Chapter 7

The Attlee governments

The election of a majority Labour government in 1945 generated great excitement on the left. Hugh Dalton described how ‘That first sensation, tingling and triumphant, was of a new society to be built. There was exhilaration among us, joy and hope, determination and confidence. We felt exalted, dedication, walking on air, walking with destiny.’\(^1\) Dalton followed this by aiding Herbert Morrison in an attempt to replace Attlee as leader of the PLP.\(^2\) This was foiled by the bulky protection of Bevin, outraged at their plotting and disloyalty. Bevin apparently hated Morrison, and thought of him as ‘a scheming little bastard’.\(^3\) Certainly he thought Morrison’s conduct in the past had been ‘devious and unreliable’.\(^4\) It was to be particularly irksome for Bevin that it was Morrison who eventually replaced him as Foreign Secretary in 1951.

The Attlee government not only generated great excitement on the left at the time, but since has also attracted more attention from academics than any other period of Labour history. Foreign policy is a case in point. The foreign policy of the Attlee government is attractive to study because it spans so many politically and historically significant issues. To start with, this period was unique in that it was the first time that there was a majority Labour government in British political history, with a clear mandate and programme of reform. Whereas the two minority Labour governments of the inter-war period had had to rely on support from the Liberals to pass legislation, this time Labour had power as well as office. It was also seen as the first time that Labour could really try its hand at international affairs, and certainly Labour’s supporters expected a new, more internationalist, socialist and ethical foreign policy from their government. Second, this period was remarkable in that Labour’s demand for a new world order, based
on a post-war settlement that included international economic planning and the creation of a more powerful version of the League of Nations to provide a collective security superstructure, appeared to have been met. A new international regime was emerging, largely through Anglo-American collaboration, based on the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), which had been agreed at the Bretton Woods conference of July 1944, and the United Nations, which had been established on 26 June 1945. These developments reflected Labour’s vision outlined in its 1942 and 1944 policy documents, *The Old World and the New Society* and *The International Post-War Settlement*, for a new multilateral system of organisations to regulate international relations and the world economy, though the leadership of the party made no mention of any intention to subordinate national sovereignty once in power. Labour’s vision coincided with America’s concern for an international regime that provided for international economic growth through the spread of free trade, buttressed by domestic economic growth, and for a collective security mechanism to mitigate the more deleterious effects of balance-of-power politics.

During the last eighteen months of the war, Attlee, Bevin and Hugh Dalton, who had become the President of the Board of Trade in 1942, had become increasingly involved in the development of the post-war international order. While Winston Churchill had felt that questions of the post-war settlement should not distract attention from the prosecution of the war, it had been the Labour ministers who had responded to the American plans for the establishment of a multilateral regime. These men also embraced the new economic thinking embodied by Keynes, who had been a crucial figure in the agreements reached at Bretton Woods. Thus, Labour’s ideas for a new, more regulatory, framework for international relations coincided with those of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, even if they differed somewhat in their ideological origins, and helped shape the post-1945 international economic order.

Third, this is an interesting period to study in terms of Britain’s changing role in the world. Britain had been the only victorious European state in the Second World War, which reinforced the perspective that it was a world leader, and a great and triumphant power. However, it was at this point in time that it became apparent for the first time that Britain’s pre-eminent position in the world was being replaced by the United States, and that Britain was, whether it really wanted to or not, retreating from its previous imperial position.
The great power manoeuvring of the European states was being replaced by the burgeoning contest between the Soviet Union and the USA, the Cold War, in which British foreign policy was to play a more minor, but still significant, role.

There are two main approaches in the extensive literature on the Labour governments’ foreign policy between 1945 and 1951. The first is a fairly uncritical approach to what was seen as a surprising degree of realism demonstrated by the Labour ministers, and praise for Bevin in particular in his role in involving the United States in a defensive alliance against the Soviet Union. This is the approach taken in the work by Bullock, Morgan, Ovendale and Pelling. The second is a highly critical approach, seeing the 1945 Labour government as dashing the hopes of those on the left for a new, more internationalist and socialist approach to foreign policy. It presents the Attlee government’s foreign policy in terms of a missed opportunity and even a betrayal of the left. This viewpoint can be found in the work of Saville, Schneer and Weiler. This chapter tries to retain a balance between the two approaches, a difficult task made harder by the fact that only a selection of issues can possibly be covered in an overview of this nature.

The chapter focuses on two major areas of foreign policy: first, the withdrawal and consolidation of the British empire; and second, the Anglo-American relationship and the emergence of the Cold War. It also outlines the opposition from within the Labour Party towards the government’s foreign policy, before finishing with some analysis of Labour’s defence policy within the context of competing demands for scarce resources. First, however, it is necessary to point out the context within which the 1945 Labour government had to develop and implement foreign policy, that of economic crisis.

The Attlee government’s foreign policy developed within the context of an immediate economic crisis, a recurring theme for Labour governments. During the war defence expenditure had risen from £626 million in 1939 to a peak of £5,125 million in 1944. Britain had used up its financial reserves to finance the war effort, and its manufacturing base had been disrupted. Exports of UK products had fallen from £471 million in 1938 to a low of £234 million in 1943, though had risen to £399 million in 1945. It owed debts to India, Canada and Australia totalling £3,567 million as a result of materials supplied during the war for which payment had been deferred. Millions of homes had been destroyed by German bombing. The USA halted Lend-Lease, the system of American financial aid that had done much to sustain the British war effort, abruptly at the end of the war,
which added to the economic problems. The balance of payments deficit had risen from £70 million in 1938 to £875 million in 1945.\textsuperscript{13} The national debt had risen from £7,247 million in 1939 to £21,473 million in 1945.\textsuperscript{14} Britain managed to negotiate a loan from the USA in 1946, but not on very favourable terms. This situation was compounded by the severe winter of 1947, which resulted in coal shortages. Furthermore, the Labour government was aiming for an export-led recovery at a time of shortages of raw materials and of full employment. This increased the need to demobilise troops as soon as possible. Home consumption was kept low in order to divert goods for export and allow high levels of investment. There was a convertibility crisis in 1947, and sterling had to be devalued in September 1949 by 30 per cent.\textsuperscript{15}

In addition to this immediate economic crisis, Britain’s relative economic decline meant that it could no longer afford to service its massive empire, and was over-extended in its foreign and defence policy commitments. While the leaders of the Labour government recognised that Britain’s power – particularly its economic power – had diminished as a result of nearly six years of war, they did not fully comprehend the extent of its weakened position and the long-term implications Britain’s leaders, both Labour and Conservative, continued to maintain that the UK had a leading role in world diplomacy and that Britain was still a great power. Attlee did seek to persuade his Cabinet colleagues that only by reducing global military commitments could economic recovery at home proceed, as there was a shortage of manpower combined with a balance-of-payments deficit.\textsuperscript{16} But the problems of maintaining Britain’s world role within its straightened economic circumstances did not appear to greatly diminish the objectives of British foreign policy, which were to maintain the Commonwealth structure; to ensure that the Middle East and Asia were ‘stable, prosperous and friendly’; to maintain a special relationship with the United States of America; to consolidate stability in Western Europe; and to resist the expansion of Soviet communism.\textsuperscript{17} However, it was not possible to achieve all these objectives at once, in particular because Britain did not have the resources to implement its global objectives.

