale, 2016). Following the Air Ministry's advice, the British Government allowed the expansion of the military installations on Ascension while retaining full access rights to the future facilities. It is worth noting that roughly 26 years later, during the early days of the Falklands War in 1982, the British Government, under Margaret Thatcher, reinforced those rights of access after an initial disagreement with the American Administration under Ronald Reagan (Thatcher, 1993). Therefore, for preceding reasons, by the early 1960s, the Air Ministry had a few

strategically placed bases (Gibraltar, Ascension, and Gan) that could link the British Isles to the Indian Ocean, relying solely on British territories. Needing only a new airfield on Aldabra, the Island Strategy had an advantage over the carriers. It was a seemingly cost-effective choice that could ensure the continuity of Britain's role as a regional actor East of Suez.

Despite its apparent cost-effectiveness, the limitations of the Island Strategy would prove to be overwhelming to surpass the carrier strike approach of the Admiralty. The assumptions of the Air Ministry and Admiralty were tested in crises in Oman (1957), Kuwait (1961), Tanganyika and Zanzibar (1964), and Aden (1967). The British intervention in those crises required joint capabilities, precisely the kind of deployment that the Admiralty argued a fleet of carriers could provide. Additionally, those operations proved that even though air transport was useful in deploying troops to capture airfields, airborne or long-range air transport operations were impossible without air superiority. The RAF could not provide the needed air superiority without an aircraft carrier deployed to the regions that were far from their fixed airfields (Speller, 2010). In Britain, the case of Kuwait in 1961 significantly impacted the understanding of the value of aircraft carriers (Lee, 1981).

Therefore, the Macmillan Government (1957-1963) of the Conservative Party opted for the plans of the Admiralty, agreeing to build the first (CVA-01) of a future fleet of new aircraft carriers. Concerning the Air Ministry, the Government rejected the idea of the Island Strategy. Despite that, in a turn of events, facing new financial difficulties, the Harold Wilson's Labour Government (1964-1970) cancelled the CVA-01 programme through the 1966 Defence White Paper. The RAF benefited as the Government initially followed the plans for an Island Strategy. However, the very decision to adopt the Island Strategy in 1966 also displayed an overall reduction in Britain's regional ambitions. London indirectly recognised the Island Strategy as an inferior plan when compared to the carrier fleet. But with reduced ambitions, the plans of the then already defunct Air Ministry³⁶ would suffice (Speller, 2010).

In 1967 and 1968, two supplements followed the 1966 defence review. Those papers announced the strategic withdrawal of almost all British forces deployed East of Suez by 1971 and a reduction in the need for supporting facilities in the Indian Ocean (Pickering, 1998). The British Government's decision rendered the Island Strategy almost entirely without purpose. Just two years after its approval, the Government almost completely scrapped the Strategy. The British Indian Ocean Territory can be only partially attributed to the plans of the Air Ministry,

³⁶In 1964, during a ministerial reformulation within the United Kingdom, the Air Ministry merged with the War Office and Admiralty to form the current Ministry of Defence.

for it planned a British base on Aldabra and an American one on Diego Garcia. London abandoned its plans for the island of Aldabra in November 1967 (Stoddart, 1968). Britain transferred Aldabra and a few other islands of the British Indian Ocean Territory back to the Seychelles when this nation achieved independence in 1976. That year, the RAF base on Gan Island was closed, and the military facilities were handed over to the Maldives (Jefford, 1988). Thus, the British would rely on the facilities on Diego Garcia. Nevertheless, Diego Garcia, Ascension and Gibraltar continued to display their usefulness to British forces, operating in similar ways that the Island Strategy once had envisaged, particularly Ascension and Gibraltar during the Falklands War (Hastings; Jenkins, 2010).

That said, it is worth highlighting that the British Indian Ocean Territory had a dual utility. It would provide an adequate military base for the Americans on Diego Garcia, while the British would have a similar base on Aldabra. The latter base had origins in the Island Strategy of the Air Ministry, and the American – and later Anglo-American – base on Diego Garcia was a bilateral arrangement. Therefore, the retention of the British Indian Ocean Territory is at least partially a legacy of the considerations of the British Government on how to continue its permanent presence in the region. As Dyndal (2016) correctly implies, the Island Strategy had an indirect interest in Diego Garcia. Since the RAF base on Gan was closed in 1976 due to reduced demands from declining commitments in the Far East, Diego Garcia's utility remained and still is influenced by the strategic thinking of the early 1960s.

Additionally, the Admiralty's argument concerning the political future of the territories also had significant foretelling and echoed concerns from the Colonial Office. As one minister of the Colonial Office declared in October 1964: "It would be unacceptable to both the British and the American defence authorities if facilities of the kind proposed were in any way to be subject to the political control of ministers of a newly emergent independent state." (Sand, 2009). Considering the decolonisation process and the British withdrawal from the region in 1971, just a few years after the creation of the BIOT in 1965, Britain could only rely on the Anglo-American facilities at Diego Garcia, the remaining British naval installations in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Brunei. It is also possible to argue that Gibraltar, the BIOT, Ascension Island are the remnants of what should have been the Island Strategy. However, only the BIOT creation and retention has a direct influence from the Island Strategy. Within that context, British air bases or supply depots in Australia and its territory of Cocos never materialised. The reopening of British military facilities in Oman in 2018 (United Kingdom, 2017), relatively close to the former RAF base at Masirah, along with renewed defence co-operation with Australia in 2021 through the AUKUS (Brooke-Holland; Curtis; Mills; 2021),

has a resemblance to what the British briefly planned for their post-imperial presence in the region.

Concerning the inter-service debate of the early 1960s, the ultimate victory-after-defeat of the Air Ministry proved to be short-lived. Even the remaining British facilities in Singapore were largely naval-oriented instead of air-focused. Concomitantly, the Royal Navy got its aircraft carrier replacement. A reduced procurement for small carriers filled the gap that would have appeared if the Government had carried on the Air Ministry's plans of the first half of the 1960s (Dyndal, 2016). In the East of Suez area, the hybrid retention of one territory and a fleet of "light" carriers was the unintentional consequence of the UK's economic fragilities and rapidly changing strategic considerations of the 1960s. The rationale behind the British Indian Ocean Territory was to ensure the continuity of a permanent British and American military presence in the Indian Ocean while reinforcing the UK's standing as the main ally of the United States. That principle remains a cornerstone of the British foreign and defence policy in the region (United Kingdom, 2021).

Nonetheless, the British Government had plans to create separated British and American bases within the BIOT. The Government included the island of Aldabra within the new territory in November 1965, weeks before a final decision on the Island Strategy was even agreed (Dyndal, 2016). As mentioned above, the British significantly modified those plans after the 1967 and 1968 supplements to the 1966 Defence White Paper. Since the 1976 handover of RAF Gan to the Maldives, Britain turned to Diego Garcia for its reduced operations (Jefford, 1988), redefining the base as an Anglo-American staging point for operations, similarly to Ascension Island in the South Atlantic.

The American involvement in the British Indian Ocean Territory was formalised in 1966 through an Exchange of Notes, which allowed the United States to use the territory for Defence purposes for 50 years. If neither party terminated the arrangement during the two last years of its validity, the bilateral agreement could have a 20-years extension. Britain would determine its new terms and retain all the facilities in case of termination of the arrangement (United Kingdom, 2014). Supplementary agreements in 1972 and 1976 removed the time limit of 20 years, indicating that the arrangements "shall continue in force for as long as the BIOT Agreement continues in force" or until the parties agree that Diego Garcia is no longer required for defence purposes (Sand, 2009). Despite the absence of the demand for renewal after 50 years, both parties expressed interest in continuing with the joint base on Diego Garcia. In 2016 the agreement was renewed by mutual agreement for the additional 20 years extension firstly

envisaged in 1966. Since the utility of the Diego Garcia was proved once again during the war in Iraq, the renewal was in line with United States' strategic interests (Mance, 2016).

Concerning the American investments, in March 1971, the United States initiated the build-up of facilities on Diego Garcia. That same year, the US laid down an airfield and naval communication base. Meanwhile, the UK advanced with the controversial depopulation of the archipelago, which had begun in 1968. In October, the British Government bought the primary source of economic revenue of Diego Garcia, a coconut plantation and transferred its workers to another island. In 1974, the UK paid Mauritius to resettle the islanders (Sand, 2009). Roughly two years after the arrival of the American engineers, a Naval Communication Station was completed by the US Navy (Edis, 2004). It would take years for an increase in the utility of the facilities for the British. Until 1976 the military facilities on Diego Garcia would witness an almost exclusive American presence. Only after 1976, the eventual military overflights of the RAF would rely on Diego Garcia, located just south of the former British base at Gan.

However, the strategic value of the Territory for its users would increase enormously – especially for the Americans – as the 1970s unfolded, packed with political and strategic setbacks for the United States. The events that marked those strategic setbacks were the fall of the American-backed Khmer Republic's capital, Phnom Penh, to the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975, the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese on 30 April 1975, and the Mayaguez incident on 12-15 May 1975. In addition, the Soviet Union displayed an increasing naval presence in Aden (a former British protectorate) while building an airbase in Somalia. All these facts caused the United States to review its position in the region, leading to a request to the UK to allow the expansion of the facilities on Diego Garcia. After the British approval, the United States enlarged the island's airfield and built anchorage facilities (EDIS, 2004).

The Iranian Revolution (1978-1979) and the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979-1981) led to a new phase of investments in the military infrastructure of Diego Garcia. According to Edis (2004), after the event in Iran, the United States and the UK sought to ensure the safety of the flow of petroleum from the Gulf States through the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, the British Government allowed the Americans to invest in new facilities. During the early 1980s, the United States expanded the local airfield leading it to have two parallel runways capable of basing heavy bombers. Concerning the naval facilities, after improvements and expansions, including anchorages facilities, fuel storage hangars, and a deep-water pier, Diego Garcia became a naval base for the largest vessels in the US Navy (Edis, 2004). Thus, American and British aircraft carriers could deploy in the Indian Ocean without relying on other countries. In

the mid-1980s, the Anglo-American base could receive thousands of personnel from the three military services.

Hence, the words of Admiral John S. McCain statement that “as Malta is to the Mediterranean, Diego Garcia it to the Indian Ocean – equidistant from all points” achieved a new meaning in the 1980s (Mancham, 2001, p.44). After more than a decade of American basing rights, the “Malta of the Indian Ocean” could perform similar duties that once Malta did for the British Empire. Once envisaged as an “austere communications facility”, the base on Diego Garcia would become one of the most important bases of the United States overseas. As Sand (2009) notices, it effectively turned the Indian Ocean from a “British lake east of Suez” into an American Lake. In 1987, a further Exchange of Notes determined that all procurements for the construction and maintenance of the military base could be supplied exclusively by Anglo-American joint ventures, of which British firms should have a 20 per cent minimum share. For Britain, the 1987 Exchange of Notes guaranteed that its Defence industry could benefit from the growing investments made by the United States since the early 1980s (Sand, 2009). Investments that without Washington, London could not replicate within the same timeframe and did not wish to replicate after 1971.

By the period of these expected large military infrastructure projects, the Americans based more than 5,900 troops on the island while the British had only 30 personnel permanently deployed there. In the dawn of the post-Cold War American interventions in the Middle East, Diego Garcia could accommodate up to 30 military vessels, including aircraft carriers of the Nimitz-class and nuclear submarines. The island could also receive long-distance bombing aircraft while maintaining the double-lane airfield operational for other military assets. Lastly, it could sustain alone a one-month war effort of a force of 12,000 troops (Sand, 2009). Considering the infrastructure installed in Diego Garcia, the UK’s global power reach benefits heavily even though those military facilities remain primarily used by the United States.

In the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the primary justification for the maintenance of Diego Garcia disappeared. The United States no longer needed to balance Soviet naval power in the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, according to this rationale, Diego Garcia’s utility was set to decline. Changes in the American and British foreign policy guaranteed that the Diego Garcia would remain widely relevant, particularly for the United States. For the UK, despite its relative absence from the Indian Ocean since the mid-1970s, the end of the Cold War prompted a reorientation of the country’s strategic approach. London slowly reorganised its armed forces for expeditionary capabilities, focusing on areas beyond the Atlantic-Europe axis (Hyde-Price, 2007; United Kingdom, 2010a). Even though the Indian Ocean remained

secondary, the fact that eventual deployments to the area had a staging point in Diego Garcia indirectly supported the British return to expeditionary warfare. For Washington, the military installations on the island had their utility renewed for the post-Cold War era as new perceived challenges arose in the Middle East. In the 2000s, as the American involvement in the Middle East expanded, so did the investments in military infrastructure in the British Territory. In 2009, after almost a decade of operations in Afghanistan, the United States had plans to expand and upgrade the base up to 2014 (Erickson. Ladwig; Mikolay, 2010; Erickson; Lord, 2010).

Opposition to the Anglo-American facilities occurred mainly from India and Mauritius. The Indian stance considered that Diego Garcia displayed Great Power competition in the Indian Ocean and a remnant of British colonialism. In the early 1970s, the Indian Government openly opposed any expansion of the then newly operational Anglo-American military base. Similarly, Mauritius' claims of sovereignty over the BIOT were ignored by both Britain and the United States. However, India's position slowly changed in the early 2000s, losing its "aversion" to the base for the perceived threat of a rising China, as shown by the Indian participation in joint naval exercises between 2001 and 2004 (Erickson; Lord, 2010).

In 2009, the Treaty of Pelindaba came into effect after 13 years since it was signed in 1996 by its negotiators. The Treaty establishes an African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone and lists the British Indian Ocean Territory as part of this zone. However, neither the United Kingdom nor the United States recognises the Territory as subject to the Treaty (Sand, 2009a). Although the UK has signed and ratified the Treaty's two protocols, it insisted on inserting a footnote about the "Chagos Archipelago-Diego Garcia". The footnote assures that the territory "appears without prejudice to the question of sovereignty" (Forsberg, 2005). The UK and the United States have declared their own interpretation of the footnote, stating that the Treaty does not apply to the BIOT. Thus, the British and American forces could legally possess and stockpile nuclear weapons on Diego Garcia. The British island of Ascension in the South Atlantic, home of an Anglo-American base, has a similar legal status to the UK and United States regarding Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (Preez; Rand; Stott, 2008).

Concerning nuclear weapons deployed at Diego Garcia, as Sand (2009) argues, in the 1980s, the idea of their deployment there were only speculations. Nevertheless, "the movement of nuclear-tipped missiles to and from the island by ships or aircraft now seems to be considered 'use of the facility in normal circumstances'". Another UK-US Agreement from 1976 reduced the bureaucratic exchanges for the presence of these weapons on the British Territory, demanding only advanced information from the American commanding officer to the British officer-in-charge. Long-range strategic bombers (B-52 Stratofortress, for example) have

frequently been present in the Diego Garcia since 1987. Strategic bombers flying from Diego Garcia were widely used in Iraq-related missions, including Operation Desert Shield (1990-1991), Desert Storm (1990), and Desert Fox (1998). In the 2000s, they were used for strategic bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2007, the United States initiated a new expansion for the shore support facilities to accommodate the US Navy's nuclear-powered attack submarines and facilities for stealth bombers. The following year, the island served as a stopping point for roughly 550 tonnes of low-grade uranium from Iraq. Hence the purposes of the island's exclusion from the Treaty of Pelindaba (Edis, 2004; Sand, 2009).

Concerning the UK, its military presence in the "Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia" has been relatively discreet since the 1970s. The British Ministry of Defence owns the site, but the United States is the primary user. Since the base's opening in 1976, the UK has maintained a British administration of the Territory through the British Forces British Indian Ocean Territory (BFBIOT). According to London, BFBIOT "(...) are responsible for providing a visible demonstration of the United Kingdom sovereignty of the archipelago. The conduct, on the behalf of BIOT Administration, a number of civil functions (...)" (United Kingdom, 2019). The military detachment responsible for the administration of the BIOT is the Naval Party 1002 (NP1002). In the early 2020s, the total number of permanent British personnel deployed to Diego Garcia was approximately 40. At the same time, the United States maintained at least 300 personnel of the Strategic Command stationed there, plus a more extensive detachment of the US Pacific Command (IISS, 2022). Additionally, the British maintained coastal and fisheries patrol boats based on Diego Garcia. However, they are not part of the Royal Navy or Royal Fleet Auxiliary (Belamy et al., 2016).

