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## British Policy Towards Military Cooperation with the Republic of South Africa, 1961 – 75

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# British policy towards military cooperation with the Republic of South Africa, 1961-75

## Abstract

The early 1960s were a turbulent time in South Africa; the Sharpeville Massacre provoked condemnation from the international community, which, with the acceleration of decolonisation, was turning increasingly against Pretoria. The decision to withdraw its re-application to the Commonwealth in October 1960 further isolated South Africa. Despite this, UK-South African military cooperation remained largely unaffected until the pivotal Simonstown Agreement's termination in 1975.

This article explores this relationship and explains why British policymakers consistently maintained links with an overtly racist regime. UK-South African military cooperation was persistently controversial and engendered frequent criticism from African members of the Commonwealth and from campaigning groups such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement, whose membership included Labour ministers.

Concurrently, Pretoria was viewed as an important Cold War ally, particularly in the context of the build-up of Soviet naval incursions into the Indian Ocean from 1968 onwards. This article will analyse how British officials attempted to navigate its military relations with South Africa under such heated circumstances.

**Key Words:** UK-South African, Simonstown Agreement, Apartheid, Arms Embargo

## Introduction

On 13 March 1965, Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced his government's intention to adhere to the UN voluntary arms embargo against South Africa. Later that month, Vice Admiral Sir Fitzroy Talbot, Britain's naval representative in Pretoria, reportedly stated that he saw no change in the relationship between the Royal Navy (RN) and South African Navy (SAN). This sentiment was reinforced by his replacement Vice Admiral John Gray, who stated that 'all forms of weapons use training as well as the fullest co-operation with the South African Navy, would continue during his command'.<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, it appears strange that these naval personnel talked positively of military cooperation with Pretoria at a time when the British government (HMG) was moving to isolate the country in this area. Five years earlier, the Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had stood before the South African parliament and proclaimed that a 'wind of change' was blowing through the continent. Framed in a Cold War context, Macmillan argued that 'Whether we like it or not, [the] growth of [African] national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact. Our national policies must take account of it.'<sup>2</sup> However, despite decolonisation, the rise of independent black African states, and the arms embargo, close relations were maintained between the British and South African militaries as a point of national policy. Joint exercises continued and South African servicemen took part in specialist training courses in the UK. In fact, the RN made one of its most controversial visits to South Africa in 1967, despite Pretoria's warning that all crew members would be subject to race-based apartheid laws while on shore leave. This article aims to

examine HMG's motivations in maintaining this relationship in the face of fierce criticism, both domestically and from large sections of the UN and Commonwealth.

The 1960s were a particularly turbulent time for the UK both domestically and overseas. Unsure of Britain's role in the post-imperial age, policymakers tried to maintain world power status by retaining a global military presence 'east of Suez'. This was, however, increasingly difficult, as the economy stagnated and the balance of payments deficit reached £800 million. This coincided with the United States playing an ever increasing role in the Vietnam War over the 1960s, particularly under the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson. HMG's refusal to commit troops to the conflict put a strain on UK-US relations.<sup>3</sup> US involvement in the Vietnam War also made Britain's presence 'east of Suez' all the more important to the Western Alliance as US resources were focused on Indochina. Secretary of State Dean Rusk even contended that 'the UK can perform security functions that no other nation can take over' owing to its experience in these countries during the colonial period.<sup>4</sup>

The international context, and stability of the Western Alliance, was also challenged by France's decision to withdraw from NATO's integrated command in 1966, meaning French troops would no longer be available for use by NATO.<sup>5</sup> There were also fragmentations in unity in the East as the Sino-Soviet split, which started with Khrushchev's denouncement of Stalin in 1956, led to a border conflict between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Soviet Union (USSR) by 1969. While this may have appeared to be beneficial for Western interests, it meant, particularly in the 'undecided world', that there were more external actors attempting to incorporate newly independent nations into their spheres of influence.<sup>6</sup> All these broader issues must be taken into account when analysing British policy towards Pretoria, and Africa more generally, in the years 1960-1975.

There has been some limited scholarship devoted to UK-South African military relations in the period being examined. Most recently, Allan Du Toit, a retired senior officer in both the SAN and Royal Australian Navy, has published extensively on this topic.<sup>7</sup> While Du Toit's work offers a useful overview of UK-SA naval relations, its broadness in covering a period ranging from 1898 to 1975 means that it lacks any real detail. Only a few pages are devoted to the period analysed in this article, which offers a far more in-depth account of HMG policy towards UK-SA military relations. Tim Bale has examined the debates within HMG about the possible modification of the arms embargo against South Africa in 1967 to allow for the sale of defensive maritime equipment.<sup>8</sup> While Bale does offer some discussion of foreign policy priorities, this article is more concerned with the inner working of the Labour cabinet in this period and the personal rivalries and ideological disagreements that came out through heated debates, press leaks, and deals with backbench MPs. John Young has examined the debates over the Labour Party's decision to implement the voluntary arms embargo against South Africa in 1964, with particular reference to the Wilson government's decision to allow the sale of Blackburn Buccaneer maritime strike aircraft to the republic.<sup>9</sup> This article will use a similar framework to Young's, however applied over a longer period and incorporating a comparative analysis of the policies of Labour and Conservative governments in the years 1961 - 1975.

This article offers a historical background to UK-SA military contact up to the latter's decision to leave the Commonwealth in 1961, before focussing on three key themes to analyse the motivations behind Britain's continued military cooperation with the republic. The first theme examines the role played by economic and commercial factors in motivating continued contact. As Britain was South Africa's main arms supplier when Pretoria left the Commonwealth in 1961, there was clearly an

economic motivation linked to maintaining relations and continuing such sales. However, economic considerations were more complex than this. Geoffrey Berridge argues that they played a major part in UK-SA relations in the period in question, owing to Britain's reliance on certain strategic minerals found in abundance in the republic.<sup>10</sup> There was also considerable private investment in South Africa by British businesses and individuals; this meant that HMG officials had to be careful in how they handled their dealings with their South African counterparts for fear of putting the UK economy in jeopardy.