**Labour and the British empire and commonwealth**

When the Labour Party came to power in 1945 one of the major challenges it faced was how to deal with the British empire. This territory,
made up of colonies such as India, Sierra Leone, Hong Kong, and Commonwealth states such as Canada and Australia, was as extensive as it had been at the height of Britain’s power in the world, and manifestly could no longer be maintained. At the end of the war, British troops were stationed in over forty countries across Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia, as shown in Table 7.1. There was massive pressure for rapid demobilisation, which was harder for a Labour government to resist than a Conservative one given Labour’s traditional rejection of conscription. Furthermore, it was difficult to argue for the need for large-scale troop mobilisation when Britain did not have a history of keeping a large army during peacetime. While Britain ended the war with over five million troops, this was rapidly cut to 3.5 million by December 1945 and to under one million by March 1948.

Labour’s policy towards the empire/Commonwealth was based on maintaining a close association with the white Commonwealth states such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, on foreign, defence and trade policy. Care was sometimes taken to inform these states of developments in Britain’s foreign policy, and to try to secure their support, for example over Britain’s role in Greece. This policy was combined with partial decolonisation.

There were a number of reasons for cutting back on Britain’s imperial commitments. First, it was clear that the growing cost of

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Source: Table taken from David Sanders, Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: British Foreign Policy since 1945 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 50.
maintaining the empire could not be met and that it was a practical and financial impossibility to keep British forces in so many parts of the world. Second, Britain was under increasing pressure from its allies, in particular the United States, to dismantle an empire that was seen as increasingly anachronistic in the post-war world. Third, the growing strength of nationalist movements in Egypt, parts of West Africa and Asia, and of course India, added to the problems of maintaining British rule. Fourth, the Labour Party’s tradition of anti-colonial policy and rhetoric meant that it had high expectations to meet, both from these nationalist movements, and from Labour’s supporters at home. Particular individuals had been very interested in colonial questions, such as Hardie, Attlee, Cripps and Arthur Creech Jones, who was Colonial Secretary from 1946 to 1950, and the Labour Party had devoted considerable attention to colonial issues at various points in the past. In 1940, the Fabian Research Bureau had established a Fabian Colonial Research Bureau, which worked hard to develop a credible policy towards the empire/Commonwealth, and which had a considerable impact on the development of the Attlee government’s colonial policy. In the case of India, Labour had a historic commitment to independence going back to its 1918 general election manifesto where the party had called for ‘freedom’ and the right of self-determination.20 Members of the Labour Party had also lobbied when in opposition for independence for India, and some had links with leaders there such as Nehru. Labour ministers were sensitive to charges of exploitation of the British empire, and in particular were aware of the opportunities for the Soviet Union to use such an accusation for propaganda purposes against a British socialist government.21

On the other hand, senior ministers such as Bevin were strongly committed to the British empire, and had not won power in order to dismantle it. Morgan notes that ‘Attlee, while capable of penning pungent Cabinet papers which called for imperial retreat and disengagement and the removal of outlying British bases in the new era of long-range air power, was also able to respond to the call of empire.’22 Bevin had told the 1945 annual Labour Party conference that ‘You will have to form a Government which is at the centre of a great Empire and Commonwealth of Nations, which touches all parts of the world.’ He was scornful of those in the Labour Party who felt that a socialist government could change the fundamental principles of British foreign policy, for ‘Revolutions do not change geography, and revolutions do not change geographical need.’23 For Bevin, the empire was not only a fundamental part of Britain’s history, but also at the heart of its destiny.
There was the enduring belief that Britain was still a great power, and as its empire was the most obvious manifestation of its great power status, this should be protected in order to prevent a loss of prestige which would lead to a decline in Britain’s influence more generally.\textsuperscript{24} In addition to this, ministers and many civil servants in the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office favoured development projects for the colonies rather than immediate British withdrawal, which, it was argued, would result in political anarchy and economic mismanagement. The empire provided Britain with valuable bases around the world, and with access to economic resources and markets, which might be lost if Britain were to withdraw. There was also concern that the Soviet Union would move into any vacuum left by Britain’s withdrawal, which must be avoided at any cost. Bevin had told Byrnes at a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers in Moscow in December 1945 that, ‘Soviet policy was disturbing. It looked as if the Russians were attempting to undermine the British position in the Middle East.’ He said that, ‘just as a British admiral, when he saw an island, instinctively wanted to grab it, so the Soviet government, if they saw a piece of land, wanted to acquire it.’\textsuperscript{25}

The result of these contradictory motivations was that Britain actually expanded its influence in areas like the Persian Gulf, which had important oil fields, and Cyrenaica, part of the former Italian colony of Libya. The Labour government also actively aided the restoration of colonial rule in French Indo-China. Britain maintained its position in other parts of the empire, for example the Caribbean. In the case of Malaya, the government resisted the communist insurgency, though this situation was not resolved until the end of the 1950s.\textsuperscript{26} On the other hand, by 1950, Britain had granted independence to Burma, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and India and Pakistan. There were also plans for Sierra Leone, Uganda, Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Nyasaland (Malawi) and Zanzibar. It is not the intention here to analyse the Attlee government’s hand-over of independence to its former colonies as detailed accounts already exist.\textsuperscript{27} However, it is worth noting certain aspects of the withdrawal from India and Palestine, as the former was, and is still, generally seen as a success, while the latter, at the time and subsequently, has been regarded as a failure.

Owen notes that ‘The ending of British rule in India has been regarded as one of the most decisive achievements of the Attlee governments.’\textsuperscript{28} Morgan that ‘The independence of India, in particular, became a beacon of freedom for emergent nationalist movements, and a kind of model for peaceful British withdrawal.’\textsuperscript{29} Their perspective
overlooks the fact that by 1945 independence for India was becoming impossible to resist. The British army would not have been able to quell the nationalist movement in India, and some troops may have mutinied if they had been ordered to attempt to do so, as they expected to be demobilised as quickly as possible and had come to see continued British rule in India as politically and morally anachronistic. Labour’s 1945 general election manifesto had contained a commitment to independence for India, and the party had repeatedly passed resolutions at conference committing it to independence for India throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. Therefore, the main problem for the Attlee government was not so much whether to grant independence for India, but how this was to be done, given the communal divisions between Hindus and Muslims. Partly as a result of these divisions, independence was brought forward, and was granted on 15 August 1947. Partition, with the formation of two separate states of India and Pakistan, was accompanied by intense communal violence. While Churchill lamented Britain’s withdrawal from India, there was very little protest from the Conservative Party over it, and it was widely accepted by the public as the retreat from India had long been anticipated. The area where British withdrawal did cause protest in Britain and abroad was Palestine, and this has subsequently been seen by some as Bevin’s major foreign policy failure. Avi Shlaim refers to the ‘inexcusably abrupt and reckless fashion by which the British government chose to divest itself of the Mandate for Palestine’. Certainly Bevin was criticised simultaneously as being anti-Semitic and as deserting Britain’s commitment to an independent Palestine by giving in to pressure for a Jewish homeland. However, just as many authors overly emphasise the success of the role that the Labour government played in granting independence to India, they apportion too much blame to the Labour government, and to Bevin in particular, over its handling of Palestine.

