

**BRITAIN,
DÉTENTE
AND
CHANGING
EAST-WEST
RELATIONS**



BRIAN WHITE



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Britain, détente and changing East-West relations

While Britain's contribution to the cold war has been widely recognized there has been little work on the British role in moderating East-West tensions. In *Britain, Détente and Changing East-West Relations* Brian White presents the first comprehensive analysis of the role of successive British governments in the development of East-West détente.

The author maintains that Britain's contribution to détente from the early postwar was considerable, and constituted an important aspect of its foreign policy. He argues that Britain played a leading role as a catalyst in the 1950s and early 1960s, and thereafter enjoyed a significant if not central role in the development of détente. The key to British influence lay in skilful adaptation to the postwar structures of East-West relations coupled with a consistent view of détente. Ultimately, however, it was the failure to adapt effectively to the changing patterns of East-West relations from the mid-1960s onwards that led to the gradual decline of British influence.

This interpretative study throws new light on both the concept and history of détente and on the nature and concerns of postwar British foreign policy. It is also a central contribution to the continuing debate about Britain's role in a rapidly changing international system. As such, it will appeal to those involved in the study of British politics, contemporary British history, foreign policy analysis and international relations.

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In memory of a dear friend, Elizabeth Neave

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The opening of the postwar archives stimulated a number of studies in the 1980s which focused on the British role in what is now referred to as the ‘first’ cold war. Using newly available documentary sources, British and some American scholars argued persuasively that the cold war was not exclusively a Soviet-American affair; Britain, too, played a leading role.¹ This confirmation of a significant British role in the early postwar period, however, serves to highlight the absence of general analyses of the British contribution to East-West relations since 1945 and assessments of the British contribution to East-West détente in particular. To date, those scholars who have touched on Britain’s contribution to moderating East-West conflict have tended to concentrate on the negative side of the record—on the alleged failure of Britain’s enthusiastic advocacy of ‘summitry’ in the 1950s, for example. In general, British attempts to act as a mediator or ‘honest broker’ between East and West have been regarded as both ineffectual and pretentious, a rather desperate effort to prove that Britain could still wield influence on a global stage despite mounting evidence of a material ‘descent from power’.²

The contention here is that Britain’s contribution to détente cannot be so easily dismissed. If cold war studies have benefited from spotlighting Britain’s role, it is at least arguable that an understanding of East-West détente might similarly benefit from a sustained analysis of the British contribution. Whether significant or not in terms of its impact on East-West relations, the promotion of détente has certainly been a recurring theme in postwar British foreign policy. To take the most recent illustration, the Thatcher government decided after its landslide electoral victory in 1983 to give the highest foreign policy priority to working ‘for an improvement in East-West relations’ (Howe, 1987, p. 559). To many commentators at the time,

this conciliatory approach appeared to represent a fundamental reorientation of British policy given the implacably hostile approach to the East that had characterized the first Thatcher administration. Significantly, however, this overt attempt to steer East–West relations in a more cooperative direction has a number of antecedents in the postwar period, which indicates an important but neglected theme in British foreign policy.

One of the central objectives of this book is to trace this theme historically in order to make some assessment of the significance of the British contribution to East–West détente since the 1950s. This will facilitate, *inter alia*, the location of British policy in the 1980s within an important historical context. From a high point that roughly coincides with the premiership of Harold Macmillan, this historical account will involve charting the gradual decline of Britain’s ability to play a central role in the détente process. However, this does not mean that the British contribution has been insignificant since the 1960s. A narrative approach is complemented by a more explicitly analytical objective. The object here is to offer an explanation rather than ‘merely’ to describe the apparent continuities in British détente policy. To this end, different analytical perspectives are deployed—though not necessarily given equal weight—in order to develop an explanation of British policy. Thus, what follows can more appropriately be described as an interpretative study rather than a detailed history of an important dimension of postwar British foreign policy. The approach taken is that of the foreign policy analyst rather than the historian.³

