

# FAILED ALLIANCES OF THE COLD WAR

BRITAIN'S STRATEGY AND AMBITIONS  
IN ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST



PANAGIOTIS DIMITRAKIS

B L O O M S B U R Y



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To Yiannis, Dimitra-Mimi and Timos





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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANZUS	Australia New Zealand United States (defence agreement)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BRIAM	British Advisory Mission
CENTO	Central Treaty Organisation
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
CRO	Commonwealth Relations Office (UK)
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HMG	Her Majesty's Government
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff (US)
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee (UK)
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam (USA)
MEC	Middle East Command
MEDO	Middle East Defence Organisation
MIDEASTFOR	Middle East Force (US)
MoD	Ministry of Defence (UK)
MPO	Military Planning Office
NAM	Non-Alignment Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
SAS	Special Air Service (UK)
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
SEATO	South East Asia Treaty Organisation
UAR	United Arab Republic
UNFICYP	United Nations Force In Cyprus



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# INTRODUCTION

Alliances are as old as war; tribes, city-states, nation-states, sovereign states joined in treaties so as to defend their own territory, to help ensure their very survival in the face of an enemy. If their opponent was deemed too strong to be confronted without help, pride gave way to necessity, and short- or long-term alliances, usually dominated by the stronger party, came into being. From the Delos pact instituted by a prosperous Athens, *primus inter pares* in classical Greece, to NATO's 'war on terror' today, states have understood the utility of cementing alliances – finding ways to bring in other parties to back them in their own security policy. But what is the unique factor that every alliance needs for its existence?

To survive, an alliance needs a threat, an enemy; and it is on the fact of such a threat that the alliance depends. The threat of an invasion, for instance, raises fears about both the present and the immediate future, and this anxiety makes even hard-nosed nationalist leaders and generals think twice, and sign a pact to establish an alliance – sharing military information, coordinating diplomatic initiatives, drafting war plans together, participating in joint exercises. No doubt common values and ideologies and shared interests, as well as balance-of-power considerations, contribute to joining forces, setting up economic-aid programmes and creating well-organised alliance structures such as permanent military committees. But the fear of an imminent or short-term threat (possibly in the form of a surprise attack by a seemingly powerful opponent) remains the vital ingredient that nurtures alliances.

In the twentieth century, the Axis, the Entente, the Allies, the Central Powers, the Warsaw Pact and later NATO all proved themselves successful alliances, though Axis and the Central Powers lost their wars and the Warsaw Pact was defeated in the Cold War. What signals success in the endurance of alliances? To win the war in the first place. But we may add a couple of other criteria. Success for an alliance means also staying together against all

odds, maintaining the same (or roughly the same) perceptions of the threat, sharing a common security policy, enduring despair at the possibility of defeat, but fighting to the end and never abandoning your ally; it means planning together, sharing a command structure, technology and top-secret information (like the much valued – and always top secret – signals intelligence and decrypts). The success of an alliance can also be identified with honesty: true allies maintain goodwill, and do not attempt to extort excessive military and economic aid from each other; conferences between them should not resemble nineteenth-century Arab or Asian bazaars, where grotesque bargaining tactics are deemed acceptable behaviour. (Let us keep this in mind when we examine in the following chapters the positions CENTO and SEATO allies took during conferences.)

Does genuine fear of invasion and defeat bring honesty in dealings with allies? It is a daunting question, with debatable answers; in the case of Stalin – who certainly lacked goodwill as an ally – we may argue that only the fear of total catastrophe at the hands of Nazi Germany induced him to cooperate with Churchill and (later) Roosevelt. Indeed, Churchill reflecting on his troubles in dealing with Stalin remarked ‘the only thing worse than allies is not having allies.’<sup>1</sup> The expediency of the alliance of Britain with Russia and the United States put emphasis on survival confronting the Axis, while the divergent strategic priorities (not to mention ideologies and military doctrines and traditions), post-war visions as well as Kremlin’s suspiciousness towards the West inhibited rational understanding amongst the allies.<sup>2</sup> Finally, a clause along the lines of NATO’s Article 5 seems to be an absolutely necessary legal provision for establishing clear commitments and obligations, while demonstrating the alliance’s coherence to the rest of the world. However, such statements will serve little purpose in comparisons between the Entente, Axis and Anglo-American-Soviet summit consultations and agreements, because they were concluded in different geostrategic global environments (the 1900s, 1930s and 1940s respectively). All these assumptions do not offer a theory; they merely help in setting a general benchmark for assessing cooperation among states.

