

Introduction

PRIME MINISTER HAROLD WILSON suffered many disappointments in his first two terms of office. The devaluation of the pound, the retreat from global defence commitments, and the failure to achieve membership of the European Economic Community overshadowed much of his premiership. Wilson's occasionally disingenuous explanations of these misfortunes, coupled with a raft of unfulfilled domestic promises, encouraged little sympathy for the plight of his government. Perhaps most damning of all was the scepticism in British politics that his first two terms engendered.¹ These ignominies, however, should not obscure a considerable record of achievement in international negotiations concerning nuclear weapons. Indeed, under Wilson, British nuclear diplomacy enjoyed much success.

Wilson's first two governments, beginning in October 1964 and ending in June 1970, represent a critical period in international nuclear history. By the close of 1968, the Labour government had signed and ratified the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. A little over a year later, the treaty came into force, marking an important step towards a world with fewer nuclear weapon states. More than four decades later, the treaty still frames British, European, and American non-proliferation efforts. Preceding this historic feat was another. In 1966, Britain became one of the founding members of the Nuclear Planning Group. The United States, Britain, West Germany, Italy, and three rotating members would share decision-making on nuclear policy in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Despite the end of the Cold War, the group

remains the ultimate authority within NATO concerning nuclear policy issues.

British nuclear diplomacy in this period involved more than international agreements. Wilson was the first prime minister to overcome serious pressure to surrender nuclear independence. Beyond calls for disarmament from within the Labour Party, the key challenge to independence came in the form of foreign demands to collectivise British nuclear weapons into a multilateral nuclear force. Under Wilson, the Labour government successfully resisted international pressure to share its nuclear weapons with other NATO members. This diplomatic challenge, unique in British nuclear history, faded away with no diminution to the country's own nuclear status. The independence of Britain's nuclear force today, and the enduring absence of a German or European deterrent, owes a debt to Wilson's handling of nuclear diplomacy more than four decades ago.

The importance of this period extends beyond the prime minister's performance on the international stage. Wilson cemented, and in some cases established, precedents for nuclear policy-making. A commitment to continued investment in times of economic crisis represents his most important legacy. As governments around the world struggle to repair their economies in the wake of the global financial crisis, politicians of all stripes continue to raise serious questions about the cost of nuclear weapons. This study of the Wilson governments reveals that such challenges are not historically unique. Although he was by no means the first prime minister to preside over a troubled economy, the balance of payments deficits and currency crises of his premiership were amongst the worst in the post-war period. In addition, Wilson was the first Labour leader to experience economic difficulties when his own government was aware of the nuclear weapons programme. He therefore had to reconcile a progressive platform with his own nuclear policies and do so publicly. Nevertheless, Wilson defended continued investment. Major economic crises failed to effect change. Spending on the British nuclear weapons programme became, and would remain, sacrosanct.

In addition to highlighting the importance of this period in nuclear history, this book examines how and why British nuclear diplomacy changed during Wilson's leadership. It focuses on three distinct but inter-related strands of British nuclear diplomacy: the sharing of nuclear weapons between states in the form of a multilateral nuclear force; non-physical measures of nuclear weapons cooperation, such as consultative and planning arrangements, be-

tween alliance members; and a global non-proliferation treaty. British nuclear diplomacy was not one consistent policy. Change reflected competition and cooperation between the pursuit of nuclear sharing proposals, consultative measures, and a non-proliferation treaty, all of which vied against the broader and shifting objectives of the Labour government. To be sure, wider international and domestic considerations encouraged Wilson to exert a degree of flexibility in the pursuit of all of his diplomatic objectives vis-à-vis nuclear weapons.

This book is therefore an account of Wilson and the Labour government's attempts to balance a collection of disparate, and at times competing, influences in the context of British nuclear diplomacy. Introducing a collection of his speeches published in 1964, Wilson describes his task as prime minister as that of conducting a mighty orchestra, attempting to harmonise and integrate domestic and international affairs.² George Brown, Wilson's third foreign secretary, reaches a similar conclusion in his own memoirs. 'The fact of the matter is that Foreign Affairs, whether for Britain or any other nation, are not just a catalogue of unconnected events', Brown explains. 'They are a kaleidoscope of inter-related pieces, all of which must somehow be juggled with, virtually at the same time and certainly in relation to each other'.³ British nuclear diplomacy was a series of compromises, an intricate blend of political, economic, and strategic considerations. Cabinet debate, financial crises, and international tensions all influenced nuclear policy-making in the two Labour governments of this period. This book consequently broadens its focus beyond events related to the development and the deployment of nuclear arsenals. Nuclear history is a much more complicated process, influenced by economics and politics, as well as diplomacy and strategy. Although a rising mushroom cloud is a common and evocative image, a more fitting portrayal of British nuclear history would depict accountants shaking their heads and politicians shaking hands.