From an international system or a ‘systemic’ perspective, British détente policy can be explained in structural terms or in terms of adaptation to changing circumstances. A structural account starts from the premise that Britain, like the other allies of the superpowers, had become ‘locked into’ a bipolar international system by the early 1950s. This confrontational structure was not only highly dangerous but it gave British governments little room for manoeuvre. Persistent British attempts to mediate between the superpowers and to play a conciliatory East–West role can be explained as an attempt to create a more flexible and less threatening international system. A tight bipolar structure, after all, not only imposed rigidity and inflexibility on policy-making but also heightened the possibility of nuclear war, whether by miscalculation or design. If British policy-makers were to continue playing a significant global role in international relations, defending if not advancing distinctive British interests around the

world, it was necessary to create some room for manoeuvre within a hegemonic Western system dominated by the United States. From this perspective, the prospect of a continuing East-West cold war, with the superpowers facing each other in an 'eyeball-to-eyeball' confrontation, was clearly inimical to British interests. It is interesting that this use of a *détente* policy as a vehicle to create a more flexible international structure was also adopted by the French and, to greater effect, by the West Germans, who, it will be argued, followed the British example by exploiting the potential of a quasi-independent high-profile East-West role.

The related adaptation explanation suggests that British policy in this context provides an important illustration of policy-makers pragmatically adapting to Britain's changed material circumstances after the Second World War by attempting to replace power, narrowly defined in material terms, with influence. If it is assumed that policy-makers, particularly after the Suez disaster in 1956, had an interest in manipulating the illusion rather than the substance of power, a significant East-West role promised to help to maintain Britain's position in the international hierarchy. This policy arena provided valuable opportunities to deploy what might be called the 'symbols of power'. Exploiting those opportunities enabled British leaders to display statesmenlike qualities on a global 'stage' and British governments to exert some independent leverage over the superpowers. In historical terms, British policy can be located within a tradition of adaptation to change, a tradition that can be traced back at least to the turn of this century.

From this analytical perspective, the gradual decline of British influence on East-West relations can be explained in terms of structural changes or changing patterns of East-West relations and the inability of successive British governments to reorientate policy to take account of those changes. With hindsight, indeed, British influence appears to have been dependent on the perpetuation of a bipolar international structure. As soon as that structure began to change, British influence began to wane, because those changes also transformed the bases of that influence. These bases included exploiting a 'special relationship' with the United States, using membership of an exclusive nuclear club to initiate or 'buy into' arms control negotiations, maintaining close if not always harmonious relations with the major West European allies and, whenever possible, keeping open direct contacts with the Soviet bloc. Thus, structural changes in East-West relations, which began in the

1960s, accelerated in the 1970s and became revolutionary in scope at the end of the 1980s, lie at the heart of this explanation of the decline of British influence in this policy arena.

A central problem which became more apparent towards the end of the 1980s than it had been before was the extent to which British influence was tied to maintaining—or, in the case of the Soviet Union, fostering—‘special’ bilateral relations with the superpowers, rather than acting as a European power and relying upon various multilateral links with other West European states as a base from which to wield influence. This does not mean, of course, that British governments ignored these links; indeed there was a marked ‘Europeanization’ of British foreign and defence policy from the 1960s onwards. But these links never appear to have been as attractive to policy-makers as the pull of ‘Atlantic’ or, more accurately, non-European connections. Significantly, the revolutionary changes in Central and Eastern Europe, which ended the 1980s and began the 1990s, served to highlight more starkly than before the inherent weakness of the British orientation to the extent that they underlined a structural trend that had been apparent for twenty years or more—namely, that intra-European relations were becoming more and superpower relations less pivotal to East–West relations as a whole.⁴

From a state or political system level of analysis, on the other hand, a very different type of explanation of British policy can be developed. From this perspective, what might be called a ‘domestic imperatives’ hypothesis suggests that British efforts to promote more harmonious East–West relations can be explained in terms of the demands of the domestic political environment, whether these were manifested in expressions of public opinion, pressure group activity, opposition demands or bureaucratic pressures. Two particular ways of developing such an analysis are pursued here. Electoral analysis is used where appropriate in an attempt to correlate peaks of governmental interest in promoting détente with the build up to general elections, on the assumption that such a stance would yield electoral advantage. This assumption in turn rests, of course, upon establishing first, that détente was an issue in the context of a particular election and, second, that there was a demand for détente whether expressed in terms of popular attitudes or in terms of the opposition’s electoral programme. Electoral analysis is limited for the purposes of this study, however,

because even if a linkage can be established, it does represent a 'peak' of interest in promoting détente at a particular time rather than an explanation of policy over a longer time period.