Crucial to this analysis is an assessment of how UK-SA military relations correlated with Britain's broader strategic interests at the time. These included the Simonstown Naval base's position in-between the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean which made South Africa strategically important to the British presence 'east of Suez'. Even once the decolonisation process was completed, and east of Suez withdrawal announced, the base was still viewed as important in the context of Soviet naval expansion into the Indian Ocean from 1968, showing that the Cold War significantly influenced relations. Only months before South Africa's decision to leave the Commonwealth, the Congo Crises brought East-West tensions to sub-Saharan Africa. In January 1961, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev vowed to support all wars of 'national liberation', quickly making good on this by offering support to the nationalist movements of Lusophone Africa.<sup>11</sup> Thus, from the mid-1960s the Cold War in Africa moved from the northern and central parts of the continent to its southern regions. In addition to this, rebel groups in the Portuguese colonies took a more Marxist line and were critical of the first wave of post-colonial leaders for failing to break the shackles of dependence on Europe and the West.<sup>12</sup> Despite the existence of a right-wing authoritarian regime in Lisbon, Britain offered tacit support to Portugal, fearing the

spread of communism throughout southern Africa. The same considerations applied to South Africa as the South African Communist Party (SACP) and African National Congress (ANC) worked closely together. Several individuals, most prominently Joe Slovo, played a key role in both organisations and the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC's armed wing.<sup>13</sup> South Africa became increasingly involved in southern Africa's Cold War conflicts after the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974 brought about Portugal's rapid decolonisation. Pretoria, in co-ordination with the USA and Rhodesia, looked to support 'moderate' groups fighting against Marxist governments in Angola and Mozambique. Policymakers, particularly in the military, believed they faced a 'communist onslaught' from their neighbours and, as a Marxist leaning government looked more likely in Rhodesia, became convinced that the future of 'white civilisation' in the region was under threat.<sup>14</sup>

The final section examines how UK-SA cooperation affected British interests elsewhere. HMG had to consider how collaboration with Pretoria impacted their relations with other African states and potentially jeopardised Commonwealth unity. During the 1960s, Western nations increasingly realised that, by maintaining close relations with the racist regimes in southern Africa, they risked pushing other African and Asian states closer to the USSR or PRC. These Commonwealth considerations will also be discussed in the context of the Rhodesian Crisis that emerged after Salisbury's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from the UK in 1965. This had a bearing on UK-SA military cooperation; while Pretoria was Salisbury's closest ally in this period, HMG officials believed that the republic could play an important role in ending the crises by persuading Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith to come to the negotiating table. This affected Britain's military relations with South Africa as officials were careful not to alienate Pretoria at key points in the

negotiating process by avoiding the cancellation of joint exercises with the SAN, or by refusing South African service personnel places on British training courses. At the same time, the Commonwealth placed increasing pressure on HMG to 'solve' the Rhodesian problem. This emphasises the balancing act policymakers had to play when orchestrating relations with both the white minority regimes and Afro-Asian members of the Commonwealth and UN.

### Historic Ties

It was historical British colonial occupation in southern Africa that was the anvil upon which post-1945 ties between London and Pretoria were forged. South Africa was a British ally in both world wars, and naval cooperation was a key theme in the alliance. The UK had first established a presence at Simonstown, just south of Cape Town, in 1806. The harbour was significantly expanded and new dockyards completed in 1910, just as the Union of South Africa was formed.<sup>15</sup> Even though the Union was meant to be autonomous, the RN maintained control of the Simonstown base in the absence of a professional South African navy.<sup>16</sup> Even as preparations were made in the 1920s for South Africa to take control of its defence policy, the Smuts-Churchill Agreement of 1921 allowed the UK to maintain control over the Simonstown base. This situation remained, even after South Africa's de facto independence was formally ratified with the Statute of Westminster in 1931.<sup>17</sup> While the Union Defence Force (UDF) took complete control of South Africa's land defences, Pretoria remained reliant on the RN for maritime protection.

Despite the creation of the Union's own land defence force in 1912, in practical terms the UDF was still indirectly bound to British military values, standards, conventions, and traditions for decades to come.<sup>18</sup> The UDF wore similar uniforms, used a similar

ranking system, and followed comparable procedure to their British counterparts. The UDF also relied on the secondment of British army officers to fulfil its officer training needs.<sup>19</sup> This allowed Britain to maintain informal influence over the UDF and would, in the eyes of British policymakers, ensure standards remained high, thus benefiting British interests should South Africa offer support at a time of war. British officers also played a prominent role in the establishment of South Africa's first military training institution in Bloemfontein in 1912, where the South African Military School and its successor, the South African Military College, continued to adhere to British military traditions.<sup>20</sup> The first three commandants of these institutions were all former British colonial officers and the college modelled itself on Sandhurst.<sup>21</sup> Training was mostly conducted in English and based on manuals supplied by the British army.<sup>22</sup> South African officers also regularly undertook training on specialist courses at various British training facilities.<sup>23</sup>

Lingering resentment ensured that few Afrikaners joined the UDF's ranks, viewing it as too British in character. Involvement in WWII solidified this because of the secondment of British officers to command South African troops. Pretoria's decision to enter WWII fuelled Afrikaner disdain for the service as many wanted South Africa to remain neutral. For large numbers of Afrikaners, this involvement emphasised the UDF's pro-British nature.<sup>24</sup> After 1948, with the introduction of apartheid, the National Party (NP) government began making moves to strengthen Afrikaner cultural and symbolic nationalism within the country. In addition to this, the NP began to cut ties with the former colonial power. Afrikaner Defence Minister Frans Erasmus epitomised this policy in his handling of the country's armed forces from 1948-59. Erasmus systematically purged the UDF's upper echelons of Anglophone South Africans, as well as any Afrikaners who supported former Prime Minister Jan Smuts

and the United Party.<sup>25</sup> Erasmus also attempted to re-brand the armed forces with changes to uniforms, medals and the introduction of an Afrikaner ranking system.<sup>26</sup> He also drastically curtailed contact with the UK, with the number of South African servicemen attending courses at British army training institutions falling from 121 in 1948-49 to seventeen in 1952.<sup>27</sup>

The NP's electoral success also threatened British control over the Simonstown base. The party wished to purge the last vestiges of British imperialism from the country and the RN presence was a stark reminder of Britain's former dominance. Many Afrikaner nationalists wanted to see South African forces take full control of the base. Despite these difficulties, UK-SA military cooperation survived the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. The 1955 Simonstown Agreement (hereafter 'the Agreement') saw control of Simonstown handed to Pretoria.<sup>28</sup> There has been extensive historiographical debate over who was the main beneficiary of the Agreement. The orthodox interpretation argues that the UK profited most from the Agreement as the RN and its allies were permitted to use the base at all times even during a war in which South Africa remained neutral.<sup>29</sup> In addition to this, the Agreement forced a modification of apartheid laws at the base; workers and sailors of non-European descent would be exempt from the racist segregation enforced throughout the country. The UK also maintained overflying rights for the whole territory of South Africa, while a senior RN officer remained stationed at Simonstown as Commander in Chief South Atlantic and South America (CICSASA), overseeing the British and South African forces there.