NATO, the most successful and resilient alliance of the second half of the twentieth century, won the Cold War, then intervened in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, but today confronts unpredicted challenges in insurgency-torn Afghanistan; certain member states debate (or even seek to downgrade) their own commitment in the campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaida. Britain and the United States carry the main burden of counter-insurgency, but other member states abstain from the combat zones, believing (though not stating openly) that the threat to them posed



by fundamentalist Islamist fighters does not justify a larger commitment – to put their soldiers in harm's way to help pacify Afghanistan and to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaida. National caveats prevent some NATO members contributing effectively to the counter-insurgency effort, for instance with special forces and assault helicopters. Logistics and security/support as well as money for development projects have been offered in place of front-line fighting units. NATO has effectively been turned into a two-tier alliance, with mainly the USA and the UK in tier one, and the other member states in qualified assignments constrained by national caveats. In December 2009 it was announced that 5000 more NATO troops would join the campaign in Afghanistan, but that their deployment would be piecemeal and their real contribution limited, since the issue of national caveats has not been resolved; operational efficiency thus remains impaired.<sup>5</sup>

This book explores the failure of two West-sponsored Cold War alliances similar to NATO: the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), in Asia and the Middle East respectively. On paper these two defence organisations would deter any Russian and/or Chinese adventurism in their respective areas of responsibility. Established in the 1950s (SEATO in 1954, CENTO in 1959) they showed themselves fine examples of the West's alliance-making diplomacy in the aftermath of the Korean War. Britain, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and the USA (the last of these as an observer, and later as an associate member) formed CENTO after the demise of the Baghdad Pact in 1959. Britain and America were the key powers in SEATO, which also included Pakistan, Australia, France, New Zealand, the Philippines and Thailand. This study will focus on the history of SEATO and CENTO, but will not attempt to compare them; their members belonged to different areas, had different traditions, histories, policies and aspirations, and the internal and external security challenges they confronted were too different to contrast.

Throughout the Cold War – from the Berlin and the Suez crises to the war in Vietnam, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the start of the Iran-Iraq war – Asia and the Middle East (and of course Europe) absorbed the attention of Whitehall strategists and their American counterparts, preoccupied as they always were with their strategy of containment with respect to the Soviet Union and China. The strategic value of the oil-rich Middle East was always self-evident to planners and their political masters, while the 'domino theory', especially with respect to Southeast Asia, paved the way for a strong American interest in defending the region from communist subversion. Thus anti-communist alliances similar to NATO (established in 1949) were to be set up so as to block communist expansion.

Anglo-American diplomacy worked hard at convincing regional states to join the new alliances, offering them – carefully, mindful of the need to avoid upsetting the regional balance of power, and causing an arms race – military and economic aid. There were also other key motives of British policy. In the 1950s, the UK assumed that formal alliances could avert American adventurist unilateralism that might otherwise provoke war with China and/or Russia. Besides, a strong alliance with Washington could help in preserving Britain's status as a world power in times of austerity, a notion to be explored in Chapter 1.

The central argument of this book, assessing British and to a lesser extent American strategy and ambitions for CENTO and SEATO, is that the absence of a Russian and/or Chinese threat of invasion led to the demise of these alliances, since key regional members – notably Iran and Pakistan – lost interest in continuing with the organisations. No actual deterrence was ever implemented, because there was no real threat to be deterred in the first place. Besides, all the allies showed themselves willing to make only qualified commitments to the defence pacts. The Indo-Pakistani wars, the Vietnam War, the *détente* with Soviet Russia and finally the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979 cost SEATO and CENTO their very existence.