Palestine had become a British mandated territory in 1920 under the auspices of the League of Nations. Britain gave up its mandate in 1947 and withdrew its troops in May 1948. The manner in which this happened, without any resolution of the competing claims for territory, was seen as a humiliation for Britain, which had an ongoing commitment both to the resident Arabs of Palestine and to the immigrant Jewish population. Tensions between both were intensified by the desire for a massive Jewish exodus from Europe to the area following the Holocaust, which Bevin tried to delay as he feared the consequences of immediate mass immigration. Because of this, Bevin
(and much of the Foreign Office) was seen as pro-Arab and suspected of anti-Semitism. The issue caused tension between Britain and the United States, with President Truman urging the creation of an independent Jewish state as soon as possible. Britain, however, had long been committed to preserving the state of Palestine and granting it independence under the conditions of its mandate. Bevin feared that the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine would lead to both immediate and prolonged conflict in the Middle East. It would be seen as a betrayal of Britain’s responsibilities towards the Palestinian people, and would undermine Britain’s relations with Jordan and Iraq (which had also come under British control by the League of Nations mandate in 1920) and cause tension with Egypt, where 100,000 British troops were stationed at the Suez Canal. It would also undermine Britain’s relations with the wider Muslim world, which were extensive due to its Commonwealth connections. As Britain was unable to resolve the conflict, and its recommendation for a bi-national state had been rejected, it returned its mandate to the UN in 1947. The UN recommended the partition of Palestine between the Palestinians and the Jews, but both groups also rejected this proposal. Britain withdrew its troops on 14 May 1948, leaving the Jews and the Arabs to settle the matter themselves. David Ben-Gurion immediately declared Israel’s independence under his premiership, and President Truman unilaterally recognised the new state of Israel. Intense fighting followed, in which the de facto state of Israel was able successfully to defend itself from attack and make further territorial gains, creating hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees in the process. Britain’s withdrawal – carried out in spite of, and partly because of, the tensions in the area – was seen to have been an ignominious end to its role in Palestine. It was even noted in the House of Commons by Rees-Williams, the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, that ‘the withdrawal of the British Administration took place without handing over to a responsible authority any of the assets, property or liabilities of the Mandatory Power. The manner in which the withdrawal took place is unprecedented in the history of our Empire.’ The Labour government’s inability to resolve the Palestinian situation was a failure, but it was one to which previous British governments, an array of British politicians, the actions of other states and the intransigence of both the Palestinians and the Jews all contributed, and which the UN was also unable to resolve. It was also a failure that arose out of Britain’s inability to impose a solution on the combatants because of its lack of resources in terms of both military power and political influence.
Palestine is not the only area of criticism of the Labour government’s colonial policy, with some authors pointing out that the Labour government continued the tradition of developing policy that was economically beneficial to Britain while taking advantage of the resources of its empire, in particular through the working of the sterling area dollar pool. This meant that certain colonial countries within the sterling area – whose currencies were fixed to the British currency – paid dollars into a central pool of gold and dollars held by the Bank of England, in exchange for sterling. However, this occurred in part because of Britain’s economic problems, in particular its balance-of-payments deficit and need for dollars, rather than through the implementation of a traditional imperial foreign and economic policy, and because Labour never really accepted the consequences of Britain’s straightened circumstances. Bevin was convinced that Britain was, and should remain, a major force in international politics, admonishing Michael Foot during a debate on foreign affairs and the preparation of a peace treaty with Germany in the House of Commons that,

His Majesty’s Government do [sic] not accept the view ... that we have ceased to be a great Power, or the contention that we have ceased to play that role. We regard ourselves as one of the Powers most vital to the peace of the world, and we still have our historic part to play. The very fact that we have fought so hard for liberty, and paid such a price, warrants our retaining that position; and, indeed, it places a duty upon us to continue to retain it. I am not aware of any suggestion, seriously advanced, that, by a sudden stroke of fate, as it were, we have overnight ceased to be a great Power.34

However, while Bevin viewed foreign policy as the maintenance of Britain’s great power status in the world, many in the Labour Party were calling for a new approach to foreign policy based on international socialist co-operation rather than power politics.

**Keep Left and opposition to the Attlee government’s foreign policy**

One of the biggest challenges faced by the Attlee government was the expectations of change generated by its landslide victory at the election. Many of the rank-and-file of the Labour Party, some of the PLP, and a significant proportion of trade union activists were to the left of the leadership of the Labour government. There were expectations
of wide-ranging change amongst the Labour Party’s supporters in foreign policy as much as domestic policy. The tension between left and right within the Labour Party and wider labour movement affected perceptions on all policy areas, but ‘by far the most contentious areas of policy within the Labour Party itself were foreign affairs and defence’. In the House of Commons ‘criticism came more frequently from the Labour left-wingers than from the Conservative benches’. The wartime experiences of the Labour leadership meant that figures such as Attlee had moved from a position of emphasising that ‘There is no agreement on foreign policy between a Labour Opposition and a Capitalist Government’, to emphasising the need for continuity and stability in foreign policy. However, tensions within the wider party over issues such as Britain’s relationship with Soviet Russia and capitalist America, of internationalism versus balance-of-power politics, and of continued high levels of defence expenditure during the post-war peace, had not been resolved.

At the 1946 Labour Party annual conference, out of six resolutions on foreign affairs, only one was positive, and that was on the United Nations. One resolution regretted the ‘Government’s apparent continuance of a traditionally Conservative Party policy of power politics abroad’, and urged ‘a return to the Labour Party foreign policy of support of Socialist and anti-Imperialist forces throughout the world’. Criticism was made of the lack of change in Foreign Service personnel; over the barriers of Jewish immigration to Palestine; of the continued diplomatic relations with the Franco regime in Spain; and over relations with the Soviet Union. All the critical resolutions were either withdrawn before being voted upon, or, like the one above, were defeated, but they still carried a worrying message to the government, representing the growing campaign for a ‘Third Force’ in foreign affairs.

The repeated protest from the left of the PLP was that, ‘It is felt that when our policy meets with such hearty approval from the Opposition, there must be something wrong with it. It is felt that if the Tories applaud it, it cannot be a Socialist Foreign Policy.’ Instead, the advocates of a Third Force called for a foreign policy which would ‘chart a middle way between America and Russia’, as Britain’s ‘historic role’ was to ‘become the leader of a Third Force in world affairs, politically democratic, economically socialist, capable of mediating between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.’. The frustration with Bevin’s foreign policy reached a climax when in November 1946 fifty-seven backbench MPs tabled an amendment to the Debate on the King’s Speech.
laying out the government’s legislation for the coming year. Richard Crossman, speaking on behalf of them, expressed,

the urgent hope that His Majesty’s Government will so review and recast its conduct of International Affairs as to afford the utmost encouragement to, and collaboration with, all Nations and Groups striving to secure full Socialist planning and control of the world’s resources and thus provide a democratic and constructive Socialist alternative to an otherwise inevitable conflict between American Capitalism and Soviet Communism in which all hope of World Government would be destroyed.42

After the debate, which included a strong defence from Attlee on behalf of Bevin who was in the United States at the time, Crossman backed down and unsuccessfully tried to withdraw this amendment. While none of the Labour MPs voted in favour of it, eighty-two of them showed their disapproval of the government’s foreign policy by abstaining from the vote.43 Bevin responded to this episode at the 1947 Labour conference by accusing these rebels of stabbing him in the back. He went on, somewhat disingenuously, ‘I do say that if you are to expect loyalty from Ministers, the Ministers – however much they may make mistakes – have a right to expect loyalty in return. I grew up in the trade union, you see, and I have never been used to this kind of thing.’44