Alternatively, the salience of détente as a domestic political issue over longer time periods is considered. 'Salience' in this context can denote a variety of factors. It can refer to expressions of popular concern—about the destructiveness of nuclear weapons, for example. It might also indicate concerns within political parties about détente or détente-related issues. It certainly indicates a degree of sensitivity on the part of the political leadership to a popular mood or to party or opposition pressures. Clearly, the more salient an issue détente is, the more likely 'domestic imperatives' are to impact on the calculations of policy-makers. One major assumption here is that détente has been more salient as a domestic political issue at times of East-West tension than at other times. Therefore, what are generally regarded as the high points of cold war and 'new' cold war—the 1950s and the early 1980s in particular—are more closely scrutinized for evidence of the impact of domestic political factors on British policy.

It follows from this proposed analysis that domestic imperatives are unlikely to provide a consistently important explanation of British détente policy during the postwar period as a whole. But this does not mean that particular domestic factors are not relevant to an explanation of British policy at certain times. The factors of variable significance considered here include not only a high level of tension in East-West relations but also the proximity of a general election, the electoral threat posed by the opposition, the effectiveness of anti-nuclear sentiment expressed either through a political party or through pressure-group activity and, finally, the 'visibility' in domestic political terms of a nuclear deterrence strategy. The latter is a particularly interesting variable, given the indications that the promotion of East-West détente has on different occasions appeared to provide governments of both political persuasions with a convenient distraction from the 'naked' pursuit of a deterrence policy.

A third and final analytical perspective focuses on the attitudes of key decision-makers. The central issue from this perspective is whether a consistent set of attitudes towards détente can be elicited from the statements of policy-makers, which helps to explain the continuity of British policy during the postwar period. Can we indeed talk about a British approach to or conception of détente which underpinned that policy? The general argument developed here is

that a characteristically British approach to détente can be identified and that the basic elements of that approach were in evidence by the end of the 1950s. What is significant is that fundamentally the same approach has been maintained with remarkable consistency for the last forty years.

This approach appears to be rooted in the traditional *realpolitik* assumption that the ‘normal’ condition of international relations is a mix of conflict and cooperation resulting from shared and divergent interests among states. To avoid conflicts of interest culminating in war, each state has two essential instruments, defence and diplomacy. A strong defence posture is necessary to deter a potential enemy from initiating warfare. If this is unsuccessful, however, the instruments of defence have traditionally provided a more or less effective war-fighting capability. The alternative response is to try whenever possible to resolve inevitable differences of interest by a continuous process of accommodation. For this diplomatic process to be effective, however, open contacts and regular negotiations with potential enemies are essential. It follows logically from these assumptions that an appropriate general strategy for maintaining a ‘normal’ condition of international relations is to balance military strength with a readiness to resolve differences by negotiation.

Relating these preconceptions to the real world of international relations, however, it is clear that British policy-makers faced an ‘abnormal’ situation after the Second World War in at least two important respects. First, the cold war confrontation between the superpowers served to minimize both the political will and the opportunities to resolve by negotiation what had become East–West differences. Second, the onset of the nuclear age meant that the consequences of war—of not resolving differences by negotiation—were incalculably more devastating to individual states and to the international system as a whole than in the pre-nuclear age. On the one hand, this new situation heightened the need to organize strategic relationships so as to deter war by developing appropriate security structures. But it also necessitated the initiation and development of a process of accommodation—reducing tensions and working towards a *modus vivendi* at least with potential enemies. Thus, defence (or deterrence) and détente were different dimensions of the same strategy designed to ‘normalize’ East–West relations.

If this brief account captures the essence of the British approach to détente, differences of priority and emphasis have been evident throughout the postwar period. Most important, the priority given

to the pursuit of deterrence or the promotion of *détente* has changed over time, reflecting in part at least differing international circumstances. In general, since the establishment of an effective structure of deterrence in the form of the North Atlantic alliance, British governments have soon become uncomfortable whenever the West and, in particular, its principal ally the United States have appeared to pursue a policy of deterrence to the exclusion of *détente*—as in the early 1950s and the early 1980s, for example—and a policy of *détente* to the apparent neglect of the structure of deterrence—as in the early 1970s. In other words, whenever Western policy towards the East has, in the view of British policy-makers, been ‘unbalanced’ they have sought to use their influence to focus the attention of their allies on the dangers inherent in such a policy.

With respect to East-West *détente* itself, the British have consistently taken the view that *détente* is a process but a slow, piecemeal one where caution and limited expectations are appropriate. Nevertheless, progress is possible, and this is registered by agreements on specific areas of East-West tension. Each tangible agreement is important, because it helps to create the preconditions for further progress towards agreement on other areas of disagreement, and so on. Given the nature of international relations, there will inevitably be setbacks in any *détente* process, but this should not deter policy-makers from pursuing what might be called the politics of accommodation whenever possible.