In 2021, as part of the "British tilt" to the Indo-Pacific, the United Kingdom deployed its new Carrier Strike Group to the region. Having the newly operational HMS Queen Elizabeth as its centrepiece, the "Carrier Strike Group 21" set sail from Britain, touring the Mediterranean and performing military exercises with local partners. The Carrier Strike Group relied on British sovereign bases in the Mediterranean (Gibraltar and the Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus) before heading for the Indian Ocean, where it did not go for resupply in Diego Garcia. Instead, on the way back to Britain, the British forces only used the newly built British facilities in Oman. It also conducted exercises with the Indian Navy. After that, the Carrier Strike Group visited Singapore – the location of another British base – and headed for visits to Japan and the American military base in Guam. In that year, following the trend set by the increased British and French interest in the region, a German frigate was deployed to the region, and used the Anglo-American facilities on Diego Garcia (IISS, 2022).

Therefore, the vast complex of military installations built in the British Indian Ocean Territory has remained a strategic asset since the 1970s. As already mentioned, for Britain, Diego Garcia had a utility even before the arrival of the Americans. The 1971 British withdrawal from most of its regional military bases has only increased the relevance of Diego Garcia for British power projection. As the Island Strategy of the 1960s delivered a concept for fixed land-based air power, the British had already applied its core principles to other territories. When the Island Strategy was scrapped in 1967-1968, the purpose of the British Indian Ocean Territory had already been established by the United States and the UK. It would have a similar duty performed by Gibraltar, Malta, Ascension, and the Sovereign Bases in Cyprus, even though the Atlantic-Europe focus of the British strategic thinking would not give Diego Garcia the same frequent utility until the end of the Cold War.

Typifying the relevance of the Territory and the British desire to retain it, in 2010, the British Government announced the creation of the Chagos Marine Protected Area (MPA), covering the waters around the islands of the BIOT. Five years later, after Mauritius' objections, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that the Protected Area was unlawful. The decision would exclude Mauritian fishers from accessing the Territory's Exclusive Economic Zone and prevent the return of exiled islanders (Bowcott; Jones, 2015). Despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, the MPA effectively demonstrated the British Government's desire to nationalise a slice of ocean space, territorialising the waters around the BIOT and further excluding Mauritius' claims. In the "age of competition" amongst the Great Powers, especially in the Indo-Pacific (United Kingdom, 2022), the British Indian Ocean Territory remains the last British foothold in the Indian Ocean. This strategic asset meets few equals in the region.

However, that did not mean Britain wished to continue operating under a questionable status over its assets. Thus, negotiations between the Labour Government under the leadership of Keir Starmer resulted in a concession on the part of the UK. The British agreed to cede sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago to Mauritius but retained Diego Garcia – and the administrative rights – as an exclusive island for military operations for 99 years with possible extension while paying an annual "rent". Provisions of the agreement also included: (1) "a 24 nautical mile buffer zone where nothing can be built or placed without UK consent", (2) a British veto on any activities on the wider islands of the Archipelago, (3) a strict ban on any kind of military and civil activity on the wider islands by foreign actors, and (4) "a binding obligation to ensure the base is never undermined" (United Kingdom, 2025b).

The agreement received opposition from the Conservative Party. It generated criticism for giving up sovereign territory and setting a possible precedent for other claims over British

Overseas Territories while pointing out the growing Chinese influence over Mauritius (Courea; Elgot, 2025; Gray, 2025). Lastly, the deal was mainly made without consultation with Chagossians and their descendants, receiving opposition from some of those living in the UK and identifying as British, with some even seeking legal action in the British high court (Courea; Elgot, 2025). Despite the agreement, the UK has not relinquished its effective control and access to Diego Garcia, a concept that remains unthinkable in the increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific.

5.3 Hong Kong (1990-1997)

By the end of the Cold War, Hong Kong occupied the position of the most populous and economically relevant British Dependent Territory. In 1997, when Britain handed over the territory to China, it had a population of approximately 6.5 million, representing roughly 97% of the population of all British possessions overseas. During the last year of British rule, Hong Kong's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) nominal was roughly 177 billion dollars or almost 11.5% of the British economy (IMF, 2022). Thus, the devolution of Hong Kong to China can be considered as the marking of the end of the Empire.

Hong Kong Island first came under Britain's control in 1841 when British forces occupied the island during the First Opium War (1839-1842). Under the Treaty of Nanking (1842), Hong Kong was formally ceded to Britain "in perpetuity". Nevertheless, the Treaty of Nanking did not satisfy the British Government, which pushed for a revision of terms. In 1856, after incidents involving a British merchant vessel and a French missionary, Britain and France opened hostilities against China's Qing dynasty. One of the consequences of the British and French victories in the Second Opium War (1856-1860) was the enlargement of British Hong Kong by the seizure of Kowloon. In 1898, Britain sought to expand the territory for defence concerns. Negotiations with China resulted in the Second Convention of Peking, signed in June 1898. The acquired "New Territories" represented 92% of the land area of the overall colony and Britain would have a lease of 99 years over the new land area (Hurst, 2022; Welsh, 1997). Thus, the lease would expire in 1997, and the majority of the Crown Colony of Hong Kong would return to China.

In 1983, the British and Chinese governments entered formal negotiations on the future of the territory. However, the Hong Kong question was already present in informal talks between representatives of the two countries since 1979. Initially, the British Government, under Margaret Thatcher's leadership, intended to retain some form of administrative power

over Hong Kong. Although this position was not a consensus between 1979 and 1982, Thatcher supported the idea that Britain should remain a political player in Hong Kong after 1997. Thatcher proposed that Britain should remain the administrative power of Hong Kong beyond 1997. In short, Thatcher's proposal derives from the belief of the British Government that only the "continued British administration" could ensure Hong Kong's continued prosperity. Thus, Britain saw the question of Hong Kong through mainly economic lens. (Hurst, 2022). The strategic field had less relevance in the British considerations than the economic one.

In the early 1980s, members of the British Government saw Hong Kong as a bastion for British economic interests in the "Far East", and its sudden loss – thorough "unilateral withdrawal" – would cause problems for Britain's economic and political position in the area. Concomitantly, the Government recognised that without the New Territories, the remainder of Hong Kong ceded in perpetuity to Britain by China was "not viable on its own". More importantly, the British understood that, in principle, the 99 years lease was a recognition that "ultimate sovereignty in these areas rested with China". Therefore, an eventual deal that recognised the Chinese sovereignty while maintaining the British administration could be considered "a real foreign policy success" (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 2012).

However, Hurst (2022) noted that members of the British Civil Service and diplomatic bodies warned the Government that Britain should not underestimate the importance of the Hong Kong sovereignty question for the Chinese. Holding onto sovereignty could lead to "confrontation with China". These warnings came after the British Government's idea of treating the leased New Territories as separated from Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon enclave. Despite that, Thatcher remained resolute on the issue: only when concerning the New Territories that the Chinese should question British control. Additionally, Thatcher distrusted China, stating that the Chinese could not be trusted to respect possible agreements if, in the future, they considered such accords "unequal". In 1983, after months of Chinese rebuttals to the British proposals, Thatcher conceded to adopt a flexible position, including over the sovereignty of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island and the administrative issue (Hurst, 2022). Following the main phase of negotiations, which culminated in the Joint Declaration of 1984, Britain retained Hong Kong until July 1997, when the whole territory would be handed back to China while receiving Special Administrative Region status for five decades.

So, concerning the defence aspect of Hong Kong, by 1989, Britain maintained elements of the British Army, Royal Air Force and Royal Navy stationed in the territory as part of the

“British Forces Overseas Hong Kong”. In the early 1990s, the Army’s Gurkha personnel³⁷ represented roughly half of the British military garrison in the territory. Dockyards were available for the Royal Navy, making the territory an extremely relevant basing point for British naval deployments in the Far East alongside the facilities in Singapore. Additionally, Hong Kong was the centre of British intelligence operations in the region. Nevertheless, after the 1984 Joint Declaration, the UK began slowly decreasing its military presence in Hong Kong. In 1987, British forces amounted to approximately 12,500 personnel down from 30,000 of the early 1950s (Seah, 2017). Out of that, 5,000 were part of support services – medical, transportation and communication –, 3,000 were civilians working for the Ministry of Defence, and 4,500 were “combat forces”. Seven years later, in 1994, the total numbers of the British Forces Overseas Hong Kong were 9,500 personnel; roughly 4,000 were “combat forces” (Chuang, 1996). Land and naval forces’ duty focused mainly on border patrols, ceremonial roles and domestic support to the police forces of the territory. It is worth noting that until the end of British rule, border incidents occurred between British and Chinese forces (Felton, 2013), symbolising the mutual distrust between China and Britain.

Aiming for a smooth transition, Britain further reduced its military presence in Hong Kong between 1994 and 1997. The four Gurkha regiments in the territory had been amalgamated in 1994 into the Royal Gurkha Rifles. These troops were rebased to Britain and Brunei; the latter remains the home of British military bases with Gurkha battalions. That year also witnessed the closure of training areas for infantry regiments. Much of it was compensated by new training areas in Britain. Supporting units that less than a decade earlier once reached 5,000 personnel were cut or redeployed to the mother country. The Army Air Corps unit – with its 660 Squadron – left Hong Kong in the same year. In turn, the Royal Air Force maintained a squadron with military helicopters until just before the handover. Britain stood down the Royal Hong Kong Regiment (The Volunteers) in 1995. The Volunteers were the successor of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, responsible for the defence of the possession during the Second World War. Their disbandment in 1995 ended more than 140 years of service to the British Crown. Similarly, the locally raised Hong Kong Military Service Corps of the British Army was disbanded in 1997, shortly before the end of British rule (Felton, 2013).

As Mark Felton (2013) states, “Hong Kong had been an important Royal Naval base for 156 years, but that came to an abrupt halt on 11 April 1997” when the “stone frigate” HMS

³⁷The Gurkhas are Nepalese soldiers recruited by British military officers through a bilateral agreement with Nepal dating back to 1816 (Felton, 2013).

Tamar (a shore station) was decommissioned at Stonecutter Island. The name of the naval establishment on land came after the British ship HMS Tamar³⁸, which served in the territory as a naval depot for approximately four decades (Davis, 2016). Concomitantly, the traditional permanent British naval presence in Hong Kong would leave active service. The cutbacks to the naval presence began in 1988 with the decommissioning of HMS Swallow and Swift, two of the five Peacock-Class Offshore Patrol Vessels of the 6th Patrol Craft Flotilla deployed to Hong Kong. The remaining three vessels of the Peacock Class – HMS Peacock, HMS Plover and HMS Starling – were sold to the Philippines on 1 August 1997 (Felton, 2013; Olver, 2001). As a comparison, the British permanent naval presence in Hong Kong surpassed that of other dependencies, only briefly outshined by the military build-up in the Falkland Islands after the war with Argentina in 1982 (Beach, 1986).

A final display of the magnitude of Britain's military installations in Hong Kong was seen in 1994. That year, Britain agreed that it would hand over those facilities to China and the Hong Kong local government on 1 July 1997. Hence, Britain would transfer “fourteen military locations” for defence purposes to China while Hong Kong received another twenty-five locations (Chuang, 1996). These numbers support the argument that Hong Kong had a military role to the UK up to the end of British rule. During the Korean War, the hills and training grounds in Hong Kong's New Territories were considered “topographically a Korea in miniature”, reducing the acclimatisation process of British troops deployed to the conflict. The Korean War witnessed Britain's traditional practice of “seasoning her frontier-bound soldiers at outposts in disparate environmental settings prior to their final deployments” (Seah, 2017; Moreman, 1998).

Moreover, those installations cast light on the statement of Major General Bryan Dutton, the last British Commander of the British Hong Kong Overseas Forces: “I think the armed forces will be remembered for having provided the infrastructure ... which allowed Hong Kong to flourish” (Felton, 2013). Although the military and strategic utility of Hong Kong were not present in the negotiations between the UK and China that resulted in the 1984 Joint Declaration, the British had clear military uses for Hong Kong as a centre of military signals and intelligence in the Far East while supporting deployments of the Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, and British Army. Hong Kong – alongside Singapore – supported a continued British strategic presence in the region long after the large possessions of Empire had become

³⁸In the 2021 Defence Review, the British Government committed two Offshore Patrol Vessels to be permanently based in the Indo-Pacific (United Kingdom, 2021). One of those vessels is HMS Tamar, commissioned in December 2020 and deployed to the Indo-Pacific in September 2021 (Royal Navy, 2021).

independent. Therefore, after the Handover Ceremony on 1 July 1997, the last British Governor of Hong Kong, along with the Prince of Wales and other representatives, sailed away aboard the royal yacht *Britannia* (Hope, 2022). Concerning the devolution of Hong Kong, for observers in the British press, it marked the end of the United Kingdom as an actor in the Far East, “the eclipse of an empire that lasted more than 400 years”, and the end of Britain’s imperial reach (Rodrigues, 2017).

However, even though the handover negatively affected the UK’s strategic position in the Far East, the country would relocate its main base of military presence in the region from Hong Kong to the Sultanate of Brunei. The Asian sultanate on the island of Borneo had a long history as a former British Protectorate and home for British armed forces. Britain never withdrew from Brunei. Its permanent military presence survived the endless round of defence cuts that inflicted the British strategic relationship with the regions East of Suez since the end of the Second World War. As explored above, by the mid-1990s, troops from Hong Kong were redeployed to the Sultanate (Felton, 2013), and Britain had been planning a peaceful transition after failing to retain the territory. But the handover did not end the British presence East of Suez. In South East Asia, the UK still has bases in Singapore and Brunei, which the mentioned British Indian Ocean Territory supports directly.

5.4 Brunei

Similarly to Hong Kong and Diego Garcia, Britain’s imperial expansion in the nineteenth century is the background for the current British military presence in Brunei Darussalam. After decades of relative decline influenced by European encroachment, the Bruneian Sultanate came “under the protection of Great Britain” in 1888. The Anglo-Bruneian Treaty of 1888 established Brunei as a protectorate of the British Empire, transferring the responsibility for all foreign relations of Brunei to the British Government. Between 1905 and 1906, the UK and Brunei signed a new agreement that furthered London’s power over the internal affairs of the Sultanate through a permanent British Resident Officer with executive powers. The Residency Era lasted until 1959 when the UK granted increased internal autonomy to Brunei while retaining the rights of the “protector” power (Hussainmiya, 2006; Manan, 2015).

On 8 December 1962, an insurrection erupted in the Protectorate against the Bruneian Monarchy and the proposed idea of joining the Malaysian Federation. British troops in the country quickly acted to protect the capital, the Sultan and oil refineries. However, some areas

had already fallen to the revolt. In addition, two Gurkha companies of the 2nd Gurkha Rifles (99th Infantry Brigade) were deployed from Singapore to Brunei. On the next day, the British – aided by their long cooperation with civilians during the resistance campaign against the Japanese in the Second World War – called upon locals to support the military effort against the rebels. Roughly 2,000 volunteers with outstanding knowledge of Brunei's interior answered the call and served under British command. On the following day, more Gurkhas arrived, raising its forces to battalion strength. On 10 December, the battalions of the Queen's Own Highlanders began arriving in Brunei, enabling operations to retake strategic objectives, including the Shell oil refineries at Seria. Ten days after it had begun, the British forces had broken the revolt. The following months of 1963 witnessed "mopping up" operations to eliminate any remaining rebel cells in Brunei. In April, attacks from across the border with Indonesia against the British Crown Colony of Sarawak, which was about to become part of Malaysia, led to the Indonesia–Malaysia confrontation (1963-1966), increasing demands for a British military presence in Brunei and Malaysia (Pocock, 1973).

The swift and successful British intervention in the 1962 Revolt significantly impacted the then Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin's perception of the necessity of British protection. In the aftermath of the revolt, for the Sultan, a minimum level of "Anglophilic identity" would be needed to ensure Brunei's political stability (Manan, 2015). Since 1962, the UK as a "political stabiliser" became the *modus vivendi* of Brunei's ruling Sultan. Even after the small country achieved independence in 1984 and developed its military capabilities, the British remained a welcomed supporting force.