The allies maintained notably different policy priorities. The USA sought to draw SEATO into the Vietnam confrontation; Australia and New Zealand dispatched forces, but in Britain Harold Wilson simply refused. In the post-Korean War era no serious threat would come from China or Russia. Pakistan attempted to persuade CENTO and SEATO members that the real threat to its national security came from India, while Britain, following its policy of withdrawal from East of Suez, manoeuvred skilfully in the committees of both alliances, avoiding further military commitments. London deemed the notions of communist 'subversion' and 'insurgency' (which terms had replaced 'invasion' or 'aggression' to describe officially acknowledged threats) too feeble to hold CENTO and SEATO members together. The regional members assumed that they could follow their own defence-policy agendas, without regard to the alliances' strict anti-communist mission – to which they had all signed up. Eventually, SEATO was dissolved in 1977, with CENTO following suit in 1979, after the fall of the Shah in Iran and the withdrawal of Pakistan. In the years of *détente* the alliances had proved themselves redundant.

CENTO and SEATO have yet to attract much academic attention.<sup>4</sup> NATO is the key alliance studied by Cold War scholars, and a great deal of literature is dedicated to Anglo-American relations and the British decision on withdrawal from East of Suez. Research into CENTO and SEATO can

provide a detailed picture of intra-alliance politics and antagonisms, and assess British strategy over these alliances, adding a missing piece to British Cold War historiography.

The key questions this book attempts to answer are: Why did CENTO and SEATO fail? To what extent did Britain boost the alliances, and what were the dividends gained? Did CENTO's and SEATO's *raison d'être* convince their constituent members, especially the USA and its regional allies, Iran and Pakistan? What was the actual or evolving military threat, if any, that faced CENTO and SEATO?

These questions will be answered with the help of the latest declassified British files – Foreign Office, Ministry of Defence and Prime Minister's office – and of American archives (notably the volumes on *Foreign Relations of the United States*), and not with international-relations and alliance-making theory.

This study reveals that international defence organisations wither once the principal partners come to assume that there is no major aggressor ready to attack them. The perceptions of a conventionally armed enemy (or an alliance) ready to invade, and of alliance-making for defence, are two sides of the same coin: they need one another for the alliance to be credible.



# BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES: SHAPING ALLIANCES BEYOND NATO

'Pactomania' is a term referring to the American urge to form anti-communist alliances in Asia and the Middle East during and after the Korean War, in order to contain Russia.<sup>1</sup> In the world of the Cold War the USA promoted the establishment not only of bilateral alliances but of international organisations for collective defence, following the creation of NATO in 1949. However, the word 'mania' here is misleading, implying American over-willingness to make military commitments in advance of war planning, demonstrating strong interest in their allies' security. As this chapter documents, the drive for anti-communist alliances was checked by the desire of Britain and the USA not to upset their relations with key third countries (e.g. India and Israel), as well as to avoid putting 'boots on the ground' – costly troop deployments under the auspices of allied war planning. The 'New Look' policy examining the employment of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons from the outset of any new world war was a key factor that inhibited the dispatch of US troops. While military staffs were trying to cope with the nightmarish scenarios of nuclear war, London and Washington based their qualified alliance-making commitments on the premise of low conventional Russian and/or Chinese military threats in Asia or the Middle East.

The domino theory – as perceived by the Eisenhower administration, the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA – was a key factor in the spread of American defence, security and economic-aid programmes in Asia and the Middle East in the 1950s. The President grasped the attention of his audience in 1954 with his simplistic but influential metaphor: states were similar to dominos, thus: 'You have a row of dominos set up, you knock over the first one, and ... the last one ... will go over very quickly. So you could have ... disintegration that would have the most profound

influences.<sup>72</sup> The domino theory was based on the fear that if one country went communist (either by invasion, subversion or opting to align with Moscow or Beijing), more would follow, especially in Southeast Asia. The domino metaphor sounded reasonable to statesmen and military officers who in their mid-career had witnessed the appeasement policy of Neville Chamberlain, giving Hitler a free hand in Czechoslovakia without securing peace. Nonetheless, President Eisenhower, a shrewd and cautious player, was not eager to give his regional allies all they asked for, and would not commit US forces even in draft war-planning.

