

Dean Acheson's Observation of Great Britain in 1962

Written by Rita Deliperi

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RITA DELIPERI, AUG 9 2015

Dean Acheson's Observation that 'Great Britain Has Lost an Empire But Not Yet Found a Role' Remains as True Today as When It Was Made in 1962. Discuss.

More than fifty years have passed since Dean Acheson – Secretary of State under the Truman presidency – created a storm of huge proportions by claiming that 'Great Britain had lost an Empire but not yet found a role' (Lowrance-Floyd, 2012; Ash, 2010). To many, the British over-reaction appeared to be nothing more than a storm in a teacup; Acheson himself, delivering a message to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., expressed his astonishment and surprise regarding an uproar of such magnitude, wondering, in a tone of bitter sarcasm, who was 'the unsung genius who read through the whole speech and found that paragraph to cable back to London' (Acheson cited in Lowrance-Floyd, 2012, p.155). Yet, the tumult around Acheson's statement had deep roots that originated in a seed of truth. The controversial claim had indeed hit the nail precisely on the head, as, by mentioning an unmentionable truth – perhaps indelicately -, Acheson simply got it right (ibid.). More than fifty years have passed and the role-hunting season is yet to reach its closure (Hannay, 2013). Quite the opposite; It still remains, within the political and academic circles, as an exclusive but nevertheless in vogue sport, 'the polo of British politics' (Ash, 2010).

This essay will attempt to discuss the current prospective for a British role on the global theatre and the debate surrounding the matter. In order to address this issue, the text will firstly provide an analysis of different perspectives regarding the role of Britain expressed throughout the course of history by some of the most prominent public figures in the United Kingdom; in particular, the essay will critically assess the notion of the 'three circles' introduced by Winston Churchill in 1948; the concepts of 'transatlantic bridge' and 'pivotal power', recently re-tabled by Tony Blair; and finally the idea of 'global hub', developed by David Miliband in 2008. The essay will continue by reasoning on the major academic and political debate, which considers the two contrasting images of 'Atlanticism' and 'Europeanism'. Before approaching this debate, a parenthesis will be opened to examine the key idea of an Anglo-American 'special relationship' – a necessary step to introduce the aforementioned concept of 'Atlanticism'. Following on from the conclusions developed in this last section, the text will investigate on the complex and ambiguous international stand of the United Kingdom when considered in the light of current challenges such as counterterrorism and the rise of the Islamic State. Finally, the essay will take a more speculative turn, briefly exploring the concept of role and whether its search is fruitful or abridging for a nation's self understanding. The essay will conclude by arguing that the time has finally arrived for Britain to abandon the role hunt.

Sir Winston Churchill fired the starting shot that inaugurated the role hunt in October 1948 (Harvey, 2011). When holding a speech in the Welsh town of Llandudno, he introduced for the first time the idea of Britain being positioned 'at the very point of junction' of three circles: the British Commonwealth; the English-speaking World; and the United Europe (Churchill cited in Harvey, 2011; and Gaskarth, 2013). By lying in such crucial position, the United Kingdom could use a considerable scope for manoeuvre to strategically impose its leadership in each circle and ply its influence to preserve its historical major power status (Gaskarth, 2013). Also, the engagement of Britain in one circle would increase its room for action in the others, thereupon compensating for the gradual loss of its colonial possessions (Wallace, 2005). The image of the three circles remained for decades the most influential conception of Britain's geopolitical standing (Gaskarth, 2013). Over the course of time, this notion has evolved into the neoteric concept of 'transatlantic bridge', introduced at first in the 1970s and rejuvenated in the late 1990s by Tony Blair (Harvey, 2011). The former Prime Minister applied the 'bridge' metaphor to enunciate a widespread understanding of

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Britain's role as a channel linking Europe and the United States (ibid.). As Churchill before him, Blair positioned Britannia – the 'pivotal power' – at the heart of the international community, claiming: 'Strong in Europe and strong with the US. There is no choice between the two. Stronger with one means stronger with the other [...]. We are the bridge between the US and Europe' (Tony Blair cited in Harvey, 2011). Finally, more recently Labourist David Miliband (cited in Harvey, 2011) advanced the new-fangled idea of Britain as a 'global hub for diplomacy and ideas', inserting the country's identity into a perspective of globalization and change (Gaskarth, 2013; Harvey, 2011).