After the revolt, Brunei remained under British protection for another 22 years. This desire to cling to the British Protectorate made Brunei a unique case in Asia. It was the last nation-state to relinquish Britain's protection to become independent. As noted by Manan (2015), Brunei avoided embarking on the wave of decolonisation of the 1960s and did not support the British withdrawal from the East of Suez in the early 1970s. Concerning the Sultan's position, Manan argues that this desire to maintain a form of association with Britain derived from a security concern aggravated by the events of 1962. In other words, the Bruneian Sultan "was concerned not just by physical security, but ontological security; the need not just to be physically safe, but also feel safe" (Manan, 2015). Britain's friendship provided this ontological security. Hence the protected state's resistance to relinquishing its political links with the European power.

In 1971, the British Government agreed to transfer the internal security responsibilities of the Protectorate to Bruneian authorities. During the British withdrawal from East of Suez,

Brunei enquired about the continuity of the status quo of the arrangement with Britain. The Government in London desired to extend its withdrawal to Brunei. However, Brunei's resistance against such British disengagement meant that only in 1979 the Sultanate agreed that direct British protection should end within the next few years. Independence came in 1984, leaving Brunei officially responsible for its external defence policy for the first time in roughly 96 years. As said by the Sultan in 1985, the process culminating in Brunei's independence was marked by the British willingness to disengage politically and Bruneian solid resistance to the latter's wishes (Manan, 2015).

Nevertheless, Britain agreed to permanently deploy troops in the newly independent country at the request of the Sultan. This military presence is organised through the British Garrison Brunei (or British Forces Brunei). In the 2000s and early 2010s, the garrison numbered approximately 1,000 personnel (Felton, 2013). By 2015, the British military presence numbered roughly 2,000 personnel in Brunei (Larke, 2015). Most of the troops serving in Brunei are Gurkhas from the 1st or 2nd Gurkha Battalion of the British Army. Demonstrating his close attention to the British forces, generally, the Sultan is present in the ceremonies that change the rotating Gurkha Battalion serving in the country (United Kingdom, 2017a).

Since Brunei's independence in 1984, the defence arrangements that support the British permanent military presence in the country have been renewed every five years (Larke, 2015; Manan, 2015). Only following the devolution of Hong Kong that Britain sought to reinforce its defence relationship with Brunei, particularly as the country was the last basing point for the British Army in the Far East. In 2002, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Defence, expanding the scope of defence cooperation to include "aspects such as visits, exercises, trainings, and education" (Parameswaran, 2019). Already within the context of strategic concerns with a rising China, in 2015, Britain and Brunei agreed to improve that Memorandum further to include greater interoperability between British and Bruneian armed forces (Manan, 2015). In 2020, the agreements on the British presence were renewed by both parties amidst criticism in Britain for its association with a country with increasingly repressive laws classified as violations of human rights by members of the British Parliament (Nichols, 2021; Brooke-Holland; Walker, 2019).

The bilateral nature of Brunei's defence accords with the United Kingdom is an exception for the British in South East Asia. Covering the UK, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand, the Five Power Defence Arrangements is the cornerstone of the British defence approach to the region, guaranteeing that these nations would consult each other in case of security risks to Malaysia and Singapore. The geographic location of Brunei would make it

an ideal candidate for membership while also including itself among the areas that the Arrangement should guarantee. However, Brunei repeatedly declared that it prefers bilateral defence and security agreements with the British over the Five Power Defence Arrangement, partially due to continued distrust in Malaysia and the historical usefulness of its accords with the UK (Manan, 2015). The country also ditched the possibility of joining the Federation of Malaysia (Bakar, 2006). In 1963, the then Sultan of Brunei, Omar Ali Saifuddin III, had clear reservations about the consequences of joining the Federation, particularly that his security needs would be transferred to the diplomatic channels of Kuala Lumpur, which meant severing direct ties with Britain. According to Isa Ibrahim (2013), - a member of the Sultan delegation that discussed with the British the possibility of joining Malaysia -, the desire to retain security ties with the UK “(...) was one of the most important factors that must have diminished his desire to join the proposed federation.” (Ibrahim, 2013).

In 1967, Brunei experienced a change of leadership with the abdication of Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III. His death in 1986 ended any remaining influence he held over his successor. Nevertheless, Sultan Saifuddin III's disagreement in 1963 to join the Federation “was a fait accompli resisted first by the British but was then seen as mutually beneficial to both Brunei and Britain” (Manan, 2015). The benefits to the British strategic position include the commitment of the Bruneian Sultan to cover the expenses of the British military presence in the country (Bowie, 2018), granting the UK several facilities in South East Asia for no cost. In addition, until 1997, the British saw Brunei as a basing point for forces that Britain could deploy to Hong Kong. Lastly, the UK maintains a training unit programme in Brunei for British troops (Manan, 2015), which aids the British Army in acclimatising to operations in tropical areas. For Brunei's leaders, the association with the United Kingdom grants a direct political support to the regime, filling the Sultanate's needs for internal security.

In the three decades after the Cold War, the British military presence in Brunei has not changed its original purpose but slowly expanded to include broader British interests. The British Forces Brunei remains in the country at the Sultan's request but has increasingly benefited from the areas available for training and military deployments as part of Britain's “tilt” to the Indo-Pacific. According to the British Army: “The tropical climate and terrain are well suited to jungle training and the Jungle Warfare Division runs courses for all members of the British Army.” (British Army, 2022). Initially, the Division - also known as British Army Jungle Warfare Training School - operated from 1948 to 1971 in Malaysia and included training courses for British and Commonwealth forces. The wave of defence cuts that resulted in the 1971 British “withdrawal” from the region also led to the closure of the training operations in

Malaysia (Cross, 1996). The training was relocated to Brunei, and by the time of the 2002 Memorandum of Understanding on Defence, Britain had already recognised the country's strategic utility for its training areas. Alongside Belize (Miller, 2020), Brunei is one of two countries that permanently base British forces for training in tropical climate and terrain, reinforcing its tactical value for Britain. Beyond that, the Sultanate can be used as a staging point for the deployment of British Gurkha Battalions throughout Asia³⁹. For example, in 1999, British peacekeeping operations in East Timor were performed by 300 Gurkhas from the battalion then based in Brunei (Lamb, 1999).

In the 2010s and early 2020s, Britain maintained three military facilities in Brunei at Sittang Camp, Medicina Lines and Tuger Lines (Seria Town) (Miller, 2020). The facility at Medicina Lines is home to the Jungle Warfare Division and the 7 Flight Army Air Corps, which provides air support through Bell 212 military helicopters. In 2021, Britain decided to increase its air presence in Brunei through the expansion of 7 Flight Army Air Corps to squadron-size⁴⁰ and the new formation was redesignated No. 667 Squadron Army Air Corps (Allport, 2021). Since its deployment to Brunei in 1994, the 7 Flight had not witnessed increases. The most extensive base at Tuger Lines is home to the Garrison Headquarters and the resident Gurkha Battalion. Moreover, the Gurkha Battalion is supported by an additional garrison responsible for logistic and administrative matters (British Army, 2022). In total, Britain maintains in the early 2020s approximately 2,000 personnel in the Asian country. This British presence represents roughly 25% of the size of the Royal Brunei Armed Forces, including Reserve units of the Army. Despite being focused on training programmes and security assurances with the Sultanate, in total numbers, the British military presence in Brunei is more extensive than its presence in the Falklands with its 1,300 troops. However, it lacks a naval presence, combat aircraft, land-to-air missile systems and other combat assets deployed to the South Atlantic territory that are aimed at state-based warfare (IISS, 2022).

So, the British military presence in Brunei is based on attending to the security needs of the Bruneian Sultan while having little to no cost to the British Government. It also provides the British Army with an area for tropical and jungle warfare training. The UK-Brunei relationship is also unique, for the latter remained a British Protectorate until 1984. This occurred because of Sultan's continued desire for security assurances. In the late 1960s, the UK

³⁹The UK-Brunei agreement stipulates that British troops in Brunei might be "temporarily" redeployed to deal with contingencies elsewhere in the region (United Kingdom, 1971).

⁴⁰A "Flight" is typically formed by four aircraft, while a Squadron has between 12 and 24 aircraft divided into three or four "Flights".

had no interest in retaining Brunei as a protected state. In 1968, London even planned to terminate the 1959 Agreement that was the legal base of the Brunei Protectorate by 1970, earlier than the withdrawal plans for Singapore and Malaysia, leading to the Sultan's offer to pay for the upkeep of the garrison (United Kingdom, 1968) a proposal that the British initially discarded. The British position would only change after the General Elections of June 1970, which propelled the Conservative Party to form a government after almost six years of Labour in office. The Conservatives under Edward Heath (1970-1974) aimed at retaining a presence in South East Asia. Some results of this partial "salvage policy" are the Five Power Defence Arrangements and the retention of Brunei as a protectorate (United Kingdom, 1971) and later as a base for British troops that would continue to support Brunei's internal security while securing to the UK training areas for its troops and a base for operations in the region.

Thus, the British garrison in Brunei is result of the latter's security dependence and the former's military benefits that could be taken from the potential training areas in the Sultanate. The change of government in London in 1970 contributed to the return of a long-term British planning concerning its relationship with the Sultanate. Five decades later, Brunei's relevance to the British was only reinforced as the UK sought to increase its military footprint in the Indo-Pacific. Once retained because of the request of the Sultan and last-minute changes of policy in London, the small Asian nation has become an integral part of reaffirming Britain as the foremost European power in the region. Alongside the naval facility in Singapore, the British bases in Brunei remain the only permanent British entrepôts in the "Far East".

5.5 Singapore

Britain's control of Singapore goes back to 1819 when British representatives reinstated a pro-British Sultan in the state of Johor in exchange for an agreement with the new Sultan to establish a trading post in Singapore. The creation of the first British imperial foothold in Singapore is directly tied to London's interests in reducing the economic weight of its direct regional competitor, the Dutch. For British officials, the nation's trading ports in South East Asia were not in a strategic enough position to maximise the growing British commercial prowess. Thus, Singapore was one of the initiatives that could remedy that problem while downplaying the Dutch's remaining commercial role in the area (Abshire, 2011). In other words, establishing the British presence in Singapore was part of strategic planning in London to avoid a stagnation of its imperial position in the Far East. In less than a decade, Britain's influence and negotiations with the Dutch gradually eroded the regional authorities' political

and military power, leading to the formation of the colonial Straits Settlements in 1826, which included Singapore (Turnbull, 2009).

During the heyday of the British Empire, Singapore became a hub for international commerce and a staging point for the Royal Navy. After the First World War, weary of an ambitious Japanese Empire, Britain decided to enhance its relative position in the Far East by creating a large naval base and other military infrastructure in Singapore. Works on the base began in 1923 and were concluded in 1938 (Morris, 1979). London constructed additional military facilities throughout the British territories between the future imperial fortress in the East and the British Isles. Reinforcing the country's position in the Far East led to ramifications throughout the Empire. Gibraltar, Malta, Port Said, Aden, Colombo, Trincomalee, Rangoon, and Hong Kong were ports that witnessed increased capabilities to support the Royal Navy in the 1920s and 1930s (Field, 2004). This building effort was part of the "Singapore Strategy", a series of war plans – generally against Japan – in which basing or dispatching a fleet to Singapore was a prevailing idea. However, as noted by Bell (2000), Singapore was not the defining aspect of those plans, for some had deterrence as their central consideration, while others were plans to defeat the Empire of Japan.

In the inter-war period, Australia was one of the supporters of the British Singapore Strategy, mainly because of concerns with its geopolitical surroundings. Although the Australian Government backed the scheme as part of an imperial defence strategy for the Far East, unlike New Zealand it did not contribute financially to the build-up of the base. Instead, in the 1920s, the British Dominion⁴¹ engaged on a defence policy focused on relying on the Royal Navy for its defence while supporting the British with additional Australian naval forces. In that decade, the amount spent by Australia on the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) was double the spent on the Army and almost nine times the amount spent on the Air Force. Even though the Australian imperial policy of dependency on the United Kingdom through a focus on the Navy met increasing dissident voices in the country (Long, 1952), the basic idea that based the nation's strategic policies persisted through the 1930s. This idea was that Australia would remain closely linked to Britain and contribute to the British war effort in exchange for continued protection from rising powers in the regions East of Suez.

⁴¹On January 1, 1901, six British colonies were amalgamated to create the Commonwealth of Australia, a self-governing Dominion within the British Empire. Until the Westminster Statute of 1931, the United Kingdom maintained de jure control of Australia's foreign policy. Australia only adopted the Statute in 1942, but the act was effective retroactively to September 3, 1939, the date of the commencement of hostilities between the UK and Germany.

The Australian policy directly increased the relevance of Singapore for the British while also contributing to the symbolism around the new “impregnable” fortress. Therefore, when war broke out between Britain and the Empire of Japan in December 1941, the fears of Australian politicians and military officers that the “mother country” would be too overstretched fighting Nazi Germany and Italy to deploy a force to counter Japan soon became a reality. Despite efforts, in February 1942, Singapore fell to the Japanese. Winston Churchill labelled those events as “the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history” (Churchill, 1950). As Peterson (2008) argues, the fall of Singapore had a severe impact on the prestige of the British Empire, for the promised large fleet had not been deployed to the region and the imperial fortress – once considered impregnable – had been captured within no more than four months of conflict with Japan. British rule was reinstated following the unconditional surrender of the Empire of Japan to the Allied forces in September 1945 (Mcintyre, 1979).

In the three decades after the end of the Second World War, even though Britain would perform readjustments that reduced its military presence in the region, Singapore remained a central part of the British strategic presence East of Suez. In 1950, the British involvement in the Korean War enacted the remaining system of imperial outposts. Despite the ease of its fall in 1942, Singapore’s strategic value remained essentially unchanged. Similarly to Hong Kong, Singapore could accommodate land, air and naval forces while being geographically positioned astride key communication and logistics routes. However, for the British Government, Hong Kong’s role was as a “political fortress”, a display of Britain’s willingness to stand against the advances of Communism. This “exemplary” base would inspire other nations of the “common front against Communism” to resist. If Hong Kong could stand against China and the Soviet Union, then Siam, Malaya and Burma could do the same. Meanwhile, for London, Singapore’s role was a traditional “military fortress”. The former earned the nickname “Berlin of the East” while the latter “Gibraltar of the East” (Hyam, 1992; Seah, 2017).

The vision for Singapore to remain a base of operation for the UK in the Far East was already present within the ranks of the British Government in 1945. Repair works on the dockyards, and other military infrastructure began shortly after the Japanese surrendered. By 1950, the British had rebuilt – and improved – Singapore’s military usefulness into the likeness of the colony’s former position as an imperial fortress in the 1930s. While Hong Kong would frequently receive the spotlight as the stand for British displays of strength – as occurred after the 1949 Amethyst Incident – Singapore hosted the “substance” of the country’s regional military capabilities. In 1950, Britain maintained a minimum force of two to three infantry battalions (between 1,500 to 3,000 personnel) and 11 Far East Air Force squadrons with more

than 100 aircraft (Seah, 2017). However, this “minimum force” would be much more significant in practice, frequently reaching over 30,000 personnel between 1945 and 1971 (Ngoei, 2019). Hong Kong never equalled the infrastructure exclusively available for the British Armed Forces in Singapore.

During the Korean War (1950-1953), Britain heavily relied on Singapore and Hong Kong as operational platforms to achieve its political and military objectives in the conflict. In 1952, privately, the chiefs of staff and government members stated that the Hong Kong-Singapore duo was one of the “three pillars” of the British global standing, alongside the Suez base and the British Isles (Dockrill, 1991). Concomitantly, Singapore had a direct role throughout the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), a guerrilla war fought in British Malaya between communist fighters and forces of Britain and the Commonwealth, which would reach its highest point of confrontations in the early 1950s. Singapore had a strategic advantage over Hong Kong, for the latter bordered the Chinese behemoth while Singapore bordered British Malaya – Singapore itself being briefly incorporated into Malaysia –, which was part of British defence and imperial arrangements. Thus, Singapore’s garrison could be smaller and more flexible than the one based in Hong Kong. However, London had the perception that Malaya could only be reinforced efficiently through Singapore. At the same time, the imperial fortress’ security depended on the alignment of Malaya, adding one more reason to quell the insurgents throughout British Malaya (Seath, 2017) while retaining defence links after the former colony became independent.