There was also a growing level of discontent being expressed by the left of the trade union movement, again particularly over foreign policy. At the 1946 TUC conference, only one resolution was forwarded on foreign policy, but this was highly, and extensively, critical of the government. This came from a communist member of the Electrical Trades Union, and stated that ‘This Congress views with serious concern aspects of the Government’s foreign policy.’ This concerned policy regarding Greece, Spain, de-Nazification in Germany, and the Soviet Union, since ‘the isolation of the Soviet Union, along with the tying of the economy of Britain with that of Capitalist America is in our view extremely dangerous’.45 This resolution was defeated by 3,557,000 votes to 2,444,000. However, it sufficiently annoyed the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, that he made direct reference to it in his speech to the Congress, saying the resolution was ‘filled with the kind of misrepresentation to which we have become accustomed from the members of the Communist Party, their dupes and fellow travellers’.46 The number of critical resolutions being forwarded, combined with criticism from the left of the PLP, caused alarm to the Labour leadership. Denis Healey, the Labour Party’s
International Secretary from 1946 to 1951, noted later that ‘communist influence in the Labour Party and unions remained a major obstacle in my task of winning support for the Government’s foreign policy’.47

One particular concern for the labour leadership was the application in 1946 by the CPGB to affiliate to the Labour Party. This was, as expected, rejected at the Labour Party’s annual conference. On Healey’s suggestion, Herbert Morrison successfully moved an amendment to the party constitution to prevent the situation arising again.48 This stipulated that political organisations ‘having their own Programme, Principles and Policy for distinctive and separate propaganda, or possessing Branches in the Constituencies, or engaged in the promotion of Parliamentary or Local Government Candidatures, or owing allegiance to any political organisation abroad, shall be ineligible for affiliation to the Party’.49 The aim was ‘to end the possibility of communist affiliation once and for all’.50 As Seyd notes, since individual membership of the party was not possible for anyone belonging to an organisation which was deemed ineligible for party affiliation, this constitutional change also ‘provided the Party leadership with the means to control the extent of organised factionalism within the Party’.51

This factionalism, organised and unorganised, was a problem for the government. There was a gap between the expectations of the rank-and-file of both the Labour Party and the unions and their respective leaderships. There was also continuing dissent from the left-wing back-bench MPs, who in May 1947 produced the pamphlet Keep Left, which by 1950 had sold 30,000 copies. Written by Richard Crossman, Michael Foot and Ian Mikardo, Keep Left was critical of the government’s domestic, and, in particular, foreign policy, repeating the call for a Third Force. Members of the Keep Left Group included Barbara Castle and Tom Balogh, and after 1950, Fenner Brockway. Richard Crossman chaired its meetings, and was the driving force behind the group.52 However, the Keep Left Group was careful not to appear to be allying itself with the communist left, and made a point of criticising the Soviet Union while expressing the desire for co-operation with it. No MP who was concerned about their future political career within the Labour government could afford to be accused of cooperating with the Communist Party. The Keep Left initiative, though significant, was to be short lived, for the arguments over foreign policy collapsed with the announcement of Marshall Aid in the summer of 1947. Once the Soviet Union had refused to participate in the
Marshall Plan, it became impossible for the continuation of protest over Bevin’s foreign policy for parliamentarians. Crossman stated in the House of Commons that it was the Marshall Plan that changed his opinion over the government’s policies: ‘I will be frank. My own views about America have changed a great deal in the last six months. Many members have had a similar experience. I could not have believed six months ago that a plan of this sort would have been worked out in detail with as few political conditions.’ Thus, the Keep Left rebels came back within the fold, muting their criticism over foreign policy, coming to accept the economic necessity of Marshall Aid, as relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated and avoiding accusations of being a ‘fellow-traveller’ became increasingly imperative. Cliff and Gluckstein have noted that ‘Keep Left holds the record as the shortest-lived left rebellion in the history of Labour. Marshall Aid from America killed it stone dead.’ This is not quite true, for the group did continue to meet until 1952, but certainly it had lost most of its impetus. Only a handful of ‘hard left’ MPs continued with their criticism of Bevin’s foreign policy, most notably Konni Zilliacus, D. N. Pritt, and John Platts-Mills. They were among the six MPs who were either marginalised, expelled by the PLP or denied support for re-election by Labour’s NEC.

Morgan has argued that Bevin’s foreign policy led to ‘an astonishing series of redefinitions, even revolutions, in Labour attitudes towards the world outside’. This required a change in attitudes on the left towards the US, and, ‘Most shattering of all, for British socialists committed to a sentimental tenderness for fellow socialist regimes from 1917 onwards, a feeling rekindled by the victories of the Red Army during the war, it implied a stern, unrelenting hostility to the Soviet Union.’ However, this study argues that this shift in Labour’s foreign policy actually occurred during the second half of the 1930s. It was the Spanish Civil War that destroyed the Labour Party’s stance on pacifism and non-intervention, and the rise of Hitler that had paved the way for the acceptance of rearmament and the use of force. The Soviet Union had long been viewed with suspicion by many in the leadership of the party, and the Nazi-Soviet pact and the Soviet invasion of Finland had reinforced this viewpoint. When the Soviet Union joined the allies, this did generate a new wave of hope amongst some sections of the Labour Party that it could forge a new relationship with Russia after the war, but not with government ministers such as Attlee, Bevin and Dalton. They were more focused on working towards the same vision of a post-war multilateral world based on international institutions as the USA,
even if this vision arose from very different motivations. The actions of the Soviet Union in refusing to co-operate with Marshall Aid and the developing Cold War meant that this was now accepted by the bulk of Labour’s supporters.

Britain, America and the Cold War

One of Bevin’s major foreign policy concerns in the immediate post-war period was that the USA would return to an isolationist position. This would be problematic for Britain in three ways. First, Labour’s vision of a multilateral world order required leadership from America. Second, in terms of a great power rivalry between the UK and the Soviet Union; whilst the Labour Party had stressed during the 1945 election campaign that it alone could handle the Soviet Union, the Labour government was well aware that it could not handle what it perceived to be an expansionist Soviet Union on its own. Third, Bevin and other ministers were also aware that Britain was not likely to be able to meet all its commitments to maintain stability in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Thus, Bevin’s aim was to maintain the ‘special relationship’ that had developed from the alliance between Britain and America during the Second World War, and to involve America in European reconstruction as closely as possible.

The situation in Greece was a case in point. Although never part of the British empire as such, Greece had long been considered within the British sphere of influence, and was seen as strategically important in that it intersected lines of communication with the British empire in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. Greece had been polarised politically since the First World War between a largely liberal, republican left and a conservative, monarchist right. This had intensified during the 1930s. In 1936 there was an army coup under General Metaxas, and then Greece was invaded and occupied by the Axis powers during the Second World War. Some of its unpopular right-wing government went into exile, as did the King, who based himself in London. Some of the right-wing stayed in Greece and collaborated with the Germans. Britain supported the underground resistance in Greece, the National Liberation Front (EAM), which included the communist and non-communist left organisations, and the affiliated National Popular Liberation Army (ELAS). This gained in strength to the extent that it seemed likely to win power in the event of an election. At first Britain supported EAM and ELAS, but soon became
concerned about the influence of the communists within it and so helped nurture the much less popular non-communist resistance, and in 1943 Britain swapped her support to it. British troops landed in Greece in October 1944. These troops found themselves not only fighting the Germans, but also trying to prevent civil war from breaking out.57

Britain’s policy at the end of the Second World War towards Greece was to support any government as long as it was not communist. Churchill had been pressing for elections and a plebiscite to be held as soon as possible, followed by British withdrawal from Greece. British policy towards the conflict in Greece had been very unpopular with the Labour Party, and both the party and large sections of the Greek population expected a change in policy, thinking that a Labour government would have a more positive attitude towards the Republicans.58 However, to a large extent Bevin continued Churchill’s policy. In August he produced a memorandum on Greece recommending to the rest of the Cabinet that the elections and plebiscite should be held as soon as possible, even though the conditions for free and fair elections did not exist within the on-going conditions of threat and violence. The reasons for Bevin’s recommendations were that continuing conflict in Greece would undermine the whole of Britain’s Middle East position;59 that until the Greek elections were held, ‘we are hampered in pressing for free elections in other Balkan countries’;60 and that Britain would not be able to withdraw its troops from Greece until these elections were held.

