

Chris Weston. Decline & Fall of British Power (Part II): 1945 to 1963

The purpose of this paper is to examine the decline and fall of British power. "Power" is defined as the ability to influence another party and Michael Mann's four sources of social power is employed as an analytical tool.

The paper takes as its starting point the state of Britain after the end of the Second World War in 1945. In its aftermath, Britain had, along with other European powers, to face up to the desire of its colonies to achieve independence. In particular, India was the "jewel in the crown" and with its independence, the "game was up" as Britain had relied on this for a substantial part of its rise in Political and Economic Power (and Military Power through the Indian Army) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and well into the twentieth century. Thereafter, Britain was scrambling to protect the other important contributors to its Economic Power through interventions in the Middle East (e.g. Iran for oil) and South East Asia (e.g. Malaya for its tin and rubber interests).

But the reality was that Britain was reliant on substantial subsidies from the USA to maintain its imperial, financial and economic interests. The reliance on the US would extend with the commencement of the Marshall Plan which saw the bulk of the funds flowing to the UK.

In parallel, the UK had performed important steps in constructing a security and defence architecture and modest moves in some form of European economic co ordination via the Marshall Plan. But the UK failed to follow up on these promising steps by failing to engage in the first moves by (Western) Europe in its first moves to construct the European project of an "ever closer union." This failure to demonstrate Leadership (a fifth source of power identified by Mann) was to have fateful consequences.

Indeed, the Suez Crisis of 1956 which saw an Anglo-French-Israeli coordinated military strike on Egypt would bring into sharp relief all of the negative trends accumulating – not necessarily by virtue of the adventure itself but how the UK succumbed to financial and economic blackmail and its default policy thereafter of increased dependence on the USA for its Military and Economic Power – the former through its decision to acquire the delivery system for its (nominally independent) nuclear deterrent from the USA; and the latter by avoiding any conflict with the US that might lead to the US threatening a repeat of the financial threats.

The price for this policy choice was ultimately paid when the French vetoed the UK's application to join the European Economic Community in January 1963 – taking place just one month after the UK had signed an agreement with the USA for the delivery of the Polaris nuclear submarine system.

Thus, from a promising starting point in 1945, as compared with its European counterparts, it is argued that the UK's political leaders had become entranced with protecting economic interests with Military Power, as subsidised by the USA, and avoided decisions to engage with the European project until it had essentially been closed to it. That was a fateful act and took place just eighteen years after emerging as one of the "Big 3" global powers. Britain played no role in the rules of the game being established by a major economic power on its doorstep.

The next article in the series will examine the course of the UK and its attempts to reverse its decline in power.

Key words: Great Britain, social power sources, leadership, India.