However, Geoffrey Berridge and Jack Spence claim that South Africa was the main benefactor from the Agreement.<sup>30</sup> Control over the base was returned to the Union

and HMG was unable to achieve one of its primary objectives in the negotiations; persuading South Africa to commit to the defence of the Middle East, which was seen as a key Cold War battle ground and important bulwark to stop the spread of communism into Africa. More recently, Peter Henshaw has reasserted the orthodox interpretation arguing that Berridge and Spence's work is 'rather theoretical' and relegated the significance of the UK maintaining 'unqualified availability' of the base's facilities.<sup>31</sup> Henshaw also contends that the Agreement's commercial aspect, which saw the SAN invest in a full modernisation programme, allowed the UK to secure 'a leading role in the development of that navy'.<sup>32</sup>

It is clear that whilst compromises were made by both sides, several aspects of the agreement were mutually beneficial; for example, guarantees of regular training for South African officers in the UK offered the Union access to specialist courses while allowing the UK to maintain influence over certain sections of the country's armed forces. Joint exercises between the two navies also continued. This was naturally beneficial to South Africa as it provided support to the defence of its waters, whilst for the UK it offered a partner in the defence of an important sea route. The relationship between the two countries' armed forces also benefited from Erasmus' move from Defence Secretary to Justice Minister in a Cabinet re-shuffle in 1959. His successor, Jacobus Johannes Fouché, took a more pragmatic approach to military cooperation with the UK.<sup>33</sup> Shortly after the re-shuffle, the SAN reverted to its original RN-influenced uniform.<sup>34</sup>

South Africa's stance on racial segregation increasingly became an outlier in the late 1950s and early 1960s as the European powers were forced to dismantle their empires in Asia and Africa. In February 1960 Macmillan delivered his 'Wind of

Change' speech warning South Africa to take heed of these new circumstances. However, this clearly fell on deaf ears. In the following month, Apartheid policies and the South African state brutality were subject to international condemnation after white police officers killed sixty-nine unarmed demonstrators in the town of Sharpeville. UK-SA relations became increasingly tense and in October 1960, South Africa's white electorate voted to become a republic, meaning they had to re-apply for Commonwealth membership as the Queen would no longer be the head of state.<sup>35</sup> In theory, this should not have been a problem as India had retained its membership after it became a republic in 1950. However, South Africa faced hostility from African and Asian Commonwealth members because of its racist policies, ultimately leading to President Hendrik Verwoerd's decision to withdraw South Africa's re-application.

Despite this, the vote did little to alter UK-SA military cooperation. On 28 June 1961, Harold Watkinson, Britain's Minister of Defence, met with Fouché to discuss the future of UK-SA military cooperation. It was agreed that joint exercises between the two country's navies would 'continue as at present'.<sup>36</sup> Watkinson advised Fouché that it was increasingly difficult for the UK to sell small arms ammunition to South Africa, as this could be used for internal repression, potentially leading to international condemnation, though, notably, if other suppliers were not forthcoming, Watkinson stated that the UK would be willing to reconsider its decision. Both sides desired the continuation of South African soldiers training in the UK 'particularly because of the high proportion of equipment of the South African forces which was of United Kingdom origin.'<sup>37</sup>

## Economic Considerations

Economic considerations are a consistent theme in HMG's approach to selling arms to the republic. In advance of the talks to re-negotiate the Agreement in January 1967 a document was prepared by the Foreign Office (FO) and Ministry of Defence (MoD) which set out Britain's objectives. One of the key aims was to secure a large purchase order of naval equipment in light of the re-negotiation.<sup>38</sup> A 1970 Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) report discussing the implications of resuming arms sales to Pretoria stated explicitly that Britain's 'main political interest in South Africa is to maintain relations at a level of friendliness which will allow our economic interests to prosper'.<sup>39</sup> Geoffrey Berridge argues that HMG's policy towards South Africa in this period was influenced largely by Britain's reliance on the supply of key strategic minerals, notably uranium and gold, meaning that Pretoria had a 'formidable economic grip on Britain'.<sup>40</sup> More recent literature has largely dismissed Berridge's thesis.<sup>41</sup> James Barber and John Barratt state that 'there is no direct evidence of Pretoria using economic pressure in its dealings with Western states,' although they do admit that 'in their diplomatic and political relations both sides were conscious of the mutual benefits they derived from economic links'.<sup>42</sup> While South Africa may not have been the more powerful partner in the relationship, as Berridge has argued, this section demonstrates how its economic importance to the UK was a motivating factor in maintaining cordial links with the republic in the military sphere.

Despite leaving the Commonwealth in 1961, and increasingly isolated as a result of Apartheid, Pretoria continued to receive arms from Britain for 'external use'.<sup>43</sup> This correlates with Britain's overall foreign policy in the 1960s, which Saki Dockrill argues was focused on maintaining 'order in the world for the sake of its commercial

and financial wealth.<sup>144</sup> It should also be noted that, during the 1960s, Britain's trade with South Africa was more than with the whole of Commonwealth Africa combined.<sup>145</sup> Despite the economic importance of South Africa to the UK, Wilson's first Labour government implemented an arms embargo in 1965, as the Party could not 'stand by as an inactive observer of this tragic situation.'<sup>146</sup> However, it should be noted that the supply of spare parts and ammunition for weapons previously purchased from Britain would continue and the Labour government agreed to honour the order for a squadron of Blackburn Buccaneer maritime strike aircraft that had been ordered under the previous administration.<sup>147</sup> Philip Alexander argues that economic considerations were a key factor in this decision, citing Commons Secretary Herbert Bowden's warning that 'Britain could ill afford to indulge in economic warfare with South Africa.'<sup>148</sup> Pretoria's requests were also generally dealt with in a sympathetic manner and British officials interpreted the UN resolutions 'as favourably as possible to South Africa'.<sup>149</sup>

On 4 July 1966 the sale of Beagle aircraft to South Africa was licensed by the Strategic Export Committee against the FO's advice. Investigative journalist Paul Foot argues that the Beagle 206 'would almost certainly have been used for military or internal security purposes' as they had been 'specially reconstructed for military use and twenty of them had already been bought by the RAF.'<sup>150</sup> Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart urged the license to be revoked, fearing the potential impact it would have on UK-US relations, as the engines used in these aircraft were manufactured in the US.<sup>151</sup> President Johnson had recently tightened the US interpretation of the arms embargo to include a number of so called 'gray area' items that, like the Beagle 206, had 'the potential for dual civilian/military use'.<sup>152</sup> Board of Trade (BoT) President Douglas Jay responded to Stewart's protest by writing directly to Wilson, pleading for

the sale to go ahead. Jay warned of wider repercussions in UK-SA trade if they were cancelled and pointed to Pretoria's decision to cancel all future orders from the American Ford company 'military or otherwise' after the US government refused to allow the sale of 'chassis cabs' for the South African Ministry of Defence in December 1964.<sup>53</sup> Jay pointedly argued that 'the USA can afford this sort of treatment. We cannot.'<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, however, Washington intervened and vetoed the sale, something which certain sections of the British press, most notably the *Daily Mail*, argued was to open up the market for US manufactured Cessnas rather than any moral commitment to the arms embargo.<sup>55</sup>

While Berridge may have overemphasised Pretoria's power over British policy, it is clear that HMG was restricted in how far it could push certain issues because of its economic vulnerability. Indeed, principle was often downplayed in Britain's post-war foreign economic policies, owing to the country's precarious financial circumstances. In addition to this, although certain sections of the Labour party were fiercely opposed to relations with South Africa, many in the frontbenches took a more pragmatic position. In practice, this meant that the party's ascension to power did not precipitate a hiatus in relations between London and Pretoria which many, particularly in South Africa, had expected.<sup>56</sup>