A particularly interesting point to consider, as also highlighted by Dr Jamie Gaskarth (2013), is that each understanding of the British global role implies the UK existing outside, and, simultaneously, as an integral part of the power relations among and within different 'circles'. If geographically Britain stands separated from the continent by the seas, also from a geopolitical perspective the country considers itself to be an 'island', capable of breaking away from one pack or engaging with another – 'as if diplomacy was akin to the practice of trade in a free market' (ibid. p. 67). Indubitably, the 'exceptionalism' underlying the attempts to define Britain's international stand is, at the very least, problematic (Wallace, 1991). De facto, the United Kingdom has arguably failed to network truthfully and proactively with any of the Churchillian circles (Gaskarth, 2013). In particular, its political influence over the agendas of the Commonwealth member states has dwindled, and its willingness to play a part in certain issues – for instance the Indo-Pakistani struggle over Kashmir – has led to strong criticisms, such as the accusation expressed by former Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral that 'Britain was a third rate power nursing illusions of grandeur of its colonial past' (ibid. p.89). For the previous decades however, the political discussion surrounding the British quest for a role focused to the greatest extent on the country's relation with the United States and the European Union (Overbeek, 1993). This debate, divided into two sides – 'Atlanticist' and 'Europeanist' -, is an essential aspect of British foreign policy and a vital key for its comprehension (ibid; Le Prestre, 1997).

In order to explore the concept of 'Atlanticism', it is crucial to analyse firstly another notion – that of a 'special relationship' existing between Great Britain and the United States. In fact, with respect to its approach towards the US, Britain built – on the myth of Anglo-Saxondom – a 'special relationship' that the British diplomatic elite enshrined and cultivated as a rare gem (Wallace, 1991; Gaskarth, 2013). Certainly, the grounds of modern history, especially the ideal soil of the Second World War, were fertile for the blossom of such rhetoric; in a ruinous era of totalitarianism, Great Britain and the United States stood together as defenders of democracy and freedom, a glimmer and a symbol of hope in the eyes of a massacred Europe (Wallace, 1991). It is beyond shadow of doubt that a special relationship existed throughout the years that followed, and it would be erroneous to underestimate the emphasis attached by the US to the British support (Thompson, 2012). Yet, Britain's confidence in this relationship appears to be quixotic, as much as the tacit expectation that the affinity with the US would have breathed new life into the lethargic grandeur of the United Kingdom (ibid.). Soon, the idea of an Anglo-American 'special relationship' proved to be a house of cards fabricated on wobbly foundations. In the Reaganian image of the US standing as 'the City on the Hill', Britain could be pictured, by analogy, simply as 'the village from which the pilgrims set out and to which only nostalgia occasionally draws them back' (Wallace, 1991, p.78).

At the end of the day, as former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (cited in Ash, 2010) put it, 'Britain's special relationship is so special only one side knows it exists' – an aspect that energetically re-echoes in Acheson's initial claim. Finally, it is the UK delusional conception of itself towards the United States that allows us to retrace our steps back to the central idea of 'Atlanticism'.

In its most neutral significance, the Atlanticist 'theology' highlights the fundamental inseparability of American and Western European geo-political interests, encouraging cooperation and coercion (Williams, 1997). However, when read in the light of the British debate regarding its search for a role, the idea appears distorted, with Britain presenting itself as a nexus between the two regions – an image that curiously evokes Blair's metaphor of the 'transatlantic bridge' (Wallace, 2005). 'Located in the middle of the Atlantic, rather than 21 miles from France and 3,000 miles from the United States' (Gaskarth, 2013, p. 68), the United Kingdom plays the tightrope walker on a wire strained from Washington to Brussels (Harvey, 2011). To some, the wire has been severely threatened but was strong enough to hold (Cyr, 2012). On the contrary, a more pragmatic eye would recognize that the wire has snapped, and cannot be restored (Wallace, 2005). According to Professor William Wallace (2005), the transatlantic bridge was built on quicksand – relying on weak foundations and unrealistic premises. Whether or not it ever existed, the 'special

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relationship' is now dead, and a nexus between the US and the rest of the world sounds terribly pleonastic (ibid.). Furthermore, the British conception of itself as the unique intermediary between North America and Europe has been mischievous to its policy of participation and integration with the European Union (ibid.).