By the end of the Korean War, two lessons would influence the next two decades of British military presence in Singapore. Firstly, strategically located and well-founded bases still retained a relevant supporting role within the expeditionary capability in warfare. Singapore and Hong Kong allowed Britain to operate with reduced dependence on the American bases in Japan. Secondly, despite their valuable contributions, limitations were clear once the conflict intensified and the battlefield demanded increasing supply lines. Although the bases could still provide for a significant part of the logistics demanded, they no longer provided the totality required for maximum operational effectiveness of British troops on land (Seath, 2017). In that context, the outpost could not equal or surpass the magnitude of the role desired by sectors of the British Government. Hence the argument that they could have done more than witnessed during the conflict (Murfett, 1995), particularly when considering that the Korean War posed no threat to the British naval military operations and supply lines (Nash, 2005).

In the following years, Britain would seek new arrangements in the region to reduce the threats posed by insurgents to its territories and other interests. In 1954, the Manila Pact and the

following formalisation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in February 1955 established what could be considered an attempt to create a NATO for the Far East (Gregorian, 2002). SEATO only reinforced Singapore's position within British strategic thinking into the late 1950s and early 1960s. By 1958, Britain had decided to deploy V Bombers of the RAF Bomber Command equipped with nuclear weapons to Singapore to display its commitment to the SEATO. This decision led to the improvement of RAF Gan in the Indian Ocean – a staging point for the bombers – just north of what would become, in the 1960s, the vast military base of the British Indian Ocean Territory. Following the commitment rationale to SEATO and the outbreak of the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (1963-1966) that involved Britain and other Commonwealth nations, the British Government would secretly base up to 48 nuclear weapons in Singapore, all of which could be deployed through Royal Air Force bombers (Jones, 2003). The bombers were withdrawn to Britain shortly after the Confrontation ended in 1966 (Wynn, 1994). However, Britain maintained a stockpile of nuclear weapons in its base in Singapore until its military withdrawal in 1971 (Stoddart, 2014).

The late 1960s would mark the last act of the Empire in South East Asia. The Harold Wilson Government (1964-1970) sounded the final imperial trumpet recalling the garrisons from the regions "East of Suez" in 1968. Although the Government had announced in 1967 that it would leave its mainland bases in the area by 1977, the country would maintain most of its forces in the region, particularly its air assets. The Wilson Government only decided on a complete withdrawal that would include a retreat from bases in Malaysia, Singapore and the Gulf Protectorates by 1971 after further economic troubles at home. Desires of the Heath Government (1970-1974) to reverse Wilson's decision and the Singaporean desire for a continued British presence resulted in the retention of a relatively small naval facility in Singapore (French, 1990; Wah, 1991). Thus, the continued British military presence in the country is largely due to Edward Heath's Cabinet desire to maintain at least the basis for a possible future strategic return to region. This is why the Heath Government resisted leaving Brunei and Singapore altogether.

Moreover, as Britain redeployed its footprint from the region back to Europe, it sought to tie itself to the defence systems of Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand to a new defence arrangement, albeit the level of commitment demanded from this new association was envisaged to be a reduced one (Ngoei, 2019). Since 1957, London had strongly supported the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA), an arrangement that included Britain, Australia,

New Zealand, and Malaya (later Malaysia⁴²). The AMDA was established by the British initiative to provide a security umbrella to the then-newly independent nation of Malaya. In the following years, British, Australian and New Zealander involvement in the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Malaysian Confrontation was justified based on the AMDA. In short, the Defence Agreement guaranteed that the British would remain fulfilling their policing role supported by the two other Commonwealth partners.

As Britain reassessed its position in the area during the late 1960s, the country sought a flexible alternative to the AMDA (Wah, 1991). The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) is the result of mainly British, Malayan and Singaporean desires to retain Britain as a security broker in the Malayan Peninsula and, to a lesser extent, South East Asia. The FPDA is a commitment that its members, if faced with an attack or military threat against Malaysia and Singapore, “(...) will consult together for the purpose of deciding what measures should be taken jointly or separately (...)” (Guan, 2011). In the months after the British announcement of their withdrawal and before the FPDA negotiations began, the Singaporean and Malaysian governments stated that they would welcome an increase in Australian troops in the Malaysian Peninsula. However, Canberra was reluctant to expand its role without direct military support from London (YEW, 2000). Following the British statement that the AMDA would be terminated in 1972, the pressure for a new defence arrangement grew, particularly for the small nation of Singapore. The initial British commitment guidelines largely guided negotiations on the FPDA: “consultation” would be the norm of this new agreement instead of an immediate armed response to threats or aggression (Guan, 2011).

However, Britain agreed to maintain a force East of Suez and a detachment in Singapore to support its new commitment through the FPDA. In the Malaysia-Singapore area, London would maintain five frigates or destroyers, a battalion – withdrawn in 1976 –, a detachment of long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft (Nimrod), and a few helicopters (Whirlwind). Lord Carrington, the official responsible for the first conversation of the FPDA with Singapore and Malaysia, considered the contribution “relatively modest”, following the line of Britain acting as an equal partner and not as a leader. The British Government considered the resources available in the early 1970s insufficient for the country to bear all the responsibilities of a leader. Nevertheless, Britain would assume the leading position in many areas and activities envisaged by the FPDA (Guan, 2011). Notably, the FPDA Integrated Air Defence System covering the

⁴²Malaya became independent in 1957 as a federation. Between 1963 and 1965, the federation included the former British colony of Singapore leading to the country being renamed as “Malaysia”. Singapore left Malaysia in 1965 (Guan, 2011).

Malaysian Peninsula was directly supported by British personnel. In addition, through the FPDA, Britain performed annual joint military exercises with its local partners. It remains one of the concrete results of the Agreement when considering the defence capabilities available for Malaysia and Singapore (Wah, 1991).

It is worth noting that the Integrated Air Defence System is not only the outcome of British interests in retaining a joint system of defence with its former colonies but also a Malaysian desire to have its main weakness – air capabilities – compensated by reliable allies. Concomitantly, although London partially dictated the FPDA and held influence over Canberra and Wellington, Singapore saw it as a welcome commitment that could give the country time to improve its defence capabilities while retaining the British as an actor directly linked to Singapore by their – reduced – continued presence. Most importantly, after further negotiations, the FPDA would provide the much-desired training for Singapore's newly formed armed forces (Guan, 2011).

The Five Power Defence Arrangements came into force on 1 November 1971, which provided Britain a new framework to project power in the region (Ngoei, 2019). However, only a few years after the FPDA was signed, the British Government revised its permanent presence in Singapore. After Australia withdrew its land forces from Singapore between 1972 and 1974, the precedent was open for the British to follow suit. In early 1976, the last remaining British ground forces were leaving Singapore. New Zealand sustained a battalion there until 1989. For its members, the FPDA quickly became more than basing troops in Malaysia and Singapore. The framework for interoperability and joint military exercises and training jumped to the frontline, surpassing the relevance of permanent garrisons, even though Britain, Australia, and New Zealand maintained small detachments of military personnel and other assets based in Singapore in the following decades. Hence the increasing relevance of joint exercises in the years after all three foreign powers had withdrawn the majority of their permanent forces (Wah, 1991).

By the end of the Cold War, the FPDA's military exercises had increased significantly. For example, in 1989, the five countries performed a two-week maritime exercise with 24 ships and 3,000 personnel. Its objective included the expansion of the local capabilities to carry out sea lane patrols and anti-submarine warfare. Beyond that, the Integrated Air Defence System had its own exercises within the auspices of the FPDA. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were two major air defence exercises, which witnessed the deployment of aircraft of the Royal Air Force to Singapore, temporarily elevating the number of British troops in the country. One of the highlights of the FPDA in those years was its use by London to deploy an aircraft carrier

to the region to partake in the Arrangements' air exercises, a sight that no longer occurred with frequency since 1971 (Wah, 1991).

Beyond the FPDA and its continued meetings of governments and military exercises, Britain maintained a naval repair and logistics support facility in Singapore at the Sembawang naval base. The reasoning behind the decision of the Edward Heath Government to retain a small permanent presence in Singapore had more considerations about Australia and New Zealand than Singapore and Malaysia. For London, a permanent presence would reinforce Britain's relationship with its two former Dominions, which was considered more strategically significant than courting good terms with Singapore and Kuala Lumpur (Ngoei, 2019). The remaining bases only tied Australia and New Zealand to a level of strategic engagement in South East Asia insofar as Britain could maintain cohesion amongst the five members of the FPDA or bilaterally. Therefore, a remnant military presence could signal that the British – the leading upholder of the FPDA, although London had no desire to be seen as such – would still commit to the defence of its former colonies.

Between 1976 and the late 2010s, the overall British military presence in the country saw no long-term increases. Following the redeployment of the battalions back to Britain, the remaining assets were almost exclusively from the Royal Air Force. At the same time, Sembawang supported the occasional Royal Navy deployments to the region, particularly to vessels headed for Hong Kong (until 1997), and Brunei to a lesser extent. According to Waters (2019), the British underutilised the facility for most of the period from the 1970s to the mid-2010s. Despite that, Britain still performed sporadic deployments that used its facilities at Sembawang, including dispatching an aircraft carrier to the Philippines in 2013 for disaster relief operations (United Kingdom, 2013). It is worth highlighting that these deployments do not include the annual exercises of the FPDA. Additionally, the idea that the United Kingdom kept the base in Singapore despite the lack of demand from the British forces, shows that the rationale of the Heath Government remained basically intact: it was a symbol of the country's enduring commitment to the region, particularly to Australia and New Zealand.

The naval facility at Sembawang is officially named "British Defence Singapore Support Unit" and is primarily operated by personnel of the Royal Navy under the label of "Naval Party 1022 (NP1022)". In a similar fashion to the Naval Party 1002, the NP1022 have between 20 to 50 personnel of the Royal Navy responsible for the administration and support work when receiving British and allied vessels (Thayer, 2019; United Kingdom, 2019a; Waters, 2019). Since the 1970s, Britain's interest in the Support Unit has been secondary to bases in Cyprus and Diego Garcia, located closer to the Middle East, a region that received the bulk of

British military operations after the end of the Cold War. However, in the early 1990s, the British Government showed a renewed interest in the facility by strengthening the FPDA joint exercises (Wah, 1991). In the following two decades, the strategic scenario of a rising China, growing trade and markets in the Indo-Pacific, and Britain outside of the European Union would contribute to a British reassessment of its capabilities deployed in the area.

In December 2018, Gavin Williamson, then Secretary of State for Defence, stated that Britain had been considering opening new military bases in the Far East and the Caribbean (Thayer, 2019). In the Caribbean and Central America, Britain has access to extensive training facilities in Belize for the British Army and minor facilities throughout its five Overseas Territories (Montserrat, Cayman Island, Anguilla, Turks and Caicos, and the British Virgin Islands) in addition to Bermuda in the North Atlantic. For the Far East, the British Government considered a new base in Singapore, which would be built on the already established British Defence Singapore Support Unit. However, in the following four years after the Secretary of State for Defence statement, Britain has yet to put forward expansion plans for its base in Singapore. In June 2020, as part of Parliament debate, the Government adopted an uncommitted stance, declaring that the “[Ministry of] Defence’s global footprint remains under constant review, including the potential merits of permanent bases in the Far East and the Caribbean.” (United Kingdom, 2020a). The Government indicated that the demands for military bases remained under constant review, signalling that a possible expansion was unnecessary for the current and planned requirements (Idem).

The rapid increase in British deployments in the years after 2017 also led to the Support Unit in Singapore returning to the centre of London’s strategic planning after decades of relative stagnation. Between 2015 and 2020, the facility served an average of 120 allied military vessels. Most port calls are from the FPDA and the United States navies, but the Unit supported ships from other countries, including Chile, India, Mexico, the Netherlands, and Sweden. According to the Royal Navy (2020), this high level of port visits made the British Support Unit in Singapore one of the “busiest UK-military operated port in terms of frigate and destroyer movements”. Despite its relevance for the British and allied deployments to the region, the British Defence Singapore Support Unit is “one of the smallest military units in the Forces inventory”, with only 33 permanent personnel in 2020 (Royal Navy, 2020).

As Britain put in place the first movements of its “tilt” to the Indo-Pacific, Singapore would witness a British Carrier Strike Group again in its waters for the first time since the 2013. In May 2021, the Royal Navy commenced its Indo-Pacific tour, employing most of its basing resources to support the “Carrier Strike Group 21” centred on the new aircraft carrier HMS

Queen Elizabeth, four British frigates and destroyers, one nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN), two support ships of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, one American destroyer, and one Dutch frigate. The Carrier Strike Group also employed 18 Lockheed Martin F-35B Lightning II combat aircraft, of which eight were British and ten from the US Marine Corps (Childs, 2022). During its deployment, the Strike Group – or some of its vessels – visited several nations and British facilities, including Gibraltar, Cyprus and the British Sovereign Base Areas, the British naval base in Oman (Duqm), India, Singapore, Guam, and Japan (IISS, 2022).

Britain's facilities in Singapore were only visited by the support ship RFA Tidespring – largely due to Covid-related restrictions – that proceeded to resupply fuel, food, stores and mail. The remaining vessels of the Strike Group visiting Singapore during the 2021 tour but did not use the naval facilities of the country (Navy Lookout, 2021). Shortly after that, the destroyer HMS Diamond was forced to the Support Unit after technical problems, missing the last day of the military exercises that celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the FPDA (Technical, 2021). It is worth noting that the creation of the AUKUS tripartite security initiative occurred while the British Government displayed its expeditionary capabilities and commitment to several partners in the region. Australia, an already prioritised partner through the FPDA, Five Eyes and the Commonwealth, has a new framework that ties itself to the British tilt and American pivot to the Indo-Pacific.

Thus, the British Support Unit Singapore served its purpose during the Carrier Strike Group's deployment to South East Asia. In 2025, during the second deployment of the British Carrier Strike Group, led by HMS Prince of Wales, Singaporean and British facilities were visited by vessels of the Royal Navy (Yeo, 2025). Providing supplies to the force and repair when unexpected technical issues befall ships in active service was a central ability that the old "imperial fortress" used to give the Royal Navy for decades. Although the military facilities that remained in place after the British retrenchment of the late 1960s and 1970s are a fraction of the size and sheer capacity for sustaining military operations in the area, the Support Unit Singapore remains sizeable enough to fulfil the increased British demands in the late 2010s and 2020s. As the British Government implied in 2020, the country's military installations in Singapore and elsewhere are under constant review (United Kingdom, 2020a). While the plans for expanded facilities did not materialise, it can be seen as an understanding that the planned demands remain within the support capabilities of the British Defence Singapore Support Unit, which proved to be able to sustain itself as one of the busiest military ports available for the British Armed Forces.

5.6 Kenya

Following the same pattern seen with the roots of the British ties with Brunei and Singapore, the British military presence in Kenya also rests on Britain's colonial past and the continued interest in London in maintaining defence and security links with former colonies. In the 1920s, after the defeat of Imperial Germany in the First World War and the establishment of the British mandate over the Tanganyika Territory (Tanzania), Kenya, then known as British East Africa, became another piece in the imperial designs, hailed by Cecil Rhodes, for an empire that held power over the contiguous land from the Cape Town to Cairo (Ferguson, 2004). Additionally, due to the availability of arable land, Kenya became a destination for immigration from the British Isles, creating European communities that controlled large swathes of land and were backed by the colonial government (Leys, 1975). The presence of British expatriates in Kenya also led to London supporting the basis of a manufacturing sector. The British also invested more heavily in the colonial industries than they did in other colonies in tropical Africa, leading to a lasting influence of British capital over independent Kenya (Rothchild, 1970).