When the Agreement was renegotiated in January 1967, in light of the 1966 Defence Review, it was decided that the SAN would take full responsibility for Simonstown's day-to-day running. Melvyn Brown, Assistant Head of the West and Central Africa Department, FCO, stated that the key purpose of these talks was to ensure that Britain's naval withdrawal was undertaken in a way that would not jeopardise its 'vitaly important relations with South Africa in other areas, for e.g. trade'.<sup>57</sup> Pretoria

accepted this situation and a 'greater responsibility for the Cape Route at a time of war.'<sup>58</sup> However, they attempted to capitalise on this new role and Britain's economic difficulties at the time by approaching HMG with an extensive arms 'shopping list'.<sup>59</sup> The MoD and FCO were aware that South Africa was planning an extensive order of new equipment and one of their aims in the re-negotiation was not to jeopardise this potential sale.<sup>60</sup> Ambassador Nicholls used the prospect of 'orders running into tens of millions of pounds' as justification for the Agreement's continuation even if 'little strategic importance' was attached to the facilities it offered.<sup>61</sup>

Information about the potential sale and HMG's consideration of restarting arms sales to South Africa was subsequently leaked to the press: this was one of the most controversial incidents in Wilson's time in office.<sup>62</sup> Several ministers, most notably Foreign Secretary George Brown and Defence Secretary Denis Healey, contended that the sale should go ahead due to Britain's precarious economic position. There were also concerns that a refusal may affect other forms of trade with South Africa. Hargreaves argues that, at this time, owing to the constant attacks HMG faced over its handling of Rhodesia 'Healey, Brown and other leading ministers no longer shared the euphoria of Labour idealists about African nationalism and the multi-racial Commonwealth' and contends that some of their advisors 'even regretted the departure of South Africa' from the Commonwealth.<sup>63</sup> There was often a gulf between the attitudes of grassroots party activists and the parliamentary Labour party on such issues, and, as left-wing Labour grandee Tony Benn argued some years later, the 'moral position on foreign policy' Labour advocates while in opposition is often 'completely eroded' when the party enters government.<sup>64</sup> Labour policy on the arms trade was often morally ambiguous, frequently viewed as a key

means of maintaining an important role in world affairs and a 'gateway to the continued exercise of political influence.'<sup>65</sup>

Wilson feared that the issue had the potential to split the Labour Party and used his contacts with backbenchers to plant a parliamentary question, leading to a debate in the House of Commons in which he categorically denied that sales of arms to South Africa would recommence.<sup>66</sup> Bale argues that this was a pivotal moment in Wilson's first administration and it allowed him to re-assert his authority as Prime Minister and seriously weaken opposition from those on the right within his cabinet.<sup>67</sup>

When the Conservatives returned to power in 1970, the sale of weapons for maritime defence was renewed. This was justified due to the perceived Soviet Naval threat in the Indian Ocean. Policymakers emphasised the importance of the Simonstown base in countering this potential Soviet aggression in addition to the need to work with South Africa as a potential Cold War ally and partner in the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans' defence.<sup>68</sup> There was also an economic benefit to this renewal of sales as it meant a potential income of between £50 million and £100 million over a five-year period.<sup>69</sup> A report on the potential impact of a resumption of arms sales on British relations with 'Black Africa' produced by the MoD and FCO in September 1970 claimed that lifting the embargo was likely to improve other areas of trade with South Africa.<sup>70</sup> However, the report concluded that South Africa was unlikely to allow relations with the UK to deteriorate even without the resumption of arms sales as it was 'of major economic and political importance to her'.<sup>71</sup>

It is clear that economic considerations were a motivating factor in maintaining UK-SA military relations. The importance of these considerations is emphasised in policymakers placing the potential sale of military hardware as one of three key

objectives prior to entering negotiations regarding the Agreement's future in January 1967.<sup>72</sup> However, economic considerations alone do not offer valid justification for the continuation of military cooperation, particularly in the face of 'black' African opposition, which policymakers believed was much more likely to have economic repercussions on Britain than maintaining the arms embargo and further ostracising South Africa militarily.<sup>73</sup> Even when the Conservative administration partially lifted the embargo in 1970, it only allowed the sale of maritime weapons and justified this as a strategic consideration in the context of the Cold War.

### Strategic Interests

In the early 1960s, with the decolonisation process underway, maintaining a military presence 'east of Suez' to safeguard British interests in the Persian Gulf and Far East was seen as essential if the UK was to remain a world power. Without formal colonial possessions, HMG's ability to meet its 'world-wide commitments' was 'dependent on facilities provided by others.'<sup>74</sup> The Simonstown base was a prime example of such facilities located at 'one of the strategic points on the globe, the Cape of Good Hope'.<sup>75</sup> Its position between the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans made it important for maritime purposes, both commercial and military.

The overflying and staging rights that South Africa provided the RAF were also seen as important for the UK's broader interests. As Middle East and North African countries gained their independence or re-asserted themselves away from Britain's informal sphere of influence, the RAF lost important staging and base rights in these territories.<sup>76</sup> This led to what RAF Air Chief David Lee referred to as an 'air barrier' between northern and southern parts of the Middle East.<sup>77</sup> Although the 'barrier' could be circumvented, it made communication and reinforcement between the two

Middle East Command areas (Cyprus and Aden) extremely difficult.<sup>78</sup> As more countries gained formal independence or sought to demonstrate their autonomy from former colonial powers, this 'air barrier' looked set to extend southwards through Africa.<sup>79</sup> Overflying and staging rights provided by South Africa grew in importance as they offered strategic air routes to the Middle and Far East. Young argues that the Wilson government viewed these rights as more important than maritime access as they were vital to Britain's 'wider strategic concerns' and the 'wellbeing' of the three High Commission Territories; Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland, British Crown Colonies that bordered on South Africa (or in the case of Basutoland were entirely surrounded by the republic) that did not gain their independence until 1966.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the necessity of military intervention in Basutoland was viewed as a distinct possibility in the run up to colony's 1965 elections.<sup>81</sup>

Overflying and staging rights provided by South Africa also allowed for quicker transport to Mauritius, for whom Britain maintained external and internal defence commitments until 1974, and the Seychelles, which did not gain their independence until 1975.<sup>82</sup> The Agreement also provided the UK with important communications facilities, without which there would be a 'large gap' in the Atlantic's equatorial zone for both merchant shipping and warships.<sup>83</sup> The Cape route was also viewed as strategically important for Western Europe; for example, in 1970, 27% of its overall trade and 34% of its oil arrived via these seaways.<sup>84</sup>