The Labour government’s actions towards Greece were very unpopular in the Labour Party, and provoked protest from party members and from within the PLP. Bevin also found that his foreign policy was being questioned within the government itself. His view was that,

> The Mediterranean is the area through which we bring influence to bear on Southern Europe, the soft underbelly of France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey. Without our physical presence in the Mediterranean, we should cut little ice with those States which would fall, like Eastern Europe, under the totalitarian yoke. We should also lose our position in the Middle East.

Thus, it was ‘essential’ that Greece remained ‘with us politically’.61 However, Attlee wrote to Bevin while he was on a trip to New York in November 1946, laying out his concerns over foreign policy. While he reassured Bevin ‘that there is not much in the complaint that there
have not been full discussions of Foreign Policy in the Cabinet’, he went on that,

I think we have got to consider our commitments very carefully lest we try to do more than we can. In particular I am rather worried about Greece. The Chiefs of staff are suggesting that we must keep our forces there for at least another year. I cannot contemplate the financial and military burden with equanimity. The political and economic situation in Greece shows no improvement. They seem to be unable to get a satisfactory government nor can they do anything but quarrel amongst themselves. Meanwhile we have to accept a good deal of criticism. I feel that we are backing a very lame horse.

Attlee reminded Bevin that ‘I have as you know, always considered that the strategic importance of communications through the Mediterranean in terms of modern warfare is very much overrated by our military advisers’, and that ‘I am beginning to doubt whether the Greek game is worth the candle.’ Furthermore, he did not think that the countries bordering Soviet Union’s zone of influence, namely Greece, Turkey, Iraq and Persia, could be made strong enough to form an effective barrier, and ‘We do not command the resources to make them so.’ Instead, Attlee suggested that Bevin try to reach an agreement with Russia that these countries become a neutral zone. He concluded ‘that we have got to be very careful in taking on military obligations in Greece and Turkey when the U.S.A. only gives economic assistance’. He complained that ‘There is a tendency in America to regard us as an outpost of America, but an outpost that they will not have to defend. I am disturbed by the signs of America trying to make a safety zone around herself while leaving us and Europe in No Man’s Land.’ His final instruction to Bevin was to find out what the Americans ‘are prepared to do’, but that ‘we should be careful not to commit ourselves’.62

This letter from Attlee effectively questioned and challenged Bevin’s whole foreign policy stance, recognising the problems inherent in Britain propping up countries in the Mediterranean when it did not have the resources, and questioning Britain’s relationship with the USA and the Soviet Union. As far as Bevin was concerned, the Soviet Union was expansionist and had to be stopped whatever the price. Attlee then spoke to Hector McNeil, then a Minister of State at the Foreign Office, who wrote to Bevin in New York asking him if he could ‘try to obtain some more definite indication as to what the Americans propose to do for Greece and Turkey’. McNeil warned Bevin that ‘I think I should tell you that in my opinion the whole
question of our policy towards Greece and Turkey is in the melting pot, and that there is a very great reluctance here to contemplate a continuation of our military, financial and political commitments in Greece.63

Bevin was enraged. He replied that ‘I cannot embark on a discussion with Mr. Byrnes on the basis suggested in your telegram. If our policy is under reconsideration it is useless for me to raise Greece and Turkey with him.’ Furthermore, McNeil’s warning that the policy towards Greek and Turkey was in the melting pot ‘has come to me not only as surprise but as a shock’.

The policy of the Government has been based hitherto on the assumption that Greece and Turkey are essential to our political and strategical [sic] position in the world and I have constantly had that assumption in mind in my conversations both with the United States of American and Russia, and it has been one of the underlying assumptions in our negotiations for the peace treaties ... I really do not know where I stand.64

Bevin was not prepared to compromise his position on Greece and the Middle East. This shows a hardening in his position, because he had in fact questioned the government’s Middle Eastern policy himself early on in the Attlee government, sending a memo to the Cabinet members in August 1945 requesting their views on the issue. He had asked his colleagues ‘to consider the fundamental question of whether we are to continue to assert our political predominance in the Middle East and our overriding responsibility for its defence, or whether, alternatively, it is though to be essential on financial and man-power grounds that we should seek the extensive assistance of other Powers in the defence of the Middle East’.65 By 1946 he had become convinced of the strategic importance of the Middle East, and of the role that Greece played as an access route to it. However, he had also came to the conclusion that Britain did not have the resources to continue its involvement in Greece, and did turn to the Americans for support. The result was the Truman Doctrine and the policy of containment, as Truman pledged that the USA would ‘support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures’. Truman linked aid to Greece and Turkey to the wider fight against communism in order to shock Congress into approving his policy of providing support for these countries and reverse America’s traditional policy of non-intervention in European affairs.66

The Truman Doctrine was followed by a speech by the Secretary of State, George Marshall, on 5 June 1947 in which he argued that
Europe’s political stability depended on its economic stability. He said that ‘It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health in the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace’. It was up to the Europeans to come forward with a common programme of their aid requirements. Bevin publicly welcomed the ‘inspiring lead’ given to Europe in Marshall’s proposal. However, privately doubts were expressed about Britain being included on the same basis as continental Europe in any Marshall Aid programme. While Britain was prepared to accept American leadership, it was not prepared to be treated as just another European country. At the first meeting with William Clayton to discuss the Marshall Plan, Stafford Cripps, by then the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pointed out ‘that there was a difference between the U.K. and other European countries because of U.K. trade with non-European countries’. Bevin argued that,

> if the U.K. was considered just another European country this would fit in with Russian strategy, namely, that the U.S. would encounter a slump and would withdraw from Europe, the U.K. would be helpless and out of dollars and as merely another European country the Russians, in command of the Continent, could deal with Britain in due course.  

Furthermore, the British government did not want to go into the program and ‘not do anything’, since, it was felt, this ‘would sacrifice the “little bit of dignity we have left”’. However, Clayton and other US policy-makers refused to accept that Britain should be treated differently from the rest of Europe, even though Bevin emphasised that Britain was in a unique position to assist in economic revival because of the British empire.

Despite this disagreement between Britain and the USA, events were to move quickly. Bevin met with his French counterpart, Georges Bidault, to discuss a first response to the embryonic Marshall Plan offer on 17–18 June. Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, joined them on 27 June. When Molotov arrived, he found that Bevin and Bidault had already set some of the terms for involvement in the plan, which included treating all the recipient states as part of an economic bloc, thus accepting the multilateral focus of the American offer. This, as Bevin and Bidault presumably realised, would not be acceptable to the Russians, as it would mean opening up the Soviet economy to Western inspection. This would have revealed the full extent of the Soviet’s economic weakness, which was not known in the West at this time.
Subsequently, Molotov walked out of the Paris talks after three days, in a fanfare of negative publicity. Bevin and Bidault were presumably relieved, as they had both told the US Ambassador to Paris, Jefferson Caffery, ‘that they hope the Soviets will refuse to cooperate’ as their participation would greatly complicate things. Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Finland, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia also went on to refuse to participate in the Marshall Plan.