British views about the appropriate mode of *détente* diplomacy between East and West have changed—in emphasis at least—in the postwar period. In the 1950s, there was an apparent preoccupation with arranging ‘summit’ meetings of the heads of government of the smallest possible number of states—ideally the ‘Big Three’ only—on the assumption that only heads of government could deliver the agreements that would punctuate progress. Thereafter, with Britain less likely to get an invitation to exclusive summit meetings, more emphasis was placed on regular diplomatic channels of communication. What has remained constant throughout the postwar period, however, is a belief in the importance of direct, high-level contacts between West and East on the assumption, rightly or wrongly, that personal face-to-face contacts between leaders help to foster understanding, build confidence in the *détente* process and promote discussion of outstanding problems. The preferred agenda of such discussions has been defined by the British in

the broadest possible terms, though, again, the emphasis has changed to some extent. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was far more emphasis on human rights issues, for example, than was evident in the earlier period.

Certain potential problems with this study, both substantive and methodological in nature, can be suggested and it is appropriate that they should be raised at the outset. The most obvious substantive objection is that the focus of this study overstates the importance of East–West relations in postwar British foreign policy. Certainly, East–West relations have not consistently dominated the foreign policy agenda since 1945, and it is not the intention here to suggest that they have. Other issues such as decolonization, Anglo-American relations and the state of play with Britain's allies and partners in Western Europe have often provided far more pressing and time-consuming problems for British policy-makers. But, to the extent that East–West relations and the state of superpower relations in particular have defined international relations since 1945, this arena has provided the most important milieu within which British policy-makers have had to operate. So even when British interests have not been directly at stake in a particular East–West issue—as in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) negotiations, for example—and governments have not been primarily concerned to influence the overall direction of East–West relations, the state of those relationships have, nevertheless, always been at least of indirect importance to Britain.

With respect to the proposed analytical framework, it might be argued that these different types of explanation are not necessarily separable or mutually exclusive. There is clearly a danger of artificially highlighting one type of explanation to the exclusion of others. Any explanation is contingent upon the level at which the analysis is pitched, an important methodological issue which is taken up in the next chapter. Even more important, perhaps, there is a danger here of imposing a design on British policy-makers with respect to détente policy that may also be artificial. Many scholars and, indeed, policy-makers themselves have argued that British foreign policy can *only* be explained as an ad hoc response to changing international circumstances. The notion that policy-making might be calculated or predetermined in terms of objectives is alien to the pragmatic ethos that allegedly dominates British policy-making. Joseph Korbel's case for effectively ignoring British

détente policy in his study and focusing on the French and West German contributions to East-West détente appears to rest on the argument that British governments have:

seen détente as a pragmatic proposition that should serve and be served through a variety of processes that seem to alleviate tensions and contribute to peace in Europe. In contrast to France's concept of détente based on analytical assumptions, London has shunned away from grandiose schemes, spectacular state visits and eloquent phrases. It has given preference to the ways of quiet diplomacy and practical steps of rapprochement (Korbel, 1972, p. 61).

In more general terms, Geoffrey Goodwin located British foreign policy many years ago in what he called an 'empirical tradition'. Developing for an American audience the argument that policy-makers in Britain have traditionally been suspicious of 'large concerns or great schemes', Goodwin warned that:

generalizations about the ends of British diplomacy need to be treated with special caution—we may easily fall into the trap of allowing hindsight to read a logic and coherence—a 'grand design'—into policies which in reality may have been little more than tentative gropings to meet bewilderingly complex situations (Goodwin, 1959, p. 31).

Any would-be analyst of British foreign policy has to give careful consideration to this caveat because the logical extension of the empiricist case is that British foreign policy cannot be analysed, it can only be described. In the absence of overarching principles and objectives, it might be argued, there is simply nothing to analyse. Indeed, this approach raises doubts about whether there is any policy even to describe, if by 'policy' is meant the purposeful pursuit of objectives.

In the context of this study, it suggests that the search for continuity in British attitudes and policy towards East-West relations in general and détente in particular will be fruitless if consistency in the pursuit of certain objectives rather than the most general historical trend is looked for. Similarly, from the empiricist perspective, it will be a pointless task trying to identify and establish a British conception of détente if it is assumed that policy-makers in Britain simply do