On the British side, the key motivations for building alliances had been two: first, Britain needed to preserve her world-power status in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, as argued by Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden in a memorandum of 18 June 1952 entitled 'British Overseas Obligations', and by the Chiefs of Staff study 'Review of Defence Policy and Global Strategy', completed in the same month. The second strategic motivation was that Britain needed a great deal of help in this endeavour – by 1951 the balance of payments was in deficit to the tune of £369 million, with defence spending rising from 8 to 14 per cent of GDP. Eden, in a bid to shore up Britain's prestige, urged the cabinet to concur in a policy of creating alliances, with Washington evolving into a key funding source for these organisations, whose existence would support British policy in Asia and the Middle East. The prime minister's argument was Machiavellian enough, and assumed that the Americans would be naïve enough to foot the immense bills:

[We] should persuade the United States to assume the real burdens in such organisations [alliances in Asia and the Middle East] while retaining for ourselves as much political control – and hence prestige and world influence – as we can ... the more gradually and inconspicuously we can transfer the real burdens from our own to American shoulders, the less damage we shall do to our position and influence in the world.<sup>3</sup>

This was the power-by-proxy concept – a fine theoretical exercise.

However, by 1953 John Foster Dulles, the US Secretary of State, suspected his allies of seeking to check American policy initiatives in the future because they 'would be exposed to veto by those consulted, with subsequent handicaps of freedom of action'; policy options would have to focus on 'the lowest denomination of boldness and capacity among the consulting nations'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Foreign Office feared that unless Washington was not bound by some sort of formal alliance in Asia and the

Middle East, they would 'drag, by unilateral action, the western world into a full scale war with China – or worse.'<sup>5</sup> British diplomats had in mind the attitude of General Douglas MacArthur during the first phase of the Korean war, and were justified in worrying about American 'freedom of action.' Ironically, once SEATO and CENTO were established, the USA avoided boosting these alliances and limited its investment in them, focusing on its bilateral agreements with regional allies. (With reference to Vietnam, however, Washington pressured its SEATO allies – largely without success – to confront Hanoi.)

Eventually, in their effort to build new alliances, Britain and USA stood together in conferences, but Washington worried about being identified with the return of colonialism, as post-war British policy was viewed by regional nationalists. The Malaya insurgency that commenced in June 1948 was a notable example: the Americans abstained from supporting the British, even refused to supply them with 10,000 carbines for the constabulary, following a request from the British deputy police commissioner.<sup>6</sup> In British eyes, 'the full development of [Southeast Asia] can only be brought about with United States assistance, but at present there is an obvious reluctance on the part of the Americans to risk a further loss after their experience in China [with the victory of communist leader Mao Tse-tung]'.<sup>7</sup>

The conflict in Indochina and the end of French rule there preoccupied British and French policy in Asia in the early 1950s. Eventually, on 21 July 1954, the Geneva Final Declaration on Indochina was drafted by British, Russian, French and Vietnamese representatives – though the Americans refused to sign it, while stating that the agreement was to be respected:

The Conference also takes note of the declarations made by the Governments of Cambodia (4) and Laos (5) of their resolution not to request foreign aid, whether in war material, in personnel or in instructors except for the purpose of the effective defence of their territory and, in the case of Laos, to the extent defined by the agreements on the cessation of hostilities in Laos. [article 4]

The Conference takes note of the clauses in the agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Viet-Nam to the effect that no military base under the control of a foreign State may be established in the regrouping zones of the two parties, the latter having the obligation to see that the zones allotted to them shall not constitute part of any military alliance and shall not be utilized for the resumption of hostilities or in the service of an aggressive policy. The Conference also takes note of the

declarations of the Governments of Cambodia (6) and Laos (7) to the effect that they will not join in any agreement with other States if this agreement includes the obligation to participate in a military alliance not in conformity with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations or, in the case of Laos, with the principles of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Laos or, so long as their security is not threatened, the obligation to establish bases on Cambodian or Laotian territory for the military forces of foreign Powers.[article 5]

In their relations with Cambodia, Laos and Viet-Nam, each member of the Geneva Conference undertakes to respect the sovereignty, the independence, the unity and the territorial integrity of the above-mentioned states, and to refrain from any interference in their internal affairs. [article 12]<sup>8</sup>

Essentially, the 1954 Geneva Declaration would hold until the Bay of Tonkin incident in August 1964, and the commencement of considerable US military involvement in Vietnam. According to the Geneva conference ruling, national elections would be held in 1956, reunifying the country. Dulles assumed that these elections would secure a quick victory for the communists, and was pleased by the attitude of Ngo Dinh Diem, the President of the 'Republic of Vietnam', to cancel the elections in the south, which prompted attacks by communist guerrillas backed by Ho Chi Minh's 'Democratic Republic of Vietnam'. In response, American military advisers were dispatched to train the South Vietnamese military.