Following the Mau-Mau Conflict (1952-1960) and the declining will and wherewithal of the British Government to hold direct control over the colony, Kenya achieved its independence from the United Kingdom in 1963 and became part of the Commonwealth of Nations. Despite that, the British would not altogether leave the country, establishing bilateral arrangements in 1964 that allowed the creation of a training facility for the British Army in Kenya. These agreements occurred while the newly independent African nation faced a mutiny from sectors of the Kenyan Army, prompting the then Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta to request assistance from Britain to quell the unrest. Although a British Major General commanded the Kenyan troops, backed by the equality policies of the mid to late 1960s, Kenyan officers rose to high-ranking positions within the three services of the Armed Forces, which were modelled after the British organisational and operational doctrine (Monene, 2021).

Therefore, in 1964, Britain created the "British Army Training Unit in Kenya" (BATUK), retaining a military presence in its former imperial "jewel" in East Africa (Servant, 2022). Nevertheless, London's desire to maintain a military presence in Kenya occurred before independence, thus rendering the 1964 mutiny a confirmation of its understanding that British interests in the former colony would need direct support. During the three conferences on Kenyan independence in the years 1960, 1962 and 1963, the British aimed to safeguard three main points: (1) military bases or training facilities, (2) the colony's economic links with its former colonial master, and (3) the interests of the immigrant populations, largely originated

from the British Isles and settled in Kenya (Ochieng; Ogot, 1995). Beyond the fact that the British Government had the negotiating advantage of being a colonial power that had put down a colonial unrest – the Mau-Mau Conflict – that displayed fractures within the nationalistic movement, Britain understood that the future independent government would have to deal with internal issues, including ethnic and ideological divisions that could foster secessionist activities. Hence the resulting first Kenyan constitution having favourable terms for former colonial power, even retaining the British Monarch as the Kenyan head of state (Odhiambo, 2021).

Moreover, with the Suez Crisis in 1956 Britain had lost its main military base and strategic asset in the continent. Kenya was seen in London as the theatre that British forces could use as a backup location. For a few years prior to independence, Britain had been constructing a large military base in Kahawa, near Nairobi (Meredith, 2011; Odhiambo, 2021). In 1967, Britain and Kenya firmed the Bamburi Understanding that committed the British to the defence of the newly independent nation from external attacks, particularly from Somalia (United Kingdom, 1974). The Bamburi Understanding followed the British rationale created after the 1964 mutiny that Kenya should not acquire expensive military equipment but rely on Britain for defence. Beyond that, the Understanding was seen by Kenyan officers as a framework for acquiring equipment and munitions from the British. In 1974, after requests from Nairobi, London sent additional military advisers to Kenya to reassess the country's capabilities. Signalling that the British would no longer take all the defensive duties of the country against a hypothetical war with Somalia, Britain supported the acquisition of improved capabilities by the Kenyan Government. A significant posture change since 1967, even though the commitment remained the same. Only in the late 1970s that the defence arrangement began to be reviewed to end direct commitment to Kenya's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Odhiambo, 2021).

Despite Britain aiming at a strategy that would lead Kenya to pay more for its defence – and preferably purchasing British equipment – in the decades after independence, Kenya's position as a special “partner” of the British continued without significant challenges until the 1980s when the new Kenyan Government, under Daniel arap Moi (1978-2002), attempted to diversify foreign policy. Reinforcing this is the fact that by the mid-1970s, Britain remained the source of over 75% of Kenya's arms imports while British investment and aid persisted as a relevant source of revenues for the local economy, considered by Kenyan Government as an important part of its “economic development” policy (Olewe, 1977).

The possibility of the British military presence in Kenya playing a direct role in local politics, as it had done by putting down the 1964 mutiny, surfaced again in August 1982. That year, junior officers of the Kenyan Air Force attempted a coup d'état against President Moi. During the failed attempt, the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, emerging victorious from the Falklands War, stated that the British forces were watching the political situation closely (Odhiambo, 2021). Thatcher's statement, coupled with the fact that Britain generally trained up to 10,000 soldiers a year in the country, triggered the perception that although the British had not been an active political actor in Kenya's domestic matters since 1964, they remained capable of doing so if needed. In the end, the position of the British Government was one of sustaining stability for business in the former colony instead of supporting or not the Moi presidency (1978-2002). During the 1980s and early 1990s, Britain persisted as "Kenya's leading trade partner, long-term source of economic aid and investment, and supplier of foreign military assistance" and closest military ally while remaining largely silent about Moi Government's human rights violations and corruption records. This convenient silence from London grew to the point of the Kenyan president relying on Thatcher's recognition of him as a leader to minimise the political effects of criticisms from other Western powers. This culminated in a visit of the British Prime Minister to Kenya in 1988. By 1991, as many Western countries reduced their economic aid to Kenya, Britain made Kenya the second largest recipient of British assistance (Miller; Yeager, 1994).

In the following two decades, Britain remained Kenya's leading commercial and military partner in Europe while the African country fulfilled a similar role for British commercial and strategic interests in the continent. Despite signalling that it would distance itself from Kenya if the candidate Uhuru Kenyatta was elected due to the allegations of crimes against humanity posed against him, Britain resumed cooperation in the aftermath of the 2013 Kenyan election of Kenyatta (2013-2022). Thus, mimicking the pattern of its relationship with the previous three Kenyan administrations, the British Government – under the leadership of David Cameron (2010-2016) – quickly engaged with the new president. Britain became the first Western nation officially visited by Uhuru Kenyatta, who attended bilateral meetings with the Prime Minister and other government officials (Kenya's, 2013).

However, due to the British support for Uhuru's political opponent, the bilateral relations between the two countries remained strained. Disagreements with Britain led to the suspension of the negotiations to renew the 40-year-old agreement that allowed British troops in Kenya. Despite that, Nairobi did not risk cutting off its links with London, preferring to extend the deal until further notice. In addition, the renewal faced additional challenges after

disagreements over the perceived immunity of British troops in Kenya that arose following reports of serious alleged offences committed by British soldiers in the country that faced no prosecution. Although London did not comment on the issue of immunity, after diplomatic rapprochement in 2015, it was reported that the British Government had agreed that soldiers committing offences in Kenya would be tried in the country. In that same year, both sides signed the renewal, allowing the continuation of the British training programme in the African country (Laing, 2015). Nevertheless, the immunity question was only solved in 2022 after a Kenyan court ruled that local courts “have jurisdiction to hear and determine criminal and civil matters involving British soldiers” (Servant, 2022). In Britain, the immunity issue was not seen by members of the British Government as an issue, having the understanding that immunity was never a part of the defence arrangement with Kenya (Laing, 2015).

Although the purpose of the British military presence in Kenya shifted from securing the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country from external attacks, its essential characteristics have not changed considerably since the 1967 Bamburi Understanding. The core of Britain’s post-colonial military stationing in Kenya is the “British Army Training Unit Kenya” (BATUK). The agreement with the Kenyan Government allows the British to deploy up to 10,000 soldiers or six infantry battalions annually to BATUK, which in turn deploys those battalions for training at the Laikipia Plateau and other areas. Each infantry battalion carries out eight-week exercises in the BATUK’s facilities, meaning that throughout 12 months, at least one battalion of the British Army is deployed to Kenya for training exercises (British Army, 2022?; Calvert, 2016; Laing, 2015; Weir, 2016). Furthermore, the Army states that “there are also Royal Engineer exercises, which carry out civil engineering projects, and medical deployments, which provide primary health care assistance to the civilian community.” (British Army, 2022?). Lastly, the British forces train roughly 1,100 Kenyan troops annually for peacekeeping operations, particularly in Somalia (British Army, 2021).

Until the mid-2010s, BATUK’s infrastructure was primarily situated in two locations: a small presence in Nairobi (Kifaru Barracks) providing a logistic and transport centre, and in Nanyuki, where the Headquarters and training activity was coordinated (Calvert, 2016). Approximately 100 British military personnel permanently supported BATUK, but this number can grow to 380 when the Training Unit receives battalions for short tours (British Army, 2021; 2022?). In 2016, the British opted to emphasise Nanyuki’s facilities and training grounds, transferring most of its assets from Nairobi to Nanyuki (Weir, 2016). However, the infrastructure available for BATUK in Nanyuki would prove to be insufficient for the demands of the British Army, leading to a Memorandum of Understanding or Defence Corporation

Agreement with Kenya that land-leased an area at the Laikipia Air Base East “an ex-RAF station – now a Kenyan Air Force base – located approximately 8 kilometres west-northwest of Nanyuki” that could provide adequate housing while being next to the training grounds of the Laikipia Plateau (Calvert, 2016).

In 2021, indicating an increased British interest in the region, BATUK received another round of investments from London. The Nyati Barracks were built for the British Army Training Unit Kenya to replace their previous installations. According to the British Government, the Nyati Barracks include “a new training headquarters, welfare facilities, 158 Single Living Accommodation and 1,400 transit accommodation bed spaces, a combined mess, a finance building, offices, stores and Joint Forces Enabling Exercise buildings”, which enable the Royal Engineers and other sectors of the British Army to undertake vital training (United Kingdom, 2021b). It also reported that BATUK is home to the largest fleet of military vehicles of the British Army, with over 1,000 units stationed at Nyati Barracks (Servant, 2022). Britain’s new facilities at the Nyati Barracks differ from the previous ones in Laikipia and Nanyuki for being regarded as “permanent”, enabling “a significant increase in training capability” for the British military (United Kingdom, 2021b).

Regarding the capabilities offered, BATUK presents itself as a hub for training, more specifically, “acclimatisation” of the British Army, thus enhancing the global reach of British personnel. Hence the direct – but often unseen – relevance of BATUK to the British during their Middle East military operations in the 1990s and 2000s. The Ministry of Defence states, “Due to the heat of Kenya, exercising units who are preparing to deploy to hotter climates are able to mimic highly realistic scenarios when completing their training.” (British Army, 2021). Moreover, the areas available for training have few equals in Britain, being one the largest live-firing training areas used by the British Armed Forces. Beyond that, the Training Unit is focused on delivering “light role infantry battle group exercises” for the Army (United Kingdom, 2021b), although combined training might include components of artillery operated by the British Army’s Rifles (Calvert, 2016). Twice a year, BATUK is used for a large-scale exercise (Exercise Askari Stor) that gathers approximately 2,000 British soldiers and 1,500 Kenyan workers. Servant (2022) observed that the scenario of the first annual Exercise Askari Stor of 2022, occurring a month after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, was “deployment to a friendly nation at its request after a hybrid attack by a hostile state actor”.

Strategically, BATUK symbolises the defence and security ties between Britain and Kenya that survived the decolonisation process. The close relationship with London puts Nairobi as one of the pillars of the British approach to East Africa and the Indo-Pacific. Within

that context, for the first time since the 1960s, Britain's considerations about its strategic position in Kenya have been increasingly willing to go beyond the traditional role of the BATUK. British leaders have been applying new meanings to the Army's deployment and training programme in Kenya. Under a renewed defence agreement dating from July 2021, Britain formally assigned new responsibilities to BATUK, including conservation projects and training the Kenyan Defence Forces in combatting terrorism. Furthermore, the agreement envisaged a multilateral component, allowing British-allied nations to join the military exercises with Kenya's consent. By 2022, senior military officials from the Netherlands had already visited the British facilities, indicating the possibility of a British-backed training area in Kenya for NATO members (Servant, 2022).

In March 2022, a Defence Committee of the British Parliament included in its reports an argument of the Ministry of Defence that indicated that Kenya was the main African ally of Britain in the Indo-Pacific. The Ministry of Defence also classified the British military presence in the country as one of two "strategic defence hubs" (the second being the bases in Oman) that provide ways to project British military power "into the Western Indian Ocean and beyond" (United Kingdom, 2022b). Kenya as a defence hub for British military power into the Indian Ocean and beyond is a relatively new concept used by the Ministry of Defence, raising the prospects of the role played by the thousands of soldiers deployed to Kenya annually. This role is better understood when considering the Defence Review of 2021 and the plans laid down by the British Government for its tilt to the Indo-Pacific, which included the permanent deployment of a "Littoral Response Group" to the region and frigates (United Kingdom, 2021a). Additionally, the Review also committed two patrol vessels of the Royal Navy to be permanently based in the Indo-Pacific (United Kingdom, 2022b). These permanent deployments are the first of their kind since the Handover of Hong Kong in 1997.

The Ministry of Defence's written answer to the aforementioned inquiry of the Defence Committee in early 2022 also states openly that the assignment of a Response Group in the Indian Ocean would entail "taking advantage of investment in new facilities and relationships with Kenya" (United Kingdom, 2022b). The Ministry's response also highlights the strategic location of Kenya for Britain in East Africa and the Indian Ocean. Lastly, the Ministry's position backs Nairobi as "a regional security leader" in the Western Indian Ocean (Idem) while London increases its military presence in the area. The views of the Ministry of Defence are in line with the British Government's general statements on Kenya. In the Command Paper of the Integrated Defence Review 2021, the Government stated that Kenya is "at the heart of our plans

for the region [of East Africa]”. Britain also committed to increasing its military presence in the country, aiming to bolster its so-called “regional hub” (United Kingdom, 2021a).

Therefore, the British military presence in Kenya, represented mainly by the British Training Unit Kenya (BATUK), has a longstanding role in Britain’s military capabilities. BATUK offers exclusive training grounds unavailable elsewhere, contributing to the acclimatisation and endurance of British troops. Thus, the force value of BATUK is similar to the training unit based in Brunei for jungle environments. The British presence also symbolises the remnants of influence of the former colonial power, cautiously and intentionally preserved since the 1960s. Lastly, the loss of Suez and other strategic bases in the region between the 1950 and 1970s did not affect the British resolve to retain the training and bases in Kenya. The Anglo-Kenyan economic and diplomatic ties remain significant despite the challenges faced by Britain to maintain the former colonial jewel of East Africa within its circle of close partners. As Britain looks eastwards with its Indo-Pacific “tilt”, plans to expand its military footprint are put in place. The first sign of renewed interest was the construction and opening of a “permanent” training area for BATUK in 2021. As already shown by the British Government and its Ministry of Defence in 2022, the deployment of increased assets to the region, mainly through the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, is likely to give an expanding strategic role to Kenya within Britain’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

5.7 Oman

In 2017, the British Government signed a Memorandum of Understanding and Services Agreement the Sultanate of Oman. The Agreement allows British forces to use the facilities at Duqm Port, which were built following another deal between the two governments in the previous year that paved the way for British companies to expand the military and maritime facilities at Duqm (United Kingdom, 2016a; 2017). These deals would give motion to increased cooperation and British military presence in Oman, re-establishing Britain as the Sultanate's primary security partner while partially reversing London's decisions in the 1960s and 1970s that led to the complete withdrawal of British forces from Oman by the late 1970s.

It is crucial noting that the close British engagement with Oman in the 2010s and early 2020s is within a pattern of continued British influence over the Sultanate that goes back to the late eighteenth century. Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain's position in the region rose dramatically. The Indian Subcontinent was consolidated within the Empire, and protectorates were established in the Persian Gulf. In 1854, Oman ceded the Kuria Muria islands to Britain,

formally creating a British foothold near the Omani coast (Qatar Digital Library, 2022?). However, Oman – then known as Muscat and Oman – would remain legally independent due to an agreement between Britain and France dating from 1862. In 1895, following a series of treaties between Britain and Oman, the Omani Sultan agreed that his government would consult the British on all "important matters" in exchange for British protection against internal threats. These agreements effectively put Britain as the guarantor of the Sultan's absolute authority, creating a *de facto* protectorate over the Sultanate. In the years from 1913 to 1932, the influence of British officers became more apparent than it was in the previous two decades. This occurred mainly due to the usual absence of the Sultan, who was almost regarded as a ceremonial figure that preferred to live in British India and frequently expressed the desire to abdicate. Thus, the Omani Government from the 1910s to the early 1930s was left to British civilian and military officers (Owtram, 2014).

In the following decades, the sight of British officers within the ranks of the Omani Government would persist. The reign of the new Sultan, Said bin Taimur (1932-1970), continued to be characterised by heavy British administrative control. Although Taimur diverged from his predecessor, remaining in Oman and relatively engaged politically, key positions within the Government were held by Britain. The chief of intelligence, the defence secretary to the Sultan, and all other ministers except one were British. The Sultan of Oman's armed forces was also a British commander. Lastly, symbolising the extent of Britain's influence over Oman, the country was not allowed to maintain formal foreign relations with any nation other than Britain. By the 1960s, more than half of the income of the Sultan came from Britain's Treasury, which helped keep him in line with British interests (Cobain, 2016). Taimur's position as the sovereign was massively curtailed by the British Crown. Oman can be considered a *de facto* British colony from the 1890s until the 1970s, and even after the loosening of the imperial grip in the 1980s, it did not mean that London had disappeared from the political and military scene.