British Nuclear History

Britain became an increasingly marginal economic and military actor on the world stage during Wilson's premiership. Decline stood in stark contrast to the dominance of the superpowers and the growing influence of the European Economic Community (EEC). Nevertheless, Britain still had an important, albeit lesser, international role.⁴ Historians have tended to focus on the retreat from East of Suez, relations with the EEC, and wider alliance politics.⁵ All of these studies touch on the issue of nuclear weapons. There is a substan-

tial literature on British nuclear history itself. The post-war period in particular has attracted considerable attention.⁶ Research specifically considering British nuclear diplomacy in the 1960s continues to grow.⁷ Building on such a broad body of work, this book makes four contributions to the existing literature.

First, this book explores nuclear sharing proposals, consultative solutions, and a non-proliferation treaty as interwoven, rather than separate, components of British nuclear diplomacy. Integrating separate bodies of historical research produces a more nuanced account of events. The creation of the Nuclear Planning Group in NATO, for example, helps to explain the timing of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the eventual failure of European nuclear sharing proposals. Beyond integrating separate bodies of historical research, such an approach reveals the interconnected nature of events and encourages broader conclusions about nuclear policy-making within the Labour government. Under Wilson, British nuclear diplomacy was simultaneously characterised by success and irrelevance. The failure of nuclear sharing proposals and the realisation of the NPT meant that the Labour government achieved its key objectives. Yet these successes were often more to do with superpower negotiations than the actions of Wilson or his government. An interwoven approach also facilitates a wider analysis of domestic and international influences on the Labour government, many of which had previously appeared unimportant or unrelated.

A second contribution comes from this book's interest in the British economy. Efforts to reduce defence expenditure and anxiety about economic performance certainly influenced the conduct and content of British nuclear diplomacy. In the early months of taking office, for example, the Labour government discussed contributing its own nuclear weapons to a multilateral nuclear force in exchange for concessions from the United States. More broadly, the state of the economy framed political and diplomatic objectives. Growing deficits and currency crises repeatedly threatened the nuclear programme itself, which, in turn, influenced the content and conduct of nuclear diplomacy. By exploring the economic dimensions of events, it is possible to complement and often improve on existing diplomatic and strategic accounts of the period. Consequently, this book pays particular attention to the growing collection of work considering the economy in this period, and integrates it into a study of the Labour government's handling of nuclear diplomacy.⁸

This book's third contribution is a greater consideration of the relationship between the Labour government's desire to join the EEC and British nuclear diplomacy. The book pays particular attention to the growing collection of

work considering Britain's second application for membership.⁹ Wilson's interest in joining was limited to the later stages of his time in office. Nevertheless, an interest in the EEC strengthens existing accounts of British nuclear history that have focused on the Cold War or US-UK relations. Wilson often adopted a secondary role in negotiations on the NPT and repeatedly left the running to the superpowers. This avoided unnecessary conflict with the countries of the EEC, who were resentful of the treaty's discriminatory terms, and thus helped to protect Britain's application for membership.

The final contribution comes from a closer examination of Wilson and his own attempts to balance competing interests within the government. Although reaching familiar conclusions about his style of leadership, this book provides a more detailed account of his handling of nuclear policy. He was a skilful, forceful, and often devious politician. Wilson, for example, was instrumental in managing the government to support the continuation of Britain's nuclear weapons programme. He did so cautiously by gathering support beforehand, directly controlling the flow of information available to the cabinet, and exploiting his small majority to encourage cooperation. Crucially, though, he was also a pragmatist. Wilson often modified the content and conduct of British nuclear diplomacy in response to a wide array of competing domestic and international interests.

Although wide in scope, this book has clearly defined parameters. It considers the development of British nuclear diplomacy with respect to the governments of the United States and, to a lesser extent, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). This decision reflects the disproportionately high levels of influence that these countries had on the nuclear policies of the Labour government. Interest in US-UK nuclear relations also benefits from the more frequent contact between the Labour Party and US officials, and the wealth of readily available archival documentation on both sides of the Atlantic. Furthermore, this book seeks to make its contribution by exploring the political and economic dimensions of British nuclear diplomacy. Relations within NATO, Britain's global military commitments, and the Cold War context are important elements in the study of British nuclear diplomacy. Nonetheless, this book is not a strategic or military history and does not dwell on the mechanics, planning, or intelligence surrounding the use of nuclear weapons. Many scholars have already made useful contributions to these fields. This book instead contributes to British nuclear history by exploring the fields of politics and economics, utilising a raft of available but often overlooked sources.