As Cold War tensions escalated in the early 1960s, it looked likely that they would increasingly influence events in sub-Saharan Africa, much as they had done in East and Southeast Asia the previous decade. On 11 July 1960, the mineral rich province of Katanga seceded from the Republic of the Congo (RoC) less than two weeks after

it gained its independence from Belgium. Katangese leader Moïse Tshombe cited Patrice Lumumba and his central government's alleged Communist leanings as justification. The 'Congo Crisis' which emerged from this went on for over five years and was the first instance of Cold War superpower rivalry in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>85</sup> British policymakers were concerned about communist penetration, as the RoC bordered Northern Rhodesia and Tanganyika, both of which remained British colonies at the time.<sup>86</sup>

These tensions looked set to spread further through sub-Saharan Africa after Khrushchev's promise in a speech at the UN on 6 January 1961 that the USSR would offer support to all 'wars of national liberation'.<sup>87</sup> From the beginning of the nationalist uprising against Portuguese rule in Angola in 1961, the USSR supported left-wing nationalist group the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola, MPLA), providing it with 'considerable material and financial assistance'.<sup>88</sup> The USSR also supported nationalist movements elsewhere in Portugal's African colonies.<sup>89</sup> Glyn Stone argues that Western governments, including Britain's, were alert to the increasing – but often conflicting and opposed – Soviet and Chinese activity in Africa during this period. Following an extensive review of Sino-Soviet penetration, the FO concluded in late December 1964 that communist activity in Africa 'is significant and increasing' and that, if communist influence was to be kept within reasonable bounds, the West 'must continue to take positive counter-measures'.<sup>90</sup>

Initially, in this new Cold War context, MoD officials believed that relations with the white minority regimes of southern Africa offered more 'tangible and reasonably cast-iron military benefits'.<sup>91</sup> The main opposition to the Apartheid regime derived from the

ANC, who were allied to the Soviet-backed SACP. However, continued UK-SA military cooperation was threatened when the Labour Party came to power in October 1964. Labour had been antagonistic towards South Africa whilst in opposition and their manifesto had pledged to end the supply of arms to Pretoria in accordance with the UN voluntary arms embargo. This was not implemented until 13 March 1965, with leading figures, including Cabinet Secretary Sir Burke Trend, warning that it would lead to the Agreement's breakdown, an eventuality he saw as imperilling RN activity and merchant shipping in the South Atlantic.<sup>92</sup> Despite the implementation of the embargo, the CICSASA would remain at Simonstown, bilateral training would continue for at least a year, and the exchange of officers would be unaffected by the arms embargo.<sup>93</sup>

Despite attempts to cut ties with South Africa there was widespread support within the Labour government for Britain's global military role. Wilson stated in December 1964 that, 'we cannot afford to relinquish our world role ... which for shorthand purposes, is sometimes called our "east of Suez" role'.<sup>94</sup> Britain's presence in the Indian Ocean was viewed as particularly important and the Wilson Government also maintained a significant military presence in Southeast Asia during the 'undeclared war' to defend Malaysia from 'Indonesian aggrandizement'.<sup>95</sup>

These broader interests clearly acted to limit the Labour administration attempts to ostracise Pretoria and naval cooperation continued unabated. In June 1967 – despite the Agreement's recent renegotiation, which gave South Africa greater responsibility over the running of the Simonstown base – three RN ships made a five-day visit to Cape Town. However, Pretoria made it clear that race-based apartheid regulations would apply to all crew members on shore leave. There was

fierce British domestic criticism of the visit and the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) urged HMG to cancel the tour.<sup>96</sup> Several Labour MPs pleaded with Wilson to intervene and stop the visit. David Winnick, Labour MP for Croydon South, successfully forced a debate on the issue in parliament on 31 May.<sup>97</sup> This proved to be a heated affair with several MPs calling for Gerry Reynolds, the Minister of Defence (administration), to resign.<sup>98</sup> Reynolds was unmoved by such protests and reiterated his and HMG's position was that the exercises were in accordance with the Agreement and that measures had been put in place to ensure that those classified as 'coloured' under the racist system of apartheid could opt for a transfer to another ship.<sup>99</sup> Despite the controversy that surrounded the visit, Defence Secretary Healey contended in August 1967 that, owing to its apparent success, naval cooperation with South Africa should be increased.<sup>100</sup> He argued that this was especially important in light of the Suez Canal's closure in the aftermath of the Six-Day War between Egypt and Israel. The closure would lead to an increase in the number of British ships using the Cape route to the Far East.<sup>101</sup>

Despite the desire on the part of some policymakers for Britain to retain a global military role, the £800 million balance of payments deficit inherited from the previous Conservative administration placed a major strain on the UK economy and meant that austerity measures were necessary to avoid devaluing the pound. Wilson had set a spending cap of £2000 million on defence by 1969 in 1964 prices.<sup>102</sup> However, it became apparent that this target was too ambitious without a major re-evaluation of Britain's global military role. The February 1966 Defence Review attempted to make such changes to Britain's priorities by cancelling a number of capital projects and announcing a withdrawal from Aden by 1967.<sup>103</sup> This did not go far enough; in July 1967 the Supplementary Statement on Defence announced a phased

withdrawal from the Malaysian and Singapore bases by the mid-1970s.<sup>104</sup> Despite these and other cost cutting exercises, the Labour Government was forced to announce the fourteen percent devaluation of the pound on 18 November 1967.<sup>105</sup> The January 1968 statement on public expenditure brought forward the withdrawal from Southeast Asia to 1971 and signalled the end of Britain's role as a global military power.<sup>106</sup> From this point onwards Britain's military presence overseas was focused on the defence of Europe.<sup>107</sup>

The east of Suez withdrawal adds further complications to an assessment of the continuation of UK-SA military relations. If strategic considerations were the main factor in continuing military relations with the republic, then one might expect that the final withdrawal of the UK's forces from east of Suez, completed in 1971, would have signalled a breaking of such ties and the Agreement's cancellation. A report commissioned by the MoD in 1970 assessing the value of the facilities provided under the Agreement predicted that 'after 1971 naval usage of South African facilities will be reduced to the regular transit of frigates to and from Hong Kong and irregular deployments of ships or small task forces to the Far East for training'.<sup>108</sup> Despite the now limited importance of Simonstown to HMG's broader strategic interests, UK-SA relations improved in the military sphere as the Conservative government, that came to power in June 1970, lifted the arms embargo to allow for the sale of defensive maritime equipment to the republic.