Some two months earlier, in spring 1954, Dulles had aired the concept of creating 'some lasting collective security system for Southeast Asia' during a conversation with Eden. The latter readily offered to examine such an option, believing that he could promote the setting-up of a regional Locarno-type security arrangement in parallel with the search for a diplomatic solution (at that time the Geneva talks had not been concluded). In this scheme the membership of India, Indonesia and Ceylon (in siding with Britain, the Commonwealth and the USA) would add much to the credibility of a collective security arrangement; but Eden was too optimistic – the three countries were unwilling to compromise their neutrality in a scheme sponsored by non-Asian powers, as Ceylon's prime minister pointed out. Britain had a colonial past, and the peoples of the region, including their elites, feared the advent of neocolonialism. In addition, American policy with respect to communist China left no room for manoeuvre by regional powers.<sup>9</sup> Of course the Chinese premier and foreign affairs minister,



Zhou Enlai, did not miss the opportunity to emphasise to Eden during the Geneva talks that a Southeast-Asia defence organisation would 'split the area just as NATO had split Europe'.<sup>10</sup>

The absence of a serious and immediate threat in the Middle East and Asia (a threat in the form of enemy divisions rather than of communist subversion and propaganda, which could be countered by police action and counter-propaganda), and the presence of regional nationalisms led London and Washington to negotiate treaty provisions that lacked the commitment of the NATO treaty. Comparing key articles in the NATO treaty with the corresponding parts of the SEATO treaty and the Baghdad Pact [the legal foundation of CENTO] it is easy to see how robust the NATO alliance structure was meant to be. On 4 April 1949, the representatives of Britain, the USA, Denmark, France, Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Portugal, Iceland and Luxembourg (to be joined in 1952 by Greece and Turkey) signed the NATO treaty, agreeing on certain key articles:

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all, and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually, and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security. [article 5].

For the purpose of Article 5, an armed attack on one or more of the Parties is deemed to include an armed attack:

– on the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, on the Algerian Departments of France, on the territory of Turkey or on the islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer;- on the forces, vessels, or aircraft of any of the Parties, when in or over these territories or any area in Europe in which occupation forces of any of the Parties were stationed on the date when the Treaty entered into force or the Mediterranean Sea or the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer. [article 6]<sup>11</sup>

Only after 20 years could a member state renounce the treaty (article 13). All these provisions established a benchmark for alliance standards (for the contemporary strategist as well as for the future scholar), and the level of automatic aid to the victim of communist aggression; but SEATO and CENTO, in their founding treaties (neither alliances ever had a charter), would never match NATO's stringent requirements. The USA, Britain, France, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, France, New Zealand and Pakistan signed the Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty (the Manila Pact) on 8 September 1954, agreeing in article 4 that:

1. Each Party recognizes that aggression by means of armed attack in the treaty area against any of the Parties or against any State or territory which the Parties by unanimous agreement may hereafter designate, would endanger its own peace and safety, and agrees that it will in that event act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes. Measures taken under this paragraph shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations.
2. If, in the opinion of any of the Parties, the inviolability or the integrity of the territory or the sovereignty or political independence of any Party in the treaty area or of any other State or territory to which the provisions of paragraph 1 of this Article from time to time apply is threatened in any way other than by armed attack or is affected or threatened by any fact or situation which might endanger the peace of the area, the Parties shall consult immediately in order to agree on the measures which should be taken for the common defense.
3. It is understood that no action on the territory of any State designated by unanimous agreement under paragraph 1 of this Article or on any territory so designated shall be taken except at the invitation or with the consent of the government concerned.<sup>12</sup>

The treaty was for an indefinite period of time. Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam were not members but were included in the SEATO defence area under a separate protocol. However, Ngo Dinh Diem did not hesitate to question SEATO's willingness to defend his South Vietnamese state. In a May 1957 conversation with Eisenhower, Diem asked for more military aid; Eisenhower, unwilling to comply with the request, reassured him of SEATO's response in the event of aggression. Replying, Diem pointed out that only two neighbouring countries, Thailand and the Philippines, had joined; their forces in the event of war would be preoccupied with defending their own