In 1967, petroleum extraction began in the southern Omani governorate of Dhofar. However, the region was the source of a rebellion against Taimur since 1965 due to his regime administration and restrictive laws that aided in securing him the position of an absolute monarch. The exploration of Dhofar's petroleum, coupled with the hesitant position of the Sultan to commit investments for the "development" of the governorate, only worsened the political situation. By 1968, growing local dissatisfaction with the regime's approach to regional development combined with nationalist and Marxist-Leninist movements led to further instability and open revolt that spread to the northern areas of the Sultanate. The rebellion in

Dhofar triggered other movements with different motivations but united in their discontent with the Sultan and his association with the British (Cobain, 2016; Owtram, 2014). Concomitantly, the British Government led by Harold Wilson (1964-1970) began to view Taimur as an inefficient leader and adopted the stance that only a change of leadership in Oman could put an end to the growing insurgency, which was classified as filled with communist ideology (Worrall, 2013).

Therefore, in 1970, as a display of their almost absolute control over Omani sovereignty, the British decided to replace Taimur with his son, Qaboos bin Said al Said, and heir-apparent as the new Sultan. British officers of the Special Air Service (SAS) contacted Qaboos stating the intentions of the Government in London. After having Qaboos on their side, the British Government, now under the leadership of Edward Heath (1970-1974), orchestrated a “palace coup” in July 1970. In order to mask the extent of Britain’s participation, Omani forces loyal to Qaboos led the majority of the actions of the coup. However, the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Secret Intelligence Service (also known as the Ministry of Intelligence, Section 6, or simply MI6), and the Prime Minister’s Office were all closely involved in the planning and development of events that resulted in the coup (Cobain, 2016; Geraghty, 2012; Jones; Ridout, 2015).

The British attempt to show Qaboos and his supporters as the driving force of the coup was directed towards the international community and the domestic public in Britain. The secrecy of the British Government under Wilson and Heath was significantly helped by the completely restrictive laws in Oman concerning the presence of journalists and the free press (Cobain, 2016). The coup was quickly over. Taimur signed his document of abdication, and his son succeeded him. Although the rebellion in Dhofar would persist for another five years until its final defeat in 1975 by British and Omani troops (Cheney, 1984), Britain had a new Sultan to perform nationwide reforms, which could try to win the “hearts and minds” of the Omani people.

Following the end of the Dhofar Rebellion, between 1976 and 1977, Britain withdrew most of its military forces from Oman. The Royal Air Forces bases at Masirah Island and Salalah were handed over to the Sultanate in 1977 (Owtram, 2014). Nevertheless, the British continued to exert influence in the country due to the links between the Government in London and the Sultan of Oman. Throughout the 1970s, including the years after the Dhofar Rebellion, British civilian and military officers remained filling the ministerial positions of the Omani Government and command ranks of the Omani Armed Forces. Additionally, the posting of military officers in Oman during the conflict in Dhofar was seen as beneficial for their training,

while the conflict was a ground for testing different kinds of new weaponry within the British arsenal (Pellas, 2020). Although the bulk of the British forces left the sultanate in the late 1970s, according to Owtram (2014), Britain's influence was maintained throughout the Cold War and beyond, "with British personnel continuing to command the Sultanate's armed forces as late as the 1990s". These officers were part of the "Loan Service" for direct military assistance, and London created arrangements governing these "loans" in 1978 and 1981 (United Kingdom, 1978; 1981).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Britain continued to use the large training areas in Oman for its forces. Exercise Saif Sareea (Swift Sword) was a major exercise performed in late 1986. Involving nearly 5,000 British personnel, the British Government's "aim of demonstrating our capability for rapid strategic deployment outside the NATO area" was regarded by ministers as fulfilled (United Kingdom, 1986). The then Secretary of State for Defence, John Stanley, stated that Saif Sareea "also enabled the three services to practice combined operations with a host nation in accordance with operational concepts evolved from the lessons of the Falklands campaign" (Idem). Noticeably, until the Gulf War, Exercise Saif Sareea was the largest deployment of British forces in a "single operation" since Operation Musketeer, which aimed to capture the Suez Canal in 1956 (Alford; Hunt, 2015).

Although Oman remained a close partner and still had British officers training and commanding its troops in the late 1980s and 1990s, Britain's next extensive exercise in Oman would occur only in September-October 2001. Named "Exercise Saif Sareea 2", the five weeks-long exercise involved approximately 22,000 British personnel. The assets deployed to Oman also included a Naval Carrier Task Group⁴³ part of a total force of 21 ships of the Royal Navy and Royal Fleet Auxiliary, Armoured and Commando Brigades totalling more than 6,500 vehicles and trailers – including more than 70 Challenger II Main Battle Tanks –, roughly fifty combat aircraft, and a detachment of the then new C-17 Strategic Lift Aircraft. Demonstrating the material results of the new "Joint Rapid Reaction Forces" concept of the 1998 Defence Review was the main objective of civilian and military officers in London (Johnston, 2002; United Kingdom, 2001). As the Armed Forces Minister stated in the House of Commons on the last day of the exercises: "By deploying, sustaining and exercising a Joint Task Force at medium scale at considerable distance, we have demonstrated key elements of the Joint Rapid Reaction

⁴³ The Naval Carrier Task Group included one aircraft carrier (HMS *Illustrious*), the assault ship HMS *Fearless*, a submarine, seven Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels, at least one frigate (HMS *Cornwall*) and one destroyer (HMS *Southampton*). The assts were redeployed to support Operation Veritas (the British invasion effort in Afghanistan) (United Kingdom, 2001).

Forces concept” (Idem). Beyond that, Britain had displayed its ability to conduct combined operations with a friendly nation in a strategically relevant region. It is worth noting that as Britain proceeded with its military exercises in Oman, the invasion of Afghanistan was already under preparation by both the British and American governments. However, Saif Sareea 2 had been prepared to occur since 1997. Four years of planning coincided with another military intervention in the Middle East (United Kingdom, 2001), precisely the kind of environment for a military action that the training in Oman had in mind.

In the year after Exercise Saif Sareea 2, Britain would engage in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Concomitantly, Oman would not see a significant British Army presence on its soil until the late 2010s. The Royal Air Force appeared as the main branch of the British Armed Forces to be regularly deployed to Oman. Exercise Magic Carpet is an example of the preeminent role of the RAF in the British-Omani training cooperation. Magic Carpet is an annual bilateral exercise hosted by the Royal Air Force of Oman, which has been performing this exercise with its British counterpart since the 1980s. The Loan Service of officers remain in practice, particularly involving RAF personnel. In the late 2010s, only the RAF had more than 20 officers and non-commissioned officers holding positions with the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAF Museum, 2020?). In 2018, a two-star General of the British Army occupied the position of Senior British Military Advisor to the Sultan of Oman (Lima, 2018).

Britain held Exercise Saif Sareea 3 between October and November 2018. The third exercise of the series occurred within a context of renewed British interest in the Sultanate and the region East of Suez. Such interest would result in the creation of permanent facilities for the British Army and Royal Navy. Thus, by 2018, the Exercise not only tested the ability of the UK to project and sustain power in the Arabian Peninsula, but it was also a test of the newly built military infrastructure. Gathering 5,500 British personnel, the scale of Saif Sareea 3 resembled more the first exercise of its series than the second one. An Amphibious Task Group was the main naval asset deployed to Oman. It consisted of the amphibious assault ship HMS Albion, the destroyer HMS Dragon, and minehunters HMS Blyth and HMS Ledbury. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary supported the Task Group with the “support/command ship” RFA Cardigan Bay and the amphibious support vessel RFA Lyme Bay. The Ministry of Defence also decided to send a “military ferry” (MV Anvil Point) to the Exercise (United Kingdom, 2018c). On land, the British Army deployed more than 200 vehicles, including 61 Warrior armoured personnel carrier/infantry fighting vehicles (APC/IFV), 18 Challenger 2 Main Battle Tanks, 43 Scimitar armoured tracked military reconnaissance vehicles, four AS90 155mm propelled artillery, and 54 Bulldog armoured personnel carrier. The Royal Air Force sent roughly 20 aircraft units, with

the capability-wise highlights being the eight units of the Typhoon multirole fighter, the two Voyager tankers/transport aircraft, and two Sentry E-3Ds airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft (OLIVER, 2018). Additionally, Oman deployed a total of 60,000 troops to participate in the joint exercises of Saif Sareea 3 (United Kingdom, 2018b).

Supporting those assets was the then recently opened UK Joint Logistics Support Base (UKJLSB) at the Duqm port. The UKJLSB origins can be traced back to March 2016, when London secured a joint-venture deal for the British defence company Babcock International to support the “development” of the growing Duqm port as a strategic hub that could benefit the Royal Navy. In that sense, Britain had plans to use the new facilities as a support entrepot for its naval forces. The joint venture heavily implied that the British and Omani governments were working for the use of the port for military purposes. As the Ministry of Defence stated, “A permanent presence at Duqm would enable the UK to shape the development of the naval facility to support future carrier capability and wider British maritime needs in the area.”. (United Kingdom, 2016b). Negotiations on the formalisation of the British military base at Duqm were concluded in August 2017 through a Memorandum of Understanding and Services Agreement. Capability-wise, for the British, the new base at Duqm was unique in the area for it “has dry dock capability able to accommodate submarines and the UK’s flagship, HMS Queen Elizabeth” (United Kingdom, 2017b).

In other words, the ability to support nuclear submarines and the carrier fleet of the Royal Navy immediately elevated the UKJLSB at Duqm above other British facilities in the Persian Gulf, more precisely, the UK Naval Support Facility (also known as HMS Jufair) in Bahrain. Regarding the naval support role in the Indo-Pacific available to Britain, only the Anglo-American installations in Diego Garcia surpassed the British base in Oman. It is worth noting that according to the British Government, the facility at Duqm will be connected to the Gulf countries through the planned Gulf Rail Project, which can reduce the costs and expand the reach of British land forces based in Oman redeploying to the neighbouring countries. Beyond the naval base, London also secured a “permanent training facility” as part of the UKJSB (United Kingdom, 2017b). This “Regional Land Training Hub” is located near the port of Duqm and was intended as an area dedicated to the occasional large military exercises performed by the British (United Kingdom, 2019c). Under a 37-year lease, the British Government officially opened the UK Joint Logistics Support Base (UKJLSB) on 5 October 2018, on the same day that Exercise Saif Sareea 3 commenced (Photo, 2021; United Kingdom, 2018d).

Two years after Saif Sareea 3, London announced that the Joint Logistics Support Base would receive a new round of investments and overhauls. In September 2020, the Defence Secretary stated that the British Government would “triple the size of the existing UK base” at Duqm (United Kingdom, 2020b). These investments led to the enlargement of the drydock facilities, propelling Duqm to have the second-largest drydock in the Middle East. Thus, aimed at supporting increased activity levels of the Royal Navy and the British Army, the Support Base in Oman fulfils a role that the naval base in Bahrain could not: supporting the large surface vessels and the submarine fleet. In early 2021, the frigate HMS Montrose became the first British military ship to be overhauled at the UKJLSB, opening the way for other similar works (United Kingdom, 2021c).

Hence the visit to the base paid by the Carrier Strike Group 21 on 4 November 2021, when the flotilla was on its way back to Britain after deploying to South East Asia, Japan, and Guam. Although the Support Base at Duqm could offer advanced maintenance, particularly drydock works, the Strike Group’s primary purpose was to include Oman in the list of partner nations visited by the inaugural deployment of Britain’s flagship. A military exercise labelled “Enduring Friendship”, or Khanjar Oman, involved British and Omani land forces, supported by the Omani vessels and the Carrier Strike Group, including F-35B combat jets of the HMS Queen Elizabeth. The exercise occurred while the British Defence Secretary visited Oman and met with the Omani Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs (Photo, 2021), one the few events of the Carrier Strike Group 21 deployment that happened under an official visit from a member of the British Cabinet to the partner nation.

Beyond the significant Support Base at Duqm, Britain has built a second sizeable military facility in Oman. One day after the end of Exercise Saif Sareea 3 in early October 2018, the British Government announced that it had agreed with its Omani counterpart to build an “Omani-British Joint Training Area” (United Kingdom, 2018e). As already seen in the talks that resulted in the Support Base, the British were interested in establishing a permanent training facility in Oman, following a similar pattern in Britain’s expressive training areas in Brunei, Kenya, and Belize. While the training areas were granted through the Memorandum of Understanding in 2017, talks on a dedicated training facility have been undergoing since 2015 (United Kingdom, 2015). By the end of Exercise Saif Sareea 3, the Joint Training Area was already under construction and planned to become operational in March 2019 (United Kingdom, 2018e). In February 2019, Britain and Oman signed a “Joint Defence Agreement”, ensuring the long-term availability of the new facility (United Kingdom, 2019d).

In March 2019, British personnel from the 59 Squadron, 1 Regiment Army Air Corps, and the 1st Armoured Infantry Brigade, along with supporting units, performed “Exercise Khanjar Oman 19” in the Ras Madrasah training field, where the Omani-British Joint Training Area was planned to be concluded and delivered by late 2019. The exercise tested the facilities’ usefulness while demonstrating the high readiness of Britain’s armoured battlegroups (United Kingdom, 2019e). During Khanjar Oman 19, it emerged that the size of the area available to British forces in Oman was larger than the British Army Training Unit Suffield (BATUS) in Canada and the Salisbury Plain Training Area, the largest of its kind in the UK (United Kingdom, 2019f). In 2021, following a similar decision regarding the forces in Kenya, the British Government announced that the “armoured battlegroups” regularly deployed to Oman for training would expend extended periods in the country, from six weeks to 12 (Ripley, 2021), effectively creating the largest – if not the main – hub for extensive training operations involved armoured elements of the British Army. By 2022, the series of exercises named Khanjar Oman became an annual practice. The 2022 edition gathered nearly 1,000 British Armed Forces personnel and involved armoured and artillery assets. Further exercises are planned until the next large one, Exercise Saif Sareea 4, occurs in 2028. In November 2022, reinforcing a trend of increasingly longer British deployments to the Sultanate, the Defence Secretary announced that the Training Area would host British personnel for eight months every year, excluding the forces already staffing the Support Unit at Duqm (Thomas, 2022).

However, for Britain, the role of the Joint Training Area is not limited to training its troops. More than that, the area is designated as a Land Regional Hub of the British Army. One of the functions of Land Regional Hubs is that they are “designed to support expeditionary roles across the world” and are one of the pillars of what the British Government describes as the “Global Hub” of bases easing the challenges to power projection (United Kingdom, 2021d). Taking that the integration of the Training Area with the Support Unit at Duqm grants a vast infrastructure to base personnel, aircraft, and vessels, the British military build-up in Oman between 2016 and 2021 gave Britain significant assets. By 2024, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) continued to invest in developing a “defence strategic hub” that would serve as a platform for power projection, while providing the infrastructure to increase the frequency of training exercises with regional partners (Brooke-Holland, 2024). These assets might rival the Anglo-American base in the British Indian Ocean Territory.

Additionally, that also means leaving France – the actor Britain wants to surpass in the region – behind when the topic is the availability of large drydock facilities and exclusive training areas. France has roughly 1.65 million French citizens living in French territories in the

Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the country has maintained a minimum force to guarantee basic patrol and security duties over those areas. In 2022, France permanently based 7,000 troops in the region, mainly in La Réunion, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia (France, 2022). More than a dozen patrol boats and at least two general-purpose frigates are permanently based throughout these territories. However, since the 1990s, this force has only shrunk, and the quality of assets is in stark contrast to the newly built patrol ships of the Royal Navy deployed to the region in 2021 or the Littoral Strike Group planned by the British to be permanently based in the area by 2023. This is in line with what Sophie Parrot (2021) indicated: “in July 2021, none of the four French Navy vessels based in New Caledonia was operational.”. If compared to the early 2010s, by the end of that same decade, the French Air Force’s personnel in the region had been cut by 30%. In that same period, the materiel used by the French personnel was ageing and not suited to the high-intensity threats. Additionally, according to Parrot (2021), the infrastructure for naval assets is inadequate to support large vessels, and no French amphibious ship is permanently based in the region. Thus, eliminating the capability of projecting power locally. In contrast, the cornerstones of the British tilt are improving the naval and land facilities – which the French do not possess for large-scale staging and training – and allocating an amphibious force to the region (the already mentioned Littoral Strike Group).