Britain's history with the EU has been highly turbulent, in regards to both its membership and participation (Cyr, 2012). With its head in Europe but its heart still on the other side of the Atlantic (Wallace, 1991) – the United Kingdom deliberately distanced itself from the continent, yet adopting a rhetoric intended to encourage cooperation among the western nations, and also emphasizing the benefits of a pan-European financial integration (Cyr, 2012). Such equivocal attitude concerning full commitment to the Union generated negative sentiment and misanthropy – resulting in disorientation in Germany, mistrust in France, and spread uncertainty through the whole of the continent (Wallace, 2005). Furthermore, Euro-scepticism stands as a central element on the country's political stage, heavily interfering with its policies towards the EU (Gaskarth, 2013); Ultimately, the consolidation of Anti-Europeanist movements within Britain's domestic politics reflects a low degree of self-identification with the rest of Europe – a common sentiment among Britons, according to the 2010 Chatham House and YouGov survey investigating on British international attitudes (recorded in ibid.). The 'Europeanist' position in the aforementioned debate is severely challenged by these factors, to the point that it would be inconsistent to define the role of the UK as that of a 'European power' (ibid.). On the contrary, the road to integration is still long and winding and the steps to be deliberately taken are numerous – restoring multilateral partnerships abroad and the confidence of a sceptic popular base at home are no undemanding commitments; they require a resolution that has been arguably reserved – perhaps to no avail – to the British commitments towards the US (Wallace, 2005).

Finally, according to the train of thought of William Wallace (1991, p.65) in regards to the Atlanticism-Europeanism dichotomy, Britain's ambiguous attitudes 'will continue to exert deep strains on British foreign policy until the confusion between the two conceptions of Britain's role is sorted out and the present is disentangled from the past'.

In reading between the lines of this debate, it appears manifest that the United Kingdom – be it fair or foul – has maintained the balance between two extremes of one dichotomy. However, the global challenges of our times gravely threaten this fragile equilibrium – to the extent that Britain's dubious status rebounds upon the country itself (Wallace, 2005). In fact, the fracture dividing the United States and Europe grows more profound with the passage of time; numerous discrepancies between the favoured modus operandi and the understandings of various issues and threats created a conceptual gap that will presumptively enlarge, increasing frictions between the regions (ibid.). On these key issues, Britain simply cannot afford to keep a foot in both camps (ibid.). Counterterrorism stands as a very relevant instance in this context; Islamic terrorism represents a communal threat, exposing the vulnerability of both the United States and Europe (ibid.)– as the Parisian 'Charlie Hebdo attack' of January 2015 has reminded the world. Nevertheless, the two regions have had an overall tendency to approach the roots of the phenomenon and pursue foreign policies towards the Middle Eastern countries in increasingly different manners, in particular regarding how to relate with Saudi Arabia and Iran, and in what way to stimulate change and reform in the area (ibid.). Certainly, Europe, 'with 12 or 14 million Muslims among its populations, for whom the Arab world begins some 15 kilometres from Gibraltar, or a ferry ride from Syracuse' (ibid. p. 58), differs in its interests from the US (ibid.). In these circumstances, Great Britain imperatively necessitates to clarify its position – which, according to William Wallace (2005), should strongly lean towards Europe. Again, the British quest for a role does not fail to frustrate and inhibit such process of self-realization.