Lifting the embargo was justified by the build-up of the Soviet Fleet in the Indian Ocean, which made its first incursion into the area in March 1968 making 'goodwill visits' to India, Kenya, Pakistan, Somalia, and South Yemen.<sup>109</sup> Pretoria attempted to use this to its advantage, tirelessly emphasising the Cape Route's importance to Western security.<sup>110</sup> Officials within the MoD and the FCO Defence Department

viewed the Soviet threat in the area as credible. The main concern was the Soviet Navy's ability to harass Western merchant shipping if a strong deterrent was not maintained.<sup>111</sup> In August 1970, an MoD report argued that the facilities provided by the Agreement were of considerable importance in the defence of the Cape Route but also that the SAN could play a role in maintaining a credible deterrent and ease the burden on the RN.<sup>112</sup> Rear Admiral Peter Austin, Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff Operations and Air, went as far as to argue that the RN's views 'corresponded closely with those expressed by the South Africans.'<sup>113</sup>

The FCO Planning Staff's Charles D Powell, however, claimed the MoD exaggerated the Soviet threat and the South African facilities' importance to 'prevent ministers reaching a decision to do away with the Simonstown Agreement.'<sup>114</sup> Powell questioned the possibility of the USSR exercising an effective blockade of shipping in seas which stretched a thousand miles to the south.<sup>115</sup> Robert M Tesh, Head of the FCO Defence Department and former Deputy High Commissioner in both Ghana and Zambia was a vocal advocate for maintaining military cooperation with Pretoria. However, in these circumstances he admitted that the Simonstown base had lost much of its importance and 'could in a military sense be dispensed with' as 'the modern Navy is maintained largely by afloat support'.<sup>116</sup>

There were several studies undertaken by the FCO and MoD in the 1960s and 70s to ascertain the Agreement's importance. The general conclusion of these reports' authors was that the facilities provided by the Agreement were 'highly desirable but not essential' for British overseas commitments.<sup>117</sup> One report commissioned by the MoD in March 1970 contended that the main benefit offered by the facilities was that they 'reduced the penalties in terms of longer periods at sea.'<sup>118</sup> These included

tanker support, the collection of mail, and fresh provisions and stores. The layovers were also seen as important for crew morale as they provided 'a valuable rest and recuperation facility' for the ships company when on longer voyages. While this was clearly useful, it was hardly of vital strategic significance as some officials in the MoD claimed; the maintenance of UK-SA cooperation in this sphere had more to do with a desire on the part of these officials to protect British military influence over South Africa's armed forces and the continuation of historic ties between the RN and SAN.

The second Wilson government, elected in February 1974, re-introduced the arms embargo, although it was agreed that 'operationally necessary ship visits' would continue.<sup>119</sup> In October, there were claims in the British media that a recent visit by the RN to South Africa could still be viewed as having a 'goodwill' element.<sup>120</sup>

Foreign Secretary James Callaghan vigorously denied this, claiming that the South African government had 'misrepresented' the visit and seized the opportunity for propaganda purposes.<sup>121</sup> This incident was the final straw for the Labour government and in a cabinet meeting on 31 October it was agreed that 'although the defence facilities available to use under the Simonstown Agreement were useful in peacetime and could be of importance in war, their value was not such to justify continuance of the Agreement in view of its political objections.'<sup>122</sup>

Formal termination occurred on 30 June 1975, although some officials wished to maintain some form of association with the South African armed forces. Most notable was the question of whether or not London should continue to offer training assistance to South African naval personnel, which caused extensive interdepartmental debates amongst officials. David West, at the MoD, argued that South African service personnel should be allowed on the majority of courses and

that this could allow London to continue to benefit from South African goodwill in regards to future use of their port facilities.<sup>123</sup> The MoD's view was supported by the 'men on the spot' in Pretoria, Ambassador James Bottomley, who warned that South Africa would see the refusal of places on courses as completely unreasonable.<sup>124</sup> British Counsellor John Snodgrass believed that, if no places were offered, it would be a 'breach of faith' by HMG and could leave the UK open to retaliation by the South African government such as the refusal to maintain RN fuel stocks at Simonstown and Cape Town.<sup>125</sup>

These debates took place within the context of southern Africa becoming an important Cold War battleground as the former Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola gained their independence on 25 June and 11 November respectively. The later quickly descended into a bloody civil war that went on until 2002 in which the USA, Soviet Union, Cuba, China, and South Africa were all involved as external supporters of the various fighting factions.<sup>126</sup> Mozambique had a similar fate with civil war breaking out in 1977 between the Marxist government and RENAMO, an anti-communist rebel group backed by Salisbury and Pretoria. While this would surely have influenced British policymakers, these events ran parallel to an increase in state violence and repression in South Africa and calls from the international community to ostracise the racist regime after police murdered over 600 children in the Soweto Township who were protesting against changes to the school curriculum. By December 1976, despite the potential threat to Britain's broader interests in the republic, the FCO decided that South African armed forces personnel would no longer be allowed on training courses in the UK.<sup>127</sup> The role of Senior British Naval Officer South Africa (which had been created after the CICSASA was withdrawn in January 1967) would be disbanded, however a RN representative would remain in

South Africa as a defence attaché.<sup>128</sup> Officials also agreed that the informal exchange of intelligence would continue with Pretoria as this was in 'Western interests'.<sup>129</sup> While South Africa was no longer viewed as important enough to maintain the Agreement in the face of criticism from the international community, successive British governments still viewed cordial relations as important for national interests.

Strategic considerations were clearly a factor in the continuation of UK-SA relations in the period 1960-75. However, South Africa's strategic importance was often exaggerated by certain sections of the MoD and FCO Defence Department. Critics of UK-SA military cooperation argued that Britain could survive without these defence links and pointed to the US who managed to maintain a global presence without any facilities on the Cape.<sup>130</sup> By 1970, even those who wished to maintain relations in this sphere, such as RM Tesh, admitted that they were no longer vital to the UK's military interests. While there was a resurgence in military cooperation under Heath's administration, owing to the perceived threat of Soviet Naval expansion into the Indian Ocean, there were interdepartmental disagreements over this justification. As the FCO Planning Staff's Charles D Powell contended, there was little chance of the Soviet Navy establishing an effective blockade to Western shipping over thousands of miles of water.<sup>131</sup> While the Soviets did attempt to infiltrate this region, this was little more than 'flag-showing diplomatic visits' designed to establish 'Soviet political influence in the Indian ocean area.'<sup>132</sup>

## Commonwealth Relations and the Rhodesia Crisis

While the broader strategic issues alone may not adequately explain the continuation of UK-SA relations, there were other considerations related to the Soviet Expansion in the Indian Ocean. In a brief prepared by the MoD for the Prime Minister in advance of a meeting with the Kenyan Foreign Minister Dr Mungai, it was claimed that this was part of a broader Soviet plan to become 'a world power to rival the United States.'<sup>133</sup> The brief contended that this was likely opportunistic and designed to 'strengthen their political hand in the area' but also pointed to potential Soviet fear of Chinese expansion into Indian Ocean territories. Since 1964, British policy had been to take action to limit Sino-Soviet penetration of Africa and cooperation with the white minority regimes was part of this strategy.<sup>134</sup> However, this led to criticism from the UN and the Commonwealth. David French argues that, from the late 1950s onwards, world opinion was an 'absolute principle' dictating how HMG conducted its foreign policy.<sup>135</sup> This became even more important as Britain's global power diminished; for example, in 1966 an MoD report stated that 'world opinion is quick to react to any incident and must be a major factor in determining our own reaction.'<sup>136</sup> Western governments realised that in this Cold War context they needed to reevaluate policy towards issues that African leaders viewed as internationally important.<sup>137</sup> The biggest concern these leaders had was 'the issue of white minority rule in southern Africa.'<sup>138</sup>