Lastly, beyond the Omani-British Joint Training Area and the UK Joint Logistics Support Base (UKJLSB) at the Duqm port, London has access to other sites in Oman dedicated to the ends of the Ministry of Defence. According to Miller (2020), by 2020, Britain had regularly used 16 military sites in Oman. While the Omani Government runs most of those military sites, some sites are operated by the British military and intelligence services but do not compare in size to the Training Area and the Support Base. Moreover, Miller (2020; 2020a) states that 91 British officers were on loan to the Omani Government in the early 2020s. Even though the numbers dropped from 225 to 91 since 1977, it still symbolises the persistence of the long-standing practice of British civil and military officers occupying positions within the Omani administrative and military command hierarchy. Although the practice of loaning officers to other nations is a common practice, Oman received in 2020 almost one-third (91 out of 285) of Britain’s officers on loan to partners across the globe (Miller, 2020a).

The loan of officers to Oman also dwarfs the other “beneficiaries” of such an arrangement. For example, while Oman received 91 in 2020, Saudi Arabia received 33 British officers in this manner, Kuwait 30 and Brunei 27. However, the Anglo-Omani agreements that back these loans secure an additional level of British integration into the structure of the Omani institutions. As Miller (2020a) affirms, “the UK forces wear Omani uniforms, are funded by the

sultan but remain part of the British military.” In 2020, the officers of the British Armed Forces loaned to the Sultan of Oman included at least one Major-general and a lieutenant colonel. The latter is the military advisor to the secretary general of Oman’s National Security Council. Other officers are officially deployed on loan to “deliver advice, capability development and training” to Oman due to the country’s extensive purchases of British military equipment, including Challenger II Main Battle Tanks and Typhoon combat jets (Miller, 2020a).

In short, until the 1980s, Britain’s military presence in Oman was characterised by the overwhelming influence of the British over certain sectors of the Sultanate politics. Defence, Foreign Policy and even the revenue of Oman depended heavily on or were strictly controlled by the British more than three decades after India – the primary colonial possession in the region – achieved independence in 1947 and started the long process of Imperial disengagement that appeared to have ended in 1971 with the end of the British Protectorates in the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, as shown here, the Government in London remains active in Oman, increasingly re-establishing the Sultanate as a British foothold in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean.

In 1970, Britain took the leading role and the initiative in the palace coup that replaced the Sultan of Oman for his son, Qaboos bin Said Al Said (1970-2020), an individual seen as a solution to the increased discontent from the Omani population. The death of Sultan Qaboos in 2020 quickly led to the British Government’s recognition of the new Sultan and a high-level diplomatic visit to the royal funeral from the then British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, the then Prince Charles, and the Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace. London recognised Qaboos’s successor, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, as a symbol of continuity (Wintour, 2020), and, as already seen, the change had no substantive impact on British strategic planning between 2020 and 2022.

Therefore, the opening of the Omani-British Joint Training Area in 2019 and the UK Joint Logistics Support Base (UKJLSB) at the Duqm port in 2018 are new chapters in the long history of the British military presence in Oman. In the late 2010s, concerns about a possible Chinese investment that could result in some form of military presence in Duqm (Jones; Ridout, 2016) were rapidly crushed by the successive British agreements with the Sultanate between 2016 and 2021, including the construction of the UKJLSB at Duqm that followed the Anglo-Omani investments in the new infrastructure of the strategically relevant port. Even though Britain’s position and control over the country have changed since the 1960s, the Sultanate remains closely in line with British interests in exchange for domestic political support. Similarly to the scenario in Brunei, Britain continues to play a role as a political stabiliser and backing stone for the current Sultan. The bases built in the late 2010s, although centred on

attempts to reaffirm Britain as the leading European power in the Indo-Pacific, also cement the British commitment to the political stability of Oman, which means the maintenance of the status quo in the political life of the Sultanate. This British role as “stabiliser” was already tested in the Dhofar Rebellion in Oman from the early 1960s to the final confrontations in 1975-1976, which, as Cobain (2016) argues, secured Britain the position of the only Great Power of the twentieth century to remain permanently at war.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis, the case of the management of the UK's relative decline and its post-Cold War standing is analysed, emphasising the declinist debate and British desire to reaffirm its position as a major player in the Indo-Pacific, a region with increasing competition among the great powers. The aim of this work was to fill the gap concerning the post-Cold War position of the former hegemonic power and answer the questions of how decline can be dealt with, whether the British preserved their standing, what the next phase – after decline – entails, and what lessons other players might draw from the British case. The initial argument presented in this work is that the United Kingdom preserved its relative position from the early 1990s to the early 2020s, often resorting to military force against non-peers and strategic engagement with other Great Powers to achieve its objective of remaining among the top powers in the international system, even if secondary to the United States and China. The British relative decline of the period analysed changed considerably in relation to years from the 1940s to the 1970s. At the same time, the country avoided losing its position as a secondary great power, displayed greater resilience than most of its G7 peers against a new relative decline triggered by a rising China, and its strategic engagement and military presence in the Indo-Pacific displayed the UK's redefined status in the international system in the decades following the Cold War.

Moreover, even as the declinist debate in the UK reached its peak in the final decades of the twentieth century and was considered by some to be fading from the political scene (Gamble, 2000), its influence remains. The rise of Asian powers, the 2007-2008 financial crisis, and Brexit, for instance, reignited the vision of Britain in decline. Therefore, it is possible to argue that successive British governments were fixated on the question of relative decline, to the point that the “declinist debate” permeated most political discussions – particularly in the realms of the economy, defence, and foreign policy – throughout the twentieth century and into the following decades. In part, the fact that Britain was the former hegemon of the international system influences the way in which British decline and the country's current position are understood. Britain's starting point was unique, a status that had changed by the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Although still privileged, Britain's position is no longer unique and is now shared with a small group of other powers.

Also, in British academic circles, there is a reluctance to label or categorise the country as a great power, largely due to the ever-present argument that doing so reflects imperial sentiment or attachment to the past, frequently dismissed as delusion or fantasy (Hastings,

2021). As Thorp (2022) notes, there is a myriad of terms used to belittle or justify a reduced ambition for the UK and its policy decisions, from “Little England” (Wordsworth, 2016) and “Little Britain” to “National Hobbitism” (Roussinos, 2020), or arguments that the country is merely a “middle-ranking offshore island” (Hastings, 2021). Considering the assets still available to the British state, these denominations reflect a concerning distortion of the United Kingdom’s relative position in the international system. Although not a primary great power alongside the United States and China, the UK remains an influential player on the fields of defence, security, finance, diplomacy and commerce while its economy slowly closes the gap with Japan and Germany. Thus, declinism distorts how a country – its leaders and wider public – perceives itself (Thorp, 2022), a reality distortion.

Diverging from the position of Gilpin (1981; 1988) and Kennedy (1988), it is necessary to recognise the strong argument that the elites of declining great powers are the first to become aware of decline and to act to counter its causes. Weakening influence and decreasing returns contribute to the attuned perception of the elites. In the British case, economic underperformance relative to peers prompted entry into the EEC in 1973 and the Thatcherite economic reforms of the 1980s. Fifty years later, British governments remain concerned with growth relative to G7 counterparts (United Kingdom, 2024n), displaying ongoing worries regarding relative decline.

During the period analysed, from the 1990s to the early 2020s, the British economy has slightly but consistently outperformed the other major European powers. Historian Robert Tombs (2021) argues that British governments’ perception of relative decline in the 1960s and 1970s was exaggerated – an “overperception” instead of unawareness –, as continental powers were modernising and recovering from the Second World War, experiencing a “one-off period of very rapid growth” that came to an end in the 1990s. This supports a narrative of steady British growth overtaking its European competitors as their own trajectories decelerated. In any case, the period witnessed the relative rise of Britain in Europe. However, the notion of relative decline has been embedded in British society and politics since the final decades of the Victorian era and remains unlikely to dissipate (Tomlinson, 2009), with Brexit ushering in new waves of criticism mixed with declinism under the assumption that “as a humble member of the EU club. Now we have left it, further decline is inevitable”, a limited understanding of the UK’s relative position that underscores the persistence of inflated declinism in Britain (Tombs, 2021a). According to Tombs (2021), even the mindset of those advocating for the UK to rejoin the EU rests on a sense of national weakness, decline, and failure. In this case, the debate over rejoining or remaining outside the EU is underpinned by questions of relative decline and Britain’s place

in the world, which are not dissimilar to the British debate of the 1960s and 1970s over the EEC.

The literature agrees that Britain has historically implemented reforms and retrenchment measures in response to perceived decline, as McDonald and Parent (2018) argue. Though this refers to a period prior to this thesis's main scope, it is reasonable to state that British policymakers in the post-Second World War era recognised that the fragmenting empire and its "successor", the Commonwealth of Nations, would no longer suffice to minimise or reverse Britain's decline. As discussed, London became preoccupied with implementing economic reforms, highlighted by accession to the EEC in 1973, effectively choosing Europe over the empire and its associates, and the "economic shock" of the Thatcher premiership (1979–1990). Hence, the management of decline became a feature of British politics as soon as the country's changing status was acknowledged. Notably, this recognition came relatively early among political elites and was often embedded in debates around economic efficiency, growth, the EEC, the Commonwealth, and even when political decisions were made during the Falklands/Malvinas War (Grandpierron, 2017). Consequently, as seen in Chapter I, the claim that recognising and responding to decline is a slow and problematic process is weakened by the British case. Even criticisms that Britain has failed to accept its "reduced position" often overlook the extent of management involved, from the retreat of empire – described as a "managed retreat" (Stockwell, 2018), in contrast with the French experience – to debates over British industry, defence, and economy, and the reforms implemented.

Some overarching strategies employed by London were identified, whether deliberately or as reactions to events combined with diminished material capabilities, to avoid accelerated relative decline. Firstly, retrenchment was employed by Britain throughout the period studied. However, post-Cold War retrenchment varies depending on its causes, and two intervals may be identified. The first offers a unique picture due to its features. The United Kingdom retrenched twice between 1990 and 2024, the first being the clearest case of the post-Cold War "peace dividend", under John Major (1990–1997), leaving an enduring legacy for the British Armed Forces over the next quarter-century. Retrenchment occurred alongside a renewed global outlook, moving away from a Cold War focus on Europe. This trend intensified under Tony Blair, whose foreign policy featured military interventions across three continents. Reductions in foreign policy expenditure were paralleled by a paradoxical resurgence in global ambition. The second major retrenchment came under David Cameron (2010–2016). Domestic austerity and a wave of defence cuts aimed to avoid economic troubles and avert a return to being the G7's laggard. Retrenchment did not halt the distancing from Europe, even prior to Brexit in

2016. Indeed, a “return” east of Suez was announced in 2014 with a deal to reopen a British naval base in Bahrain as operations in Afghanistan were scaled down, reflecting a reallocation of resources to avoid severe overstretch.

Economically, compared with most G7 nations except the United States, the UK experienced relative economic gains during the period. It consolidated itself as Europe’s second-largest economy, gaining ground against Germany and Japan. In part, the continued dominance of Thatcherite policy produced both inequality – exemplified by austerity of the 2010s – and economic performance that surpassed France, Germany, Italy, and Japan. Fragmentation within the political elite and public over Britain’s relationship with the European Union led to the Brexit vote, which came into effect in 2020, reintroducing trade barriers with Britain’s main trading partner and generating long-term repercussions, which might need years to provide adequate data to effectively measure the consequences. Despite promises by successive governments to curb immigration, British population growth – largely driven by immigration – also advanced toward closing the gap with Germany, its main economic rival in Europe.

In summary, the sharp economic decline seen in the 1960s–1970s relative to other industrialised powers ended during the 1990s–2020s. This was achieved through a combination of policies dating from the 1970s–1980s, targeted protectionism in sectors like defence, demographic expansion, economic reform, and intermittent retrenchment. Thus, the British state overcame the form of relative decline associated with the post-Second World War era. In the post-Cold War period, Britain faces a new, non-inherent form of relative decline. The rise of China (from the 1990s–2000s) and then India (in the 2010s) marks the main shift. In simple economic terms, even the challenge from “emerging” actors such as Brazil diminished by the late 2010s and early 2020s, with the economic gap widening again. Britain’s relative position is therefore eroded by the Asian powers but strengthened relative to most G7 countries. By the end of the scope of this work, the British government manages decline vis-à-vis China and India while continuing efforts to avoid the revival of the “old” relative decline. However, unlike the post-war era, the new relative decline is not uniquely British. Rather, the UK’s relative position declines in tandem with the broader decline of Western powers.

It is possible to argue that, out of the G7, the UK and the United States have presented the strongest results against this backdrop of decline, demonstrating, among other things, the resilience of the current and former hegemonic powers. The trappings of the rules-based international order might have contributed to Anglo-American performance, with the two countries – especially the United States – benefiting from the arrangements established after

1944. This highlights the advantages available to a hegemonic power. Thus, the relative decline of a hegemon is not a straightforward process; the chances of reversing or mitigating decline are significant. The relatively “peaceful” transition from British to American hegemony might have helped the UK benefit from the new distribution of power. A like-minded successor may have contributed to Britain’s continued advantage under a relatively favourable international order.

Furthermore, post-British relative decline witnessed London adopting a foreign policy centred on maintaining a global role, with the country acting as a great power. The desire for a first-rank role can be observed in the interventionism of the 1990s and 2000s, which continued in various forms into the 2010s with Syria, Libya and Mali, and in the 2020s with Yemen and Ukraine. It is worth noting that interventionism is no novelty for Britain, which carried out dozens of political and military operations to assert control or support friendly actors overseas during the Cold War. Between 1945 and 2023, Britain has been involved in approximately 83 “military interventions” in 47 countries (Curtis, 2023), including imperial conflicts and covert operations to defend British interests, with Tony Blair’s premiership (1997–2007) marking one of the most active periods. As discussed, Britain sought to maintain a status quo that preserved its special rights and responsibilities, even if as a secondary actor to the United States. Thus, most of Britain’s post-Cold War interventionism had American political support or was conducted alongside US forces, demonstrating a preference for the international order created after 1945 over any potential reshuffling stemming from China’s rise that might reduce Britain’s role.

One of the main pillars or sources of power remains the economy. Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while imperfect and insufficient to fully reflect global power, offers insights over the medium and long term. In this work, GDP was used in nominal terms to better reflect a state’s relative power in a globalised international economy for it captures real economic weight in global markets, currency strength, financial influence and capacity for expenditure. At the same time, GDP measured in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) does not adequately capture the dynamics of an interconnected economy or the structural reasons and strength behind currency resilience. The argument for Britain as a secondary great power remains valid, even in contrast to certain mainstream assessments.

Paul Kennedy (2023), in a review of his work and the distribution of power in the twenty-first century, argued that “with a mere 2.3 per cent of the world GDP, the UK is no longer a Great Power”, adding that “none of the European states – Germany, Russia, France, the UK or Italy – would individually count for much, as how could a nation be ranked among the great

powers if it possessed only 3 or 4 per cent of world GDP?”. That question is answered by arguing that GDP does not provide a complete picture of world power, particularly in PPP terms; under Kennedy’s definition, only the United States and China – with India as a possible exception – would qualify as great powers. This overlooks the fact that other actors continue to hold positions of influence in global affairs. Kennedy also fixates on quantifying great powers by their share of world GDP, with the 3.3% of the UK’s nominal GDP not enough, and the threshold remains unclear. Moreover, his vision of great powers as necessarily expanding at the expense of others is not entirely applicable to secondary great powers, which may seek to maintain the status quo depending on their relationship with one or more primary great powers. Notably, Kennedy relies on GDP measured in PPP – another divergence from this work – due to PPP’s tendency to produce distortions that reinforce narratives of inevitable decline, without acknowledging that Pax Britannica occurred while the UK was not the largest economy by PPP (Allison, 2017). Furthermore, Kennedy (2023) considers offensive participation in wars that may alter the “territorial status quo” as an implicit precondition to being a great power. Finally, the cornerstone of Kennedy’s argument is the rate of GDP growth relative to other powers. If a state grows more slowly than others, even non-great powers, its capacity to generate military power is presumed to decline. Kennedy thus links great power status directly to a state’s share of global GDP.