The majority of source materials come from the National Archives in London, including Prime Ministerial, Cabinet, Treasury, Defence and Foreign Office documents released under 'the thirty-year rule'.¹⁰ This book also draws from the Labour Party archive and a selection of private papers, venturing to a number of smaller archives housing these collections.¹¹ As this book is concerned with British perceptions and policy-making, British documents are the principal focus of its research. Nevertheless, additional material from the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and the US National Archives in Maryland is useful in addressing absences in British archives. The collection of US documents found in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* book series, published by the Office of the Historian in the US Department of State, is similarly helpful.¹² In support of a wide array of archival documentation, this book also draws on a wealth of secondary sources, published data and interviews with ministers and officials.

Despite focusing on decision-making at the highest level, often in the context of international negotiations, this book recognises the context of decision-making within the government. Discord in the Labour Party, cabinet debate, and interdepartmental rivalries all provide an important context to the development of British nuclear diplomacy. There is an abundance of memoirs and diaries from all levels of the Labour government.¹³ Added to these is a collection of biographies concerned with many of the key participants, particularly Wilson.¹⁴ Also useful are the selection of books concerned more broadly with British government, cabinet, and Whitehall in this period.¹⁵ International historians should consider influences from within government. Politicians, civil servants, and institutions construct policy as a reaction to domestic and international events.

Overview

This book contains six chapters. Taken together, they explore how and why British nuclear diplomacy evolved under Wilson's leadership. Chapter One, 'A British Bomb', offers an overview of nuclear policy between 1945 and 1962. It charts the development of British nuclear diplomacy in the post-war period, focusing on the major themes that Wilson would come to face during his time in office. A desire for strategic independence, US-UK nuclear tensions, and the emergence of a commitment to measures of non-proliferation are perhaps the clearest historical antecedents. The role of the economy in British nuclear

history also receives attention. Balance of payments deficits, the threat of devaluation, and anxieties about comparative decline influenced successive governments' handling of the British nuclear weapons programme. Wilson's rise through government weaves into this historical account. The post-war period represented the future prime minister's formative years in the British political system and helps to contextualise his later actions in office.

Chapter Two, 'The Ambiguities of Opposition', explores the twenty-month period between Wilson's becoming leader of the opposition in February 1963 and the General Election of October 1964. It considers how Wilson balanced his own approach to nuclear diplomacy with the demands of the Labour Party and broader domestic and international constraints. Nuclear weapons had been a tremendously divisive issue within the Labour Party. As leader of the opposition, Wilson sought to satisfy the needs of the party, which often came at the expense of a more conciliatory negotiating position with Washington concerning nuclear sharing proposals. He was, at this time, more concerned with party unity, rather than transatlantic commitments on which he had little influence. Wilson could address international issues when he took office; if he failed to win the next election it would not be his problem. Thus, in discussions with foreign officials, he vigorously contested any future commitments to nuclear sharing, and cast doubt on Britain's future as a nuclear power.

International pressures, specifically the fear of an exclusive nuclear alliance between the FRG and US, and consequently West German access to nuclear weapons, eventually led Wilson to produce some subtle caveats to his negotiating position with Washington. Yet, to his domestic audience, he repeatedly downplayed such diplomatic prudence. In contrast to his private approach to nuclear diplomacy, Wilson's public position was far more ambivalent and intentionally ambiguous. Claims that he could not make a final decision on the future of the British nuclear weapons programme, and consequently nuclear sharing proposals, until he was in power provided a convenient way to criticise the Conservative government and keep the Labour Party united, without necessarily committing to cancellation. Wilson's criticisms of the British nuclear weapons programme also complemented the Labour Party's broader efforts to highlight the Conservative government's perceived mishandling of the national economy.