This was taken into consideration by British policymakers, particularly under Wilson's two administrations, both of which implemented the UN voluntary arms embargo. Despite the promise that joint naval exercises would continue after the implementation of the embargo in 1965, it was decided by Foreign Secretary Michael

Stewart that Britain should not take part in that year's 'CAPEX' exercise.<sup>139</sup> These exercises focused on the defence of South Atlantic sea routes by Western powers, such as the US, France and Portugal, as well as South Africa, and had occurred annually since 1950. However, in 1965 only South Africa and Portugal were set to take part and it was decided that UK participation was an impossibility.<sup>140</sup>

In the same year, Britain's relations with Rhodesia reached crisis point as Ian Smith announced the UDI on 11 November 1965. The Rhodesia crisis was a cause of great embarrassment for Britain, with the Commonwealth and UN demanding tougher action against the white minority government. French argues that an invasion of Rhodesia by Britain would have had international approval.<sup>141</sup> However, Sue Onslow argues that this was not something HMG was ever willing to consider as it was 'morally and indeed politically undesirable'.<sup>142</sup> As Rhodesia was landlocked and its neighbours with sea borders, South Africa, South West Africa and the Portuguese colony of Mozambique, were all sympathetic to the white settler regime, the prospect of an invasion was 'logistically fraught with difficulty'.<sup>143</sup> Phillip Murphy contends that owing to the continued close contacts between Britain and Rhodesia's militaries, 'there were concerns that the British armed forces would refuse to obey any order to fight against their Rhodesian 'Kith and Kin''.<sup>144</sup>

However, despite Britain's refusal to respond militarily to the UDI, the increasingly tense international climate in 1964–65 made military intervention by the UN or the Organisation of African Unity a serious possibility.<sup>145</sup> This would most likely have led to counter-intervention by South Africa, which Onslow describes as 'the very stuff of nightmare for politicians in Westminster'.<sup>146</sup> To reduce this threat Wilson attempted

to moderate black African demands while refusing to intervene militarily which he hoped would 'soothe South African sensibilities'.<sup>147</sup>

Solving the Rhodesia crisis is known to have become an obsession for Wilson.

Richard Crossman, a leading figure in Wilson's first administration, claimed he referred to it as 'his Cuba'.<sup>148</sup> Pretoria, as regional hegemon, and Salisbury's closest ally, was viewed as playing a vital part in the negotiations over Rhodesia's future.

Wilson felt he could press Verwoerd to exercise influence behind the scenes to bring both sides in the conflict together.<sup>149</sup> Richard Coggins claims that 'South Africa's influence was probably crucial' in starting the 'talks about talks' which brought the two sides together for the first time.<sup>150</sup> Barber contends that despite an element of distrust, Britain and South Africa looked to each other to help broker a Rhodesian settlement.<sup>151</sup>

Pretoria endeavoured to use this situation to its advantage. Barber and Barratt argue that South Africa's attempt to purchase an arms 'shopping list' from Britain in 1967 was incentivised with 'the prospect of support in seeking a Rhodesian settlement'.<sup>152</sup>

While the order was refused, Bale contends that Wilson had been interested in the prospect of a deal if it encompassed Rhodesia.<sup>153</sup> In advance of talks to re-negotiate

the Agreement in January 1967, a document was prepared by the FO and MoD which set out Britain's objectives. In addition to a desire to maintain use of

Simonstown in a time of war in which South Africa was not involved, and the hope of securing a large purchase order of naval equipment, the other key objective set out by HMG was to avoid 'damaging our general relations with the South African government' as 'their attitude over Rhodesia in recent months has not been

unhelpful and is a vital factor in the success of our policy of bringing about the resumption of constitutional government there.’<sup>154</sup>

While the Labour Government was reluctant to make serious strides to ostracise Pretoria militarily, the US, under the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, went further in isolating the apartheid regime in this sphere. In the 1940s and 50s, the US had based its relations with South Africa primarily in a Cold War context, turning a blind eye to Pretoria’s overt racism and frequent human rights abuses. Thomas Borstelmann argues that ‘the sense of international emergency that pervaded the early Cold War years would help hide the substantial differences between the two countries behind a solid, if not iron, curtain of anticommunism.’<sup>155</sup> However, Kennedy risked US strategic interests in the republic, primarily its missile tracking stations based there, by implementing the voluntary arms embargo in 1964.<sup>156</sup> Kennedy was more sympathetic to the demands of African leaders than his predecessors and believed that more radical states such as Ghana, Guinea and perhaps even Mali could be persuaded to ‘turn to the West’.<sup>157</sup> His tougher stance against a racist regime was also linked to his domestic and foreign policy priorities, as in the same year he announced plans for the Civil Rights Act 1964. Such moves towards civil rights legislation were at least in part driven by concern for the corrosive effect racism in the US was having on relations with the decolonising world.<sup>158</sup>

However, Richard Nixon’s administration was ‘convinced of the need for a strong, Western-orientated power to play the role of policeman in the region’ and entered into a closer relationship with the republic shortly after taking office in 1969.<sup>159</sup>

Similarly, when the Conservative Party returned to power in Britain in 1970, the arms embargo was rescinded and the sale of weapons for maritime defence purposes

recommenced. Arthur Snelling, UK Ambassador to South Africa, emphasised the potential importance of the republic in any future East-West conflict, but advised against any formal alliance as this would 'augment the danger we face by forcing the rest of Africa (or at any rate the ex-British parts of it) further into the company of the East.'<sup>160</sup> This position was supported by Malcolm MacDonald, an FCO official and former governor general of Kenya, who explained that 'undoubtedly some sale of arms to South Africa would help to protect those interests against the Russian presence in the Indian Ocean; but without any doubt the gain for our interest would be far more offset by the much greater consequent damage done to them – to the Russians' advantage – elsewhere.'<sup>161</sup>

Despite highlighting the perceived Soviet naval threat in the Indian Ocean, the authors of the MoD and FCO report on the potential impact of a resumption of arms sales on British relations with 'Black Africa' were apprehensive about a renewal in sales, claiming British interests were likely to suffer substantial damage without countervailing gains in South Africa.<sup>162</sup> While it was argued that the defence facilities in Mombasa, Karachi and Bombay were of limited use in the Indian Ocean's defence without access to South African facilities, there were fears that resuming arms sales may see these ports fall under Soviet influence as their leaders lashed out against the UK in a showing of Afro-Asian solidarity. John Graham, Principal Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary, summarised this position stating that the sales of arms would 'result in a polarisation of view in Africa generally, with the Russians on the side of the angels and ourselves the French and the Portuguese on the other.'<sup>163</sup> The joint MoD and FCO report also argued that South Africa had similar defence interests to Britain and was 'unlikely to willingly increase her political isolation' meaning 'the continuation of her defence agreements with us is unlikely to be at risk',

even if arms sales were not resumed.<sup>164</sup> The authors also believed that South Africa would still maintain a strong military as other countries, such as France, would supply arms to Pretoria. The report's writers concluded that 'on balance it would be less harmful to put at risk South African cooperation, if only in peacetime, than that of Black African and other Indian Ocean countries; but the clear defence interest is to maintain both.'<sup>165</sup>