It has been argued by some on the left that the USA used the Marshall Plan to swing Britain towards the American sphere of influence and so alter relations between Britain and the Soviet Union. However, the leaders of the British government had taken a more suspicious stance towards the Soviet Union even before the Second World War was over. This cautious approach to the Soviet Union continued with the election of a Labour government, led by Attlee, Bevin and Dalton who were staunch anti-communists. During 1945 and the first half of 1946, the Americans had in fact resisted what they saw as British attempts to forge an Anglo-American front against the Soviet Union, which included members of the British Embassy making discrete efforts to toughen the American government’s attitude towards the Kremlin. Certainly the British Ambassador in Washington was concerned that the Russians have ‘found themselves until now in a position where they can manoeuvre at will between the divergent attitudes of Britain and the United States’. Britain has ‘tended to be caught in a squeeze play between an expansionist Soviet Union and a United States anxious to compose its own differences with the Russians without due regard for the consequences upon ourselves’. Indeed, the USA should stop ‘shilly-shallying’ around, as ‘The one means of bringing the expansionist moves of the Soviet rulers to a satisfactory halt is to confront them with a joint Anglo-American aggregate of power’. The US government would have to abandon its traditional fear of being accused by its own public of ‘ganging up’ with the British empire against the Soviet Union. Indeed, ‘there seems to be no harm in discreetly exercising our powers of persuasion along these lines on policy-shaping Americans at all levels’.

By the spring of 1946, the American position had changed. According to Gaddis, the turning point in American policy towards the Soviet Union changed in late February and early March of that year. Up until then, attitudes towards the Soviet Union had developed on an ad hoc basis, with little consistency besides the assumption of shared basic interests in peace and stability. It was not until after Kennan’s Long Telegram of 22 February 1946 that the US fully
started to reconsider its position vis-à-vis co-operation with the Soviet Union.76

Having helped push for the change in the American position towards the Soviet Union, the British government then had to explain to them why it was not being more anti-Soviet in its rhetoric. One of the key reasons for this situation was that the public, and members of the Labour Party, did not share the anti-communism being voiced by the central organs of government, and still regarded the Soviet Union with appreciation for its role in the Second World War. An overt anti-Soviet stance at this point would have created a backlash in the party, which interpreted internationalism as including a strong relationship with the Soviet Union, and might have interpreted an anti-Soviet stance as a rejection of internationalism. Anstey points out that the Foreign Office had the problem of trying to satisfy public opinion in the UK and US at the same time; while the American public was becoming increasingly hostile towards the Soviet Union, the British public still largely desired an alliance with Russia, and so ‘aligning rhetoric with reality simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic became increasingly difficult. An answer of sorts lay in educating the British public to adopt a tougher stand, and in informing American officials of the nature of the Foreign Office’s predicament.77

While Bevin asked the press to take a tougher anti-Soviet line, Waldemar Gallman, a minister at the American embassy in London, reported the predicament to the American Secretary of State, George Marshall, that,

Foreign Office officials directly charged with Soviet affairs have recently and repeatedly indicated that while there is no change in substance of United Kingdom policy towards USSR, every move must be carefully considered and planned from point of view of protecting Bevin from Labour Party rebels … in light of Labour rebellion Bevin and Foreign Office now take greater pains to avoid creating impression he is ganging up with the United States against Russia.78

Part of Bevin’s problem was that the viewpoint of many Labour Party supporters on foreign policy was to the left of the government’s. Since the Labour Party had in the past emphasised its commitment to international socialist co-operation, and had presented the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union as part of a fight against fascism and for working-class values, even a cold war against the Soviet Union was such a volte-face that care had to be taken on how it was presented to the public. In addition, many on the left of the Labour Party blamed
Soviet intransigence on its fears of invasion from the West, and its experience of Western intervention to undermine the Soviet revolution, interpreting Soviet actions as defensive rather than offensive.\textsuperscript{79} Bevin was helped in this by the Soviet Union’s entrenchment of its power in the East. In September 1947 representatives of the communist parties of the USSR, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, France, Italy and Yugoslavia met in Poland to create the Cominform. At this meeting, Zhdanov, the Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s Central Committee, made his famous ‘two-camps’ speech. He argued that Western policies, and especially the Marshall Plan, had split the world into two opposing camps, with the ‘antidemocratic’ camp led by the imperialist United States, and the other ‘democratic’ camp led by the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{81} The Cominform was to act as an information bureau, designed to co-ordinate the activities of the communist parties and smooth out differences between them. While Yugoslavia resisted Soviet attempts to centralise control, a series of bilateral treaties were imposed upon Eastern European states during early 1948. In February 1948 a communist coup in Czechoslovakia ousted the coalition government, and the Berlin blockade began in June 1948. This all provided the Labour government with the evidence they needed for their antipathy towards the Soviet Union, and the Cold War became fact rather speculation. The establishment of the Cominform also provided Labour with a perfect excuse for rejecting any co-operation with the CPGB, and launched its own anti-communist campaign.\textsuperscript{81} This reflected an increased willingness from the government by spring 1947 publicly to confront their left-wing critics rather than trying to placate them.\textsuperscript{82} The Labour back-benchers’ \textit{Keep Left} was soon countered by Healey’s \textit{Cards on the Table}, an official Labour pamphlet which sought to rebut the criticisms of Bevin’s foreign policy. This stated that ‘The idea that we should have extricated ourselves from the quarrel between Russia and the USA does not make sense; during the period under review, Britain was the main target of Russian hostility, while until a few months ago America was an undecided spectator.’ It argued that it was ‘both undesirable and impractical’ for Britain to remain completely independent of both Russia and the US after the War since ‘Britain herself was too weak to cut herself off from American aid.’\textsuperscript{83} The arguments in \textit{Cards on the Table} were reinforced by the unfolding external events of the Marshall Plan, which provided concrete evidence of the difficulties of finding common ground with the Soviet Union. The realities of an increasingly fraught international situation in which it
was impossible for Britain to maintain some kind of ‘Third Force’ or middle way bolstered Bevin’s policy of closer relations with the USA.

Defence policy

The Labour government’s immediate defence policy had been based on providing armed forces to back up British foreign policy, which included forces in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and East of Suez, within the context of cutting the defence expenditure projections to the £500 million per annum which had been agreed by the wartime coalition government. Initially Attlee acted as Defence Secretary, but with the creation of a separate Ministry of Defence in 1946, he appointed A. V. Alexander to the post of Minister of Defence. Defence policy lacked any overall direction as the Chiefs of Staff had been concerned with winning the Second World War, not planning for the post-war peace. It was also at the centre of a growing division within the Cabinet, as Attlee and his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, wanted military cut-backs in the light of the economic crisis, while Bevin and Alexander maintained the necessity of continued military capacity. At the beginning of 1946 Dalton argued that there should a sharp drop in expenditure on defence, as the economic picture ‘was a very gloomy one’ as Britain was going to be nearly one million men short of the minimum required to revive its export trade. He was very worried by the large military expenditure overseas, and felt that Britain could not possibly afford to continue in this way. Bevin, on the other hand, said that he was nervous of any material cut in the armed forces before the June negotiations with the Soviet Union and the United States, and ‘It might be more economical to keep another 100,000 men for a few months if by so doing we avoided much more expensive trouble later on. It was necessary to weigh up whether our future prosperity depended more upon a satisfactory clearing up of the international situation in the coming year, or upon an additional build-up of our productive capacity.’ Because of the shortage of troops due to demobilisation, it was agreed in 1946 that conscription would continue for the time being. This was particularly unpopular within the rank-and-file of the Labour Party and trade union movement, given their traditional opposition to conscription, and given the manpower shortages in Britain at this time.