Yet, in 2013, *The Independent's* editor Amol Rajan (2013) suggested that Great Britain had finally ripped away the brace of Acheson's anathema. According to him, the House of Commons' rejection to adopt any military measure against Bashar Al Assad's government in order to prevent it from employing chemical weapons marked the beginning of a major shift in regards to the British quest for a role (Rajan, 2013). The parliamentary decision not only left David Cameron perplex, as his demand to act in support of a US-led operation against the Syrian regime did not find consensus, but also led to the rise of strong criticism among the overtly war prone British ranks (ibid.). Furthermore, on the other side of the Atlantic, a paralyzed Barack Obama hesitated and prorogued the course of action (ibid.). According to Rajan (2013), in this very aspect Britain might have discredited Dean Acheson and satisfied its hunger for a role, which he claims is 'to encourage caution in American presidents, something we spectacularly failed to do over Iraq a decade ago' (Rajan, 2013). Nevertheless, Rajan's supposition was promptly

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drained of its potential when, one year later, the House of Commons agreed by large majority to support the US and the Arab allies in their intervention in Iraq and Syria to oppose the rise of ISIS (BBC, 2013). Once more, the British role-hunt enters the picture; as argued by Journalist Matthew D'Ancona (2014) 'the campaign against the IS is a battle against extremism [...] but it also forms part of a wider debate on the British character and the destiny of Britain'. In point of fact, the UK has hardly sustained the pressure posed by its post-Cold War commitments, often running the risk of overstretching its capabilities – such as in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and arguably in the current war on terrorism (Marsh, 2005). Ultimately, as the consequence of punching above its weight, Britain's main aspiration appears to be the nourishment of the aforesaid debatable Anglo-American 'special relationship' (ibid.).

Finally, it is quintessential to reflect on the profound significance of the British quest for a role from a more conceptive angle. As suggested by Timothy Garton Ash (2010), 'perhaps all this talk of *role* is itself part of the problem'. Ultimately, this is a highly inexact science; roles are a miscellany of one's perception of itself and the others' perceptions of it (Gaskarth, 2013). The concept implies the covert risk of remaining trapped in excessive degrees of rigidity, standardization and in all probability misrepresentations and distortions (Barber, 1980); De facto, the idea carries several side assumptions which might arguably be misleading and eventually do more harm than good, drawing a veil on troublesome realities and undesirable changes and therefore hampering the development of a coherent and broad-minded foreign policy (Hill, 1979). Historian Christopher Hill (1979) discussed this issue in depth, to conclude that 'the quest for a unique role, like the pursuit of the Holy Grail, is a fatal distraction to politicians with responsibilities' (ibid. p. 250). To overcome such dilemma, it could be argued that that states play not singles, but numerous overlapping roles that are valid in different contexts (Barber, 1980); this view would certainly be consonant with the complexity of the current global political arena. Nevertheless, this approach still implies gratuitous limitations and restrains, merely sidestepping the issue. A more innovative and convincing approach would be, as suggested by Timothy Garton Ash (2010), to leave the role discourse aside and talk instead of national interests. Unlike roles, interests are fluid, not immutable nor inelastic, nevertheless they would still implicate the security, wellbeing, freedom for the British citizens and – following the liberalist tradition – would accommodate the fundamental interests of the rest of the world population (ibid.). At last, the time to abandon the role-hunt has come, 'we have nothing to lose but our illusions' (ibid.).

Clearly, Acheson's belief that 'Great Britain has lost an empire but not yet found a role' still re-echoes in the British political debate: the hunt for a role has not reached its closure. Although the British role discourse is an extremely extensive topic, this essay has attempted to throw light and draw some conclusions regarding this enduring phenomenon. An analysis of some of the most renowned attempts made to individuate the international role of the UK has been followed by an investigation on the debated 'Atlanticism-Europeanism' dichotomy. As a preamble, the notion of an Anglo-American 'special relationship' has been considered, making the argument that such idea is mostly a British delusional perception of its own identity and standing in world politics. The same reasoning appears valid in concerns to the idea of Britain representing a nexus between the two poles of the so-called 'transatlantic bridge'. Finally, the essay has evaluated the ambiguity surrounding the British aspirations for a role in regards to issues and threats on the top of the agenda, concluding that it would be necessary for the UK to clarify its interests and capabilities, adopting a more rational international behaviour and developing a more suitable national rhetoric (Wallace, 1991). In conclusion, the role discourse has to be considered as superfluous and delimitate; the British elite should accept the fact that the postulates underpinning British foreign policy in the past centuries have been swept away, and the country should begin to rebuild on new, more opportune foundations (Wallace, 2005).

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