Tesh criticised the report for overemphasising the importance of British interests in 'Black Africa'.<sup>166</sup> He also claimed HMG could not assume UK-SA cooperation would continue without the resumption of arms sales. Tesh also dismissed the claim that South Africa would continue to be well-armed as African states would no doubt put similar pressure on other suppliers and downplayed the potential threat to Commonwealth relations, arguing that the organisation's members 'even Black African ones, are frequently shrewder than we expect them to be.'<sup>167</sup> Tesh pointed to the muted reaction of African Commonwealth members to Rhodesia's UDI in November 1965, with only Ghana and Tanzania breaking off relations over what was 'surely a bigger shock than the sales of arms from us to South Africa'.<sup>168</sup>

Heath's government pressed ahead with a resumption in arms sales and, when challenged by African Commonwealth leaders, remained committed to sales and to the Agreement. In October 1970, Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere met with Heath at Chequers to discuss the matter. The British prime minister emphasised the Cape Route's importance and the potential threat posed by the USSR. Heath stated that he 'had grown up during the years of the Berlin-Rome axis. He was not now prepared to remain passive in the face of a similar threat from the Soviet Union.'<sup>169</sup> Nyerere responded by emphasising that Tanzania, and much of the African

continent, did not view relations with South Africa in the context of defence as for them 'the dominant consideration was apartheid.'<sup>170</sup> Nyerere also pointed to the radical shift in the international context since the Agreement was signed in 1955, explaining that there were very few independent African countries at the time and that 'new situations demanded new attitudes of mind, and perhaps Britain should even take a fresh look at the Simonstown Agreement itself.'<sup>171</sup>

Other African leaders were unconvinced by the Cold War defensive arguments put forward by HMG. Cameroon's Foreign Secretary, Aimé-Raymond N'Thepe, for example, contended that if this was so vitally important to Western interests, then other Western European powers and the US would be involved in their defence.<sup>172</sup>

The Defence Secretary Lord Peter Carington, however, argued that 'the United States does not have the same degree of dependence as the United Kingdom in the free flow of trade along routes which pass the Cape of Good Hope'.<sup>173</sup> The consensus amongst leading ministers was that continued UK- South Africa armed forces cooperation was, to some extent, worth the risk of alienating Afro-Asian Commonwealth members. Carington felt that South Africa was a more reliable partner in the region as it would 'never join the Soviet Camp'.<sup>174</sup> Arms sales to South Africa were a contentious issue at the 1971 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Singapore. The acrimony expressed towards the British government over possible arms sales to Pretoria and the continued use of the Simonstown naval base led the FCO to conclude that the entire affair 'came fairly close to wrecking the Commonwealth.'<sup>175</sup>

Even after the Agreement's cancellation in 1975, Cold War considerations still played a role in military relations with the republic. In 1978, in the context of financial

uncertainty and economic woe faced by James Callaghan's Labour government, it was decided that Britain's diplomatic presence overseas would be reduced by twenty-five per cent. Foreign Secretary Dr David Owen argued that South Africa should be no exception to these diplomatic cutbacks.<sup>176</sup> However, Defence Secretary Fred Mulley argued that the two military attachés in Pretoria were an invaluable source of intelligence stemming from their contacts in South African military circles.<sup>177</sup> The British diplomatic position in South Africa was also regional, as London did not have defence attachés anywhere else in southern Africa, which was still a volatile 'Cold War theatre'.

It is clear that Cold War considerations played a role in maintaining military cooperation, particularly when the Conservative Party was in power. However, at the same time, fear of alienating other African states and driving them into the USSR or PRC's embrace meant that this policy had to be handled carefully. Even the Heath government's decision to lift the arms ban was focussed specifically on the sale of maritime weapons and Pretoria was disappointed by this decision, hoping the ban's lifting would offer access to a wider range of weaponry.<sup>178</sup> This decision reflected the tightrope HMG officials had to walk, balancing Cold War defence considerations with the battle to win over the 'hearts and minds' of the decolonising, often non-aligned, world.

## Conclusion

Continued cooperation between Britain and South Africa's armed forces from 1961 to 1975 was influenced by a wide range of factors. Economic considerations were clearly important, and some members of Wilson's first government were prepared to

put the British economy before their principles when Pretoria approached London with the arms 'shopping list'. However, economic interests alone do not adequately explain the persistence of UK-SA military cooperation, and were considered of secondary importance to strategic considerations when the Heath administration allowed the sale of weapons for maritime defence to recommence in 1970.

Britain's broader strategic interests were an important consideration in the continuation of UK-SA military relations. The Simonstown Naval Base was strategically significant owing to its position between the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans, and South Africa provided the UK with important overflying and staging rights. The Cape Route grew in importance as a result of the Suez Canal's closure in 1967, and the rise in the use of supertankers which were unable to travel through the canal even if it was open. However, the Agreement was maintained after the east of Suez withdrawal was completed in 1971 and Britain's decolonisation process was all but complete. The continuation of military cooperation was based on broader considerations than purely as an important connection en route to the Far East and Persian Gulf.

Cold War considerations in sub-Saharan Africa offer another possible explanation for the durability of military cooperation. While the 1968 Duncan Report played down the overall importance of Africa in Britain's overseas interests, it did emphasise the importance of maintaining influence on the continent to counter Soviet and Chinese expansion.<sup>179</sup> This was compounded by the Soviet Navy's incursions into the Indian Ocean in the same year. Despite this, while a strong white South Africa would offer a valuable partner, there were fears that if relations were maintained with the apartheid state other African countries could align with one of the major communist states. This

was clearly more important to Labour when in power, as they cancelled British involvement in the CAPEX exercise from 1965 fearing the potential backlash against joint naval exercise alongside South Africa and Portugal. Even after the Agreement's cancellation in 1975, British military attachés remained in the republic until 1985 as they were considered to be a good source of intelligence on the Cold War proxy conflicts in Angola and Mozambique.<sup>180</sup>

There was never one overriding motivation for British policy makers to continue armed forces collaboration with South Africa from 1961 to 1975. Instead, a complex constellation of factors saw cooperation continue until 1975, and, in some limited areas, beyond. Clearly, rather than retreating from sub-Saharan Africa in the post-imperial age, British officials still viewed the region as a key foreign policy arena, at least until the completion of the east of Suez withdrawal. A wind of change did indeed sweep through Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, but it took some time for it to really blow through the UK-South African military relationship.

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## Notes

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