The developing Cold War over the next couple of years served to support Bevin’s perspective. At a Cabinet meeting on 5 March 1948...
Bevin argued that Soviet activities in Czechoslovakia and Finland ‘showed beyond any doubt that there was no hope of reaching a satisfactory settlement’ with the Soviet Union and ‘that resolute action must be taken to counter the Soviet threat to Western civilisation’. This involved reviewing existing levels of defence expenditure and of the defence measures that would be needed if diplomacy with the Soviet Union failed, launching a propaganda drive to rebut Soviet propaganda that continuously condemned British foreign and defence policy, and completing the North Atlantic Treaty negotiations as a matter of urgency.88 On 4 March 1947 Britain had signed the Treaty of Dunkirk, a defensive pact with France against an attack from Germany. This was enlarged on 17 March 1948 with the Treaty of Brussels, signed by Britain, France and the Benelux countries, committing them to collective defence against any armed attack for fifty years. Part of the rationale for this treaty was to help President Truman convince the American Congress that Europe was willing to contribute to its own defence, and that the US could therefore join Western Europe in a military alliance. The Labour government feared that if war did break out with the Soviet Union, there would be little chance that either Britain or Europe collectively would be able to resist the Red Army. Thus, Bevin wanted to ensure long-term American military support for Western Europe. A series of Anglo-American talks were held at the end of March 1948 to discuss a collective defence agreement for the North Atlantic, at which a draft treaty was agreed upon. The impetus for this North Atlantic Treaty was increased by the Berlin blockade of June 1948, when the Soviet Union blocked the entry of goods by rail and road from the West into West Berlin in protest against US efforts to centralise the administration of economic policy in the Western sectors of the city. Since Berlin was in the Soviet zone of control, this effectively cut West Berlin off from the rest of the world. In response, Bevin proposed to the British and American Chiefs of Staff that they airlift supplies to both the military and civilian population in Berlin using transport planes.89 At the same time, Bevin agreed to the stationing of American B-29 bombers, which were capable of carrying atomic weapons, in British bases. Not until 1951 was it made clear that the USA would have to seek permission from Britain before launching an atomic attack from bases in the UK.

While the political division of Europe had occurred during the period from the summer of 1948 to the spring of 1949, the division of Europe into two defensive blocs at the heart of the bi-polar, Cold War world occurred during the period of the Berlin blockade. This ended
in May 1949. On 4 April 1949 the USA, Canada, Britain, Belgium, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal signed the North Atlantic Treaty of Mutual Assistance. This in effect committed America to guaranteeing West European defence, for an armed attack against one member state was to be considered as an attack against all. This was then institutionalised into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In the House of Commons, Bevin was careful to present the treaty as a defensive move, resulting from the failure of the United Nations to prevent Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe, saying:

[N]o such arrangement as the North Atlantic Treaty would have been found necessary at all if the effectiveness of the Security Council as an instrument for ensuring the immediate defence of any member against aggression had not been undermined by the Soviet use of the veto, and by other actions of the Soviet Government ... That is why we have signed this Treaty; because we must have security and because we have learned by bitter experience that we cannot get it at present through the Security Council.\(^9\)

The treaty was passed by an overwhelming majority in the House of Commons, with only six MPs, four Labour and two Communist, voting against it.\(^9^1\)

Despite the growing Anglo-American alliance, Britain was reluctant to be too reliant on its allies for its defence needs, and so the decision was made in secret, by Attlee, Bevin and four other members of the Cabinet Defence Committee on 8 January 1947, for Britain to develop an independent nuclear strategy. This decision was made without the knowledge of the rest of the Cabinet, Parliament or the Labour Party. It was made for two reasons. First, for strategic purposes: if other states had so dangerous a weapon, then Britain would need it to deter or retaliate, otherwise Britain would become too dependent on its allies for its defence needs. Second, to halt the image of decline by demonstrating that Britain was still a world power, for ‘Nuclear weapons seemed to be the way by which a medium-sized, but technically advanced, nation could retain great power status.’\(^9^2\) However, these aims were undermined somewhat by the continued reliance on the US for technology and weapons to maintain Britain as a nuclear power. Much to Britain’s chagrin, the Soviet Union was the first in the race between the two nations to test an atomic bomb, doing so in August 1949. The first British atomic bomb was not exploded until October 1952, by which time Britain’s nuclear strategy,
decided in secret, was becoming a highly politicised issue for the Labour Party.

Labour won the election of 23 February 1950, but with a much-reduced majority of only five seats. The government seemed to be suffering from a lack of direction and energy, at a time when international affairs were becoming increasingly tense. The outbreak of the Korean War, when in June 1950 North Korean tanks crossed the thirty-eighth parallel into South Korea, saw another rethink about defence expenditure, galvanising Attlee and Chancellor Stafford Cripps to agree to extra defence provisions. Cripps felt that ‘on general economic grounds’ the most that Britain could commit to defence over the next three years was £950 million per annum. But, this ‘could not be provided without some reduction in Government expenditure, some additional taxation, or some reduction in capital investment or a combination of all three’. The Cabinet approved Cripps’ proposals for increased expenditure as ministers pointed out that ‘the fact was that our forces were insufficiently equipped to meet the dangers with which we were now faced. It was abundantly clear that we must spend substantially more on defence.’ It was decided that Britain would inform the US that ‘We considered on general economic grounds an annual expenditure of £950 million on defence was the most we could afford in 1951–52 and in the following two years.’ Labour’s defence and foreign policy were criticised at the Labour Party conference, to the extent that Bevin felt it necessary to speak on behalf of the NEC’s report on the international situation, despite his failing health. At what was to be Bevin’s last conference appearance, he spoke in defence of the NEC’s report on the international situation, saying that Labour’s foreign policy was based on collective security through the United Nations. He argued that they must give the UN the necessary power and defence arrangements so that aggression could never succeed, for ‘A few failures by the aggressor will mean … the triumph of peace over the sadistic desire for war and destruction.’

Ernest Bevin’s health had been failing for some time, but he wished to continue as Foreign Secretary until the next election, which would not be far off given Labour’s small majority. Attlee, however, felt that the post was now too demanding for Bevin. On 9 March 1951, the day of Bevin’s seventieth birthday, Attlee requested that he resign. Both worn-out and devastated at his loss of power, he died on 14 April. Herbert Morrison replaced him, but remained Foreign Secretary only until Labour’s election defeat in October 1951. Morrison’s Principle Private Secretary at the Foreign Office has said...
that “This relatively short period amply sufficed to show up his inade-
quacy for the job” and that ‘One unexpected complication was
Morrison’s extraordinary ignorance of most of the Foreign Office
problems of the moment.’96 The choice of Morrison to be Bevin’s
successor was unusual in that Morrison did not have any particular
experience of foreign affairs, nor had he demonstrated any particular
flair for dealing with such policy issues. It perhaps reflected the declin-
ing health, vigour and power of the government and its leading
members, though at the time the appointment was ‘widely
acclaimed’.97 Certainly Morrison’s brief time at the Foreign Office was
marked by failure both at home and abroad to maintain the influence
that Bevin had achieved. Morrison did not have the influence with the
Americans that Bevin had had, nor did he have as much influence
within the Labour Party. Foreign and defence policy was again becom-
ing highly politicised and contentious within the Labour Party, partic-
ularly over the issue of British rearmament.