From a broader perspective, the United Kingdom exemplifies a declining great power whose falling trajectory was averted or at least minimised. In most cases, a state experiencing prolonged relative decline will adopt countermeasures to preserve its position within the ranks of great powers. As in the UK’s case, this often results in a foreign policy marked by expanding costs, increasing instability, and a desire to reaffirm national status. In such cases, the rhetoric of defending national security can become a means of justifying the pursuit of a new international role – or even a new identity – for a state emerging from decline. If the country successfully maintains its place among the great powers, this post-decline phase is likely to be defined by costly foreign policy engagements. For political elites, this stage offers renewed opportunities to pursue national objectives. Just as relative decline is often recognised early (Gamble, 1999; McDonald; Parent, 2018), relative stability and rising capacities are the same. Hence, the definition of “national interest” remains opaque. Nonetheless, elites’ ambitions tend to expand, seeking to maximise security and private-national interests, thus testing the country’s limits after decline.

The roughly three decades examined in this work also demonstrate the UK’s shifting strategic focus in response to evolving power dynamics within the international system. In the

1990s and early 2000s, Britain moved away from identifying primarily as a European power. Instead, it returned to an expeditionary and global role, directing strategic attention to the Middle East and non-conventional warfare. At the time, its relative position was on the rise among peers and was one of the leading military powers and defence spenders. Meanwhile, the 1990s offered no immediate conventional threats to the UK. A “second Belle Époque” for Britain and other Western powers allowed for retrenchment, while simultaneously endorsing global interventionism. By the late 2000s and early 2010s, global power distribution began to shift gradually, with China and India emerging as new competitors. By the late 2010s and 2020s, the UK had become far more engaged with non-European partners – although Europe and NATO remained central (United Kingdom, 2025) – having left the European Union, pivoted towards the Indo-Pacific, and partially rebuilt its diplomatic and military presence in the region. All this unfolded in the face of a new “systemic challenger” (United Kingdom, 2021) that had been largely absent three decades earlier. Britain was therefore compelled to manage emerging demands within a contested global order using limited resources, in an increasingly competitive strategic environment.

London remained willing to threaten and use force to defend and pursue a broad conception of the “national interest”. As Adrian Johnson (2014) argued, “Few other states – perhaps only the US and France – have taken such a role since 1991”. The former hegemon has employed military action to pursue its interests and maintain its position, generally at the expense of non-great powers. In this regard, minor powers have been the UK’s preferred “partners” for building up its conventional military force in the Indo-Pacific, possibly due to power asymmetry almost guaranteeing amicable and stable basing rights. Similarly, minor powers also became the preferable targets of British interventionism during that period. Additionally, the British military and diplomatic re-engagement with actors in the Indo-Pacific reinforces the argument of its position as a secondary great power, with the asymmetry of power favouring the UK when dealing with Australia – a possible middle power – having a relatively equal footing with Japan – a secondary great power – and unfavourably with the United States – a primary great power. It is possible to observe the indirect role played by Washington in Britain’s policy of strengthening bilateral relations in the Indo-Pacific, with the closeness of the Anglo-American relationship acting as a stepping stone to reforging or buttressing close ties with Australia and Japan. This indicates the continuing relevance of the United States, Britain’s hegemonic successor, in shaping British foreign and defence policy, raising questions about American relative decline and, if hegemonic transition occurs, the absence of a reliable successor.

With limited resources to deploy to the Indo-Pacific, Britain's preference for asymmetry becomes a means of minimising challenges. Striking agreements with Oman, Singapore, and Kenya means that asymmetry serves British military interests more than deals with its peers would. Beyond this, as shown, London gradually turned its attention back to Australia, rebuilding and forging new security links through AUKUS, which almost perfectly symbolises the international status of its members, as contributions to AUKUS Pillars I and II are led by the United States, followed by the UK, and then Australia. In short, the government in London has a strategy not exclusive to the Indo-Pacific: military bases are focused on minor partners, and security and defence initiatives involve actors that can offer more than just basing rights. For Britain, renewed Anglo-Australian and Anglo-Japanese strategic ties represent the other side of its engagement with the region, focusing on containing rising challengers.

British ties with its Japanese and Australian counterparts have evolved significantly over the roughly three decades since 1991. In both cases, there was a willingness in Tokyo and Canberra to foster enhanced security relations with London. Simultaneously, Britain recalibrated its regional policy, focusing on these two Indo-Pacific partners. Three factors contributed to the convergence of British, Japanese, and Australian interests. The first reason is the negative perception of China's rise, which emerged in these countries during the late 2000s and early 2010s and gained traction by the mid-2010s. Britain, Japan, Australia, and the United States shifted from constructive political and commercial engagement towards strategies to counter China's potential emergence as a disruptive power in the Indo-Pacific. Second, Brexit gave rise to the "Global Britain" foreign policy on the British side, which sought additional economic and security partners beyond Europe. Third, the closeness of bilateral relations of Britain, Japan, and Australia with the United States provided further leverage to strengthen cooperation that "bypassed" direct American involvement.

Thus, the influence of the primary great power on British and Japanese strategic thinking is significant. The United States already maintains close security and defence ties with both countries, with Britain being its main ally in Europe – and arguably globally – and Japan its principal ally in Asia. This removes a possible source of political pressure from the United States on Japan and the security engagements of its Self-Defence Forces. For Britain, ties with Japan indirectly reinforce the Anglo-American special relationship. Nevertheless, although seemingly paradoxical, Britain and Japan sought to strengthen their bilateral security relationship to expand their strategic options with additional partners, more evident in the Japanese case than the British. By the mid-2020s, Britain and Japan had become "quasi-allies", lacking formal mutual defence commitments but deeply entangled in security cooperation and

sharing strategic views on regional security. Notably, for the United States, the convergence of Britain and Japan supports its strategic aim of containing a rising China. Renewed cooperation between the two powers is thus strengthened by their respective relationships with Washington and functions as another strategic tool for the United States in the Indo-Pacific.

The same American influence is visible in the Anglo-Australian relationship from the 2000s to the 2020s. The War on Terror provided an avenue for renewed security cooperation and high-level exchanges. Predictions from the late 1980s and early 1990s about the end of special ties between the two nations (Bell, 1993) proved misguided, although it required both Australia and the UK to align with US efforts in the War on Terror to shift the narrative away from divergence. Australia's government sought to prove its value to its principal ally, while Britain aimed to influence American foreign policy decisions, particularly regarding Iraq (Kampfner, 2004). Initial cooperation and official exchanges were often by-products of strategies aimed at Washington. Nonetheless, collaboration deepened in the following decades, especially as the UK began rebuilding its military and diplomatic presence east of Suez in the early 2010s. While the United States pursued its pivot to the Asia-Pacific, its influence on Anglo-Australian ties remained indirect, as Britain continued to enjoy strong cultural, commercial, and financial links with Australia and its elites. The advent of AUKUS exemplifies the UK's role as a secondary great power and Australia's junior status. Far from an honorary participant, Britain was crucial in brokering the initiative between Australia and the United States, while also securing significant roles for its defence industry.

Lastly, the UK's case illustrates that when a country adopts strategies to reduce foreign policy costs, enhance economic efficiency, maintain a willingness to defend core interests, reassess its priorities, and has a relatively reliable successor, it can avoid losing great power status, even as a former hegemon. Moreover, Britain's experience supports the view that once inherent relative decline is halted, the state is likely to seek renewed prominence by reaffirming its international role. This pursuit led the UK to adopt renewed foreign policies – including military interventions – consistent with the behaviour of traditional great powers in competition for influence. Although no longer *primus inter pares*, Britain remains among the most prominent global actors, regardless of whether the international order is undergoing a hegemonic transition.

From a broader perspective, the relative decline of the Great Powers is seen as a period of volatility and instability, from the advocates of Hegemonic Stability Theory (Gilpin, 1981; Kindleberger, 1973) to Power Transition Theory (Copeland, 2000; Kugler; Organski, 1980). Nevertheless, historical empirical evidence shows that incentives for preventive war or

aggressive policies to pre-empt decline against a rising competitor have been rare. The same applies to the notion of political paralysis among leaders as decline advances, and they either fail to recognise or refuse to accept it. As McDonald and Parent (2018) argue, relative decline is not necessarily dangerous because, during its occurrence, Great Powers tend to adopt retrenchment as a countermeasure, implying a reduction in foreign policy costs and in the ambitions of grand strategy. It is after the period of relative decline has faded that real danger emerges, when the Great Power returns to a foreign policy of rising costs and a grand strategy of increased ambition. In sum, the first decades of the post-decline phase are more dangerous than the period of decline itself. The incentives for restraint gradually dissipate, and the Great Power re-engages fully in the pursuit of international power and prestige. Signs of this phenomenon can be seen in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review, which shows the British Government's vision of Britain as a country that must remain capable of shaping the global security environment, prioritising the defence of the Euro-Atlantic while maintaining defence ties with the Persian Gulf, the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East, able to protect the British Overseas Territories, and expand its military and industrial capabilities for an increasingly volatile and uncertain world. All these ambitions backed by rising defence spending and economic growth (United Kingdom, 2025).

In conclusion, the case of the United Kingdom from the 1990s to the 2020s is a prime example of a reaction to the end of a long period of relative decline. It might apply to others, including Russia after 1991 – Kennedy (2023) identifies the “rebuilding of Russian power” – and can occur after shorter periods of decline with negative consequences to international security, generally at the expense of countries below the ranking of the Great Power. It is worth noting that the end of a period of decline does not mean it cannot return as the country expands the costs and ambitions of its foreign policy. As in the case of the UK, the “British” relative decline ended around the late 1980s. Despite that, the 1990s would become the early years of a new type of relative decline with the rise of Asian economies. The era of British decline ended, and the Western decline commenced. The challenges to the UK's relative position remain significant. The possible consolidation of three Primary Great Powers (the United States, China and India, with the latter a possibility in the medium to long term) in the twenty-first century put additional pressure on other actors, including Secondary Great Powers, as these primary powers downgrade the relevance and influence of all others.

Therefore, the United Kingdom went from having a foreign policy of disengagement and retrenchment with varying degrees of intensity in the period from 1945 to the 1980s – with the Falklands War showing the limits of British retreat – to a country with increased willingness

to engage and intervene militarily overseas in the decades after the end of the Cold War, marking an increasingly ambitious foreign policy, even if dictated by limited resources. The change in Britain's international behaviour is not only in the military field; before the 1990s, the nation already had a long history of interventionism and military operations worldwide. The real change between the 1980s and 1990s was that Britain shifted to an offensive posture, willing to intervene in several regions where no critical interests – such as sovereignty or imperial integrity – were under immediate threat. After the Falklands War, the British gradually abandoned the posture of a declining power struggling to uphold its fragile position – whether at the fringes of empire or in former areas once marked by British influence – and adopted a more assertive foreign policy under the banner of liberal interventionism. In seeking to preserve its standing, Britain had retrenched to the point where it could once again test its limits and expand its interests.

The tilt to the Indo-Pacific is part of the British pursuit of offensively maintaining a world order seen in London as beneficial, even if secondary to the United States, as the UK prefers the predictability of the liberal, rules-based international order under American leadership to the potential outcome of a rising multipolar order. The status quo and the position Britain has preserved since its hegemonic decline are preferable to an uncertain order in which the UK holds no special relationship with the hegemon. Even though the tilt is influenced to some extent by the American pivot to the Asia-Pacific and subsequent policies, the British are motivated to lend their weight to efforts that minimise the likelihood of China emerging as a hegemonic power. Britain's objective in the Indo-Pacific is to suppress challenges to the world order established after the end of the Cold War. In pursuit of that aim, long-term relations with rising Asian powers or other regionally relevant actors – including Middle Powers – may deteriorate if London's elites perceive those players as attempting to undermine or reorganise the British-backed international order.

Furthermore, a Great Power that has managed to preserve its position and stave off further decline tends to develop a renewed willingness to test the limits of its post-decline capabilities, diplomatically and militarily, to reinforce its privileges and status. In other words, the actor seeks a special role or reaffirms its place in the world order. As a result, a post-decline Great Power is inclined to become an exporter of instability to lesser powers and regions as a way of safeguarding its international rights and privileges. The case of the UK highlights this phenomenon, showing that even liberal democracies can be a source of instability by exporting violence through military interventions during periods of renewed elite confidence following the end of inherent relative decline. Moreover, the reverberations for international security can

be significant, as the country remains relatively influential and possesses substantial assets. In Britain's case, the Government in London became content with a world order led by Washington, where the UK holds the position of a Secondary Great Power with institutional privileges and rights, a role focused on maintaining its place by upholding the liberal, rules-based international system.

By seeking to maintain the status quo, Britain became an exporter of future instabilities across various regions, with interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, Libya, Syria, and others, only the operation in Sierra Leone resulted in a sustained cessation of military hostilities. In short, Britain supported the status quo by employing military force when deemed necessary, even at the limits of its defence budget. However, this position became more complex with the rise of China in the 2000s and India in the 2020s, as the hegemonic role of the United States came under growing scrutiny. Broadly speaking, British foreign policy expanded in ambition and cost across the three decades since 1991. While the UK did undertake retrenchment in the 1990s, it was partially offset by a favourable international context. A second phase of retrenchment occurred briefly in the 2010s, but it showed that the UK was unwilling to sustain a foreign policy of disengagement and reduced aspirations for more than a few years.

Even as London implemented retrenchment, its forces intervened in Libya (2011) and Syria (2013), began expanding its military presence east of Suez (2014), exited the European Union (2016–2020), and officially “tilted” to the Indo-Pacific (2021). In this context, the British case illustrates a pattern of exporting instability to lesser powers by merely seeking to preserve the global status quo in which the UK remains a Secondary Great Power. A more unstable scenario could arise if a Great Power follows a similar trajectory of decline and recovery but seeks to revise the international order rather than being satisfied with recognition of its newfound resilience and position. Other Great Powers, such as Russia, who do not see favourably the status quo, could lead to significant exports of instability and violence to foreign regions while seeking something more than being a Secondary Great Power in an unfavourable world order.

The phenomenon also sheds light on the potential outcomes of future declines. The eventual hegemonic decline of the United States is no exception: if it occurs, and the country manages to maintain its status as a Great Power, it may follow a comparable trajectory. One recurring feature of decline is that the greater the power, the more forceful is its pushback against decline, and the greater the risk of exporting instability to weaker powers and regions. Furthermore, since every hegemonic power since the sixteenth century has accumulated an increasing core of substantial capabilities (Fiori, 2011), it is reasonable to argue that hegemonic

decline tends to leave the former hegemon with some enduring degree of status and material power. Britain's core capabilities were far greater than those of the Italian merchant city-states, Spain, or the United Provinces and they continue to be relevant in the twenty-first century with the British resilience as a Secondary Great Power. The United States may experience a similar trajectory: losing the trappings of hegemony – which amplify national power – while retaining the core assets necessary to sustain its relevance as a Primary Great Power.

Nevertheless, the consequences of American decline may prove even more destabilising than in the British case, due to the significantly greater core capabilities of the United States. Facing hegemonic decline, Washington may lash out with greater intensity than its predecessor, even if its place as one of the Primary Great Powers is not in question. Notably, unlike the UK that had the United States as successor, for the Americans there will be no like-minded successor to which the country might maintain a close relationship to avoid additional challenges, further reinforcing the risks of violence during a possible hegemonic transition. Thus, Great Powers should be watched closely, as their “decline” may not signal the end of their global influence. On the contrary, those that retain their relative position are likely to become exporters of instabilities, not necessarily to their peers, to avoid major wars, but to those perceived as fertile ground to advance their interests and reaffirm their privileges.

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