Chapters Three and Four, 'Constructing the Atlantic Nuclear Force' and 'The Recurring Death of Nuclear Sharing', consider the development of nuclear sharing proposals between 1964 and 1967. Wilson oversaw the creation of the

Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) as a more palatable replacement to the widely unpopular Multilateral Force (MLF). Although its principal objective was to address the MLF problem, the ANF became a serious proposal that sought to improve broader international nuclear relations and facilitate measures of non-proliferation. Moreover, much of the government initially perceived the ANF as an effective method with which to secure future military and economic concessions from NATO and the United States. Specifically, in return for a commitment of Polaris submarines or V-bombers, Wilson sought the release of a substantial number of conventional forces presently committed to Western Europe. These potential concessions were especially valuable given the precarious situation of the pound, a significant balance of payments deficit, and a commitment to greater defence rationalisation. Moreover, from a domestic and party perspective, the ANF served as a valuable instrument for Wilson to justify the preservation of the British nuclear weapons programme without harming party unity or undermining his slim parliamentary majority.

Nevertheless, the ANF was only ever a more acceptable version of a still widely unpopular idea. Once Wilson had secured approval from the cabinet and US president Lyndon Johnson to pursue this proposal, progress swiftly dissipated. Throughout 1965, the government subtly extricated itself from its commitment to nuclear sharing proposals, and instead pursued consultative solutions and a non-proliferation treaty. Broader international and domestic concerns, however, tempered Wilson's resistance to nuclear sharing. US support for the pound, growing tensions with the FRG on the costs of military cooperation in Europe, and fears about a revival of the MLF meant that formal support for the ANF remained prudent. The government's stance on nuclear sharing was thus characterised by public support for the ANF, but procrastination and equivocation in private. Consequently, nuclear sharing proposals, effectively lifeless within the government itself, lingered on the international landscape for several more years.

Chapter Five, 'Cooperation as Consultation', looks in more detail at the emergence of non-physical measures of cooperation in British nuclear diplomacy between 1965 and 1967. Despite initial reservations, the Labour government ultimately welcomed US proposals for greater consultation between the allies in the form of the Nuclear Planning Working Group (NPWG), later supplanted by the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). The proposal complemented the dual objectives of removing nuclear sharing proposals from the international political landscape and progressing non-proliferation negotiations. Re-

sponsibility for the success of this approach, though, rested largely with the superpowers. In a series of private negotiations designed to improve the ailing non-proliferation negotiations, a compromise emerged. The Soviet Union tacitly agreed to relinquish its objections to consultative measures of nuclear cooperation, specifically the NPG. In exchange, the United States agreed to forgo any further commitment to nuclear sharing proposals, such as the MLF and ANF. The United States subsequently used the offer of a permanent seat on the NPG to convince the FRG to forgo its increasingly unrealistic ambitions for a multilateral nuclear force.

Because of its exclusion from these private negotiations, the British government played a secondary role in overcoming the international difficulties surrounding the possession and control of nuclear weapons. Wilson remained unwilling to denounce the ANF formally. This stance reflected his unease about upsetting his US creditors, and lingering fears about the possibility of a future NATO nuclear force that could exclude British participation. Persistent difficulties over the costs of British forces stationed in West Germany, and a growing interest in membership of the EEC, only strengthened Wilson's reluctance to press the issue. It was therefore private superpower negotiations and France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated command structure that helped to facilitate closer collaboration in matters of nuclear cooperation within the alliance. Thus, between 1965 and 1967, Britain enjoyed significant progress in both nuclear consultation and non-proliferation largely because of the actions of other states.

Chapter Six, 'Proliferation Politics', explores the later stages of the British government's pursuit of a nuclear non-proliferation treaty. By 1967, a desire for entry into the EEC had become a major influence on the content and conduct of British nuclear non-proliferation policy. Wilson intentionally embraced a secondary role in the negotiation process, leaving the running to the superpowers, in order to avoid conflict with the countries of the EEC and thereby protect Britain's application for membership. Although membership was not achieved in 1967, a commitment to future entry continued to influence non-proliferation policy. Indeed, a desire for future membership of the EEC, alongside giving renewed impetus to the NPT, helps to explain the British government's decision to become the first nuclear weapon state to ratify the treaty.

This chapter also challenges the pervading assumption that the decision to sign and later ratify the treaty was uncontested within the British government. Some ministers harboured serious reservations about the consequences of the

treaty on Britain's nascent relations with the EEC. Tensions between these foreign policy objectives surfaced in sporadic arguments at the highest levels of office. Despite his own increasingly precarious political and economic situation, Wilson successfully managed the passage of the treaty through his own government. The NPT codified the death of nuclear sharing and, more important, Britain's legal existence as one of only a small number of nuclear weapon states. Taken together, these six chapters reveal how and why British nuclear diplomacy evolved under Wilson's leadership as he struggled to balance his own objectives against wider domestic and international forces.