The result of the increased defence expenditure was that cuts
would have to be made in public spending. The rather inexperienced
Hugh Gaitskell, who had taken over as Chancellor on 19 October
1950, proposed in the spring of 1951 that charges be introduced in the
National Health Service for teeth and spectacles. This rather prosaic
choice of spending cuts was to result in a very embarrassing debacle.
Nye Bevan, who was upset at Gaitskell’s appointment as well as this
particular decision, resigned in protest, and Harold Wilson and John
Freeman joined him.98 Many in the party felt that Labour had gone
back on a commitment to one of their most popular policies, free
health care, as well as feeling that the commitment to such a huge rear-
mament policy would undermine the British economy. The party was
demoralised, Bevin was gone, and Attlee was unwell and unable to
exert his leadership to contain the row. The Gaitskell/Bevan split was
to permeate the Labour Party until 1957, with foreign and defence
policy being the main issue of contention. This all occurred as the
Labour government was seen to be stalling, exhausted from its years in
power, with its main achievements now in the past.

When the Labour Party assumed power in 1945 there were high
expectations of what it could achieve in international affairs. However,
the government found that there was a disjunction between what it
saw as Britain’s leading role in the world, and Britain’s ability to meet
its existing foreign and defence requirements. Despite trying to cling
to its role as one of the ‘big three’ of the wartime alliance, it was
becoming clear that Britain’s power was declining, in particular in
relation to the power and reach of the US. The Attlee years saw a period of retrenchment from the empire, which was to be continued, though reluctantly, by successive post-war governments. Britain’s hasty withdrawal from Palestine in particular reflected a pragmatic and even unpropitious response to a difficult problem. The central conundrum that had to be faced was how to cut back expenditure while continuing to have as powerful a role in the world as possible. Somewhat surprisingly given the focus of sections of the party on the inter-linking of economic and political issues, the Labour Party was often just as reluctant as its opponents to admit to Britain’s decline, or to be open about its inability to afford a world-wide role in security issues. Its response to its problems was to turn to the USA for support, as Britain could no longer afford to maintain its world role unaided. As Porter puts it, ‘[Britain’s] superstructure had come to rest on someone else’s base.’ Bevin in particular predicated his foreign policy on a close relationship with the US, as America’s involvement in Europe became institutionalised through the Marshall Plan and NATO. To a certain extent the Labour government’s foreign policy of 1945–1951 was Bevin’s foreign policy, with Attlee allowing him a remarkable degree of freedom. No other Labour foreign secretary has had the impact that Ernest Bevin had, either on Labour’s foreign policy or Britain’s role in the world. However, while Bevin was implementing what he saw as Labour’s foreign policy, his critics on the left felt that the party had wasted its opportunity to change the nature of British foreign policy. The battle against the Labour Party’s pacifism in the early 1930s; the battle for rearmament in the face of the threat from Hitler in the late 1930s; disgust at the Nazi-Soviet pact; and experience of coalition government, meant that there had already been a remarkable shift in attitudes of the Labour leadership away from socialist internationalism and towards balance-of-power politics. For these men, Labour’s internationalism was being met through the new post-war regime based on the UN and the institutions of the Bretton Woods agreement, and through Britain’s remaining global commitments. For them, international solidarity did not mean co-operating with the Soviet Union. However, for many in the rank-and-file of the party, their hopes for a post-war Labour foreign policy were based on a continuation of the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, and internationalism and international solidarity meant working with Russia, not capitalist America. The criticisms over the Labour government’s foreign policy were muted by the onset of the Cold War, but they never really went away, and this period saw the division between left and right of the
party on foreign policy solidify into a division between Atlanticists and those suspicious of the USA, which continues to this day.

Notes

3 Ibid., citing interview with Sir Trevor Evans, p. 346.

16 Public Record Office, London (hereafter PRO), CAB 131/1 DO (46) 1, 3 and 5, minutes of meetings of 1st, 3rd and 5th meetings of the Cabinet Defence Committee, 11 January, 21 January and 15 February 1946.


19 PRO, CAB 129/1/CP (45) 107, memorandum by the Foreign Secretary, ‘Greece’, 11 August 1945.


21 Comments by Bevin, PRO, CAB 129/23, CP (48) 7, July 1948.


23 *LPACR*, 1945, p. 115.


26 See article by the Labour Colonial Secretary, ‘British colonial policy, with particular reference to Africa’, *International Affairs*, 17:2 (April 1951), 176–83.


36 Barclay, *Ernest Bevin and the Foreign Office*, p. 82.


38 *LPACR*, 1946, p. 151.


40 *H.C. Deb.*, vol. 419, col. 1322, 21 February 1946.


42 *H.C. Deb.*, vol. 430, col. 526, 13 November 1946.


44 *LPACR*, 1947, p. 179.

45 *Trades Union Congress Report* (hereafter *TUCR*), 1946, p. 469.


48 *Ibid*.


52 Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (hereafter MRC), Richard Crossman papers, MSS 154/3/KL/1-4, Keep Left Group.


58 Documents on British Policy Overseas, series 1, vol. 1, telegram from Mr Caccia (Athens) to Anthony Eden, reporting meeting of Caccia with the Greek Regent (Damaskinos), 27 July 1945, p. 1157.
59 PRO, CAB 129/1/CP (45) 107, memorandum by the Foreign Secretary, ‘Greece’, 11/8/1945.
61 PRO, CAB 131/2/DO (46) 40, Memorandum by Bevin, 13/3/1946.
62 PRO, Bevin Papers, FO 800/475/ME/46/22, Attlee to Bevin, 1/12/1946.
63 PRO, Bevin Papers, FO 800/468/GRE/46/39, McNeil (Minister of State) to Bevin, 4/12/1946.
64 PRO, Bevin Papers, FO 800/468/GRE/46/40, Bevin to McNeil, 5/12/46.
65 PRO, Bevin Papers, FO 800/475/ME/45/11, Memorandum by Bevin to members of Cabinet, 28/08/1945.
68 Bevin’s address to the Foreign Press Association in London, 13 June 1947.
69 FRUS, 1947, vol. 3, Memorandum of conversation by the First Secretary of the Embassy in the UK (Peterson), of the first meeting of Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs (Clayton) and ambassador with British cabinet members, 24 June 1947, p. 271.
71 FRUS, 1947, vol. 3, Caffery to Secretary of State Marshall, 18 June 1947 at 11.00am and 18 June 1947 at 4.00pm, p. 258 and 260.
74 PRO, FO 115/4270, the British Ambassador in Washington, the Earl of Halifax, to Bevin, 19 February 1946, enclosing a ‘Note on Mr. Davies’ Memorandum’, by John Ballour and Isaiah Berlin, of 18 February 1946.
78 US National Archives II, College Park, Maryland, State Department RG59, W. Gallman to G. Marshall, 3 February 1947, 841.00/2-3-47.
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83 Denis Healey, *Cards on the Table* (London: Labour Party, 1947).
84 PRO, FO 800/351, Bevin to Attlee, 3 September 1945; and Attlee to Bevin, 5 September 1945.
86 PRO, CAB 131/1 DO (46) 3, minutes of meeting of Cabinet Defence Committee, 21 January 1946; and PRO CAB 131/ DO (46) 1, minutes of meeting of Cabinet Defence Committee, 11 January 1946.
87 PRO, CAB 131/1 DO (46) 3, minutes of meeting of Cabinet Defence Committee, 21 January 1946.
88 PRO, CAB 128/12, CM (48), 19, minutes of meeting 5 March 1948.
91 Ibid., col. 2128.
93 PRO CAB 128/18, CM (50), 52, minutes of meeting 1 August 1950.
97 Donoughue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, p. 479.