

Selective Emulation and Strategic Culture: Rethinking Post–Cold War British Defense Reform Through the Lens of Neoclassical Realism

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This paper re-evaluates post-Cold War British defense reform through the lens of neoclassical realism, challenging the prevailing view that such reforms have been largely unfit for purpose. It argues that, when understood as a strategy to “manage decline” and preserve Britain’s status as a secondary power, emulating the military modernization of the United States represents a rational and cost-effective choice. The analysis integrates systemic pressures with domestic political and cultural factors, particularly strategic culture and the Anglo-American “special relationship,” to explain the pattern of “selective emulation” rather than wholesale adoption of the U.S. Revolution in Military Affairs. Examining historical context from the Suez Crisis to the Labour governments (1997–2010), the paper demonstrates that British defense reforms, including the 1998 Strategic Defence Review and subsequent white papers, successfully enhanced interoperability with the U.S. and maintained Britain’s great-power identity despite resource constraints and institutional inertia. While acknowledging operational shortcomings and mismatches between high-end platforms and stabilization missions, the paper concludes that the overarching strategic objectives of the reforms have been largely achieved. The neoclassical realist framework thus offers a more nuanced understanding of British defense policy, reconciling structural necessity with domestic political realities.

Keywords: Neoclassical realism, British defense reform, selective emulation, strategic culture, special relationship, managing decline

Introduction

There has been a view in academic and policy spheres that British defense reforms since the end of the Cold War have not been fit for purpose. Yet this view appears seemingly plausible, it is not necessarily accurate. Overall, Britain’s post-Cold War defense reforms aimed to “manage decline.” As a secondary power, emulating the defense reforms of major powers to modernize their own military affairs represented a highly cost-effective option. It should therefore be viewed as consistent with its goal of managing decline. Additionally, considering the historical context of these reforms, along with the influence of strategic culture and systemic pressures within the neoclassical realism (NCR) framework, the same conclusion holds.

Analyses of historical causes tend to draw more on interpretations of cultural contexts than on theoretical critiques, whilst international relations theory does the opposite. Among IR theories, neoclassical realism

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emphasizes both external systemic pressures and domestic politics which includes strategic culture and institutional politics. It provides a composite framework that integrates cultural and structural factors. The following discussion will build upon the convergence of prior research and, using this framework, analyze whether Britain's post-Cold War defense reforms aligned with its strategic interests.

The Historical Context of the Mid-20th Century

Formation of the “Special Relationship”

With the end of the Second Middle East War (i.e., the Suez Crisis), as Britain and France were forced to cease military action under pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union, Britain's global colonial system collapsed. Realizing that its global influence had been superseded by that of the United States and had come to depend on it, Britain, driven by shifting strategic objectives and spurred by the military reforms undertaken by the United States and the Soviet Union in the wake of the Cold War, began its own military reforms in the 1990s, albeit later than others, by emulating the leading power, namely the United States.

The overarching theme of Britain's defense reforms, which were modeled on the United States, is the “Atlanticist” orientation of its defense policy; this orientation, in turn, stems from the “special relationship” that developed between the United Kingdom and the United States through their bilateral diplomatic practices in the mid-20th century.

Regarding the “special relationship” between the United Kingdom and the United States that gradually took shape around 1945, a chapter by Self (2022) provides a detailed account of the historical development and preconditions of this bilateral relationship. Specifically, the essence of the Anglo-American special relationship is a mutually beneficial arrangement rooted in national and cultural ties: the United States needed Britain to maintain its position on the European continent to contain the expanding Soviet influence, while Britain needed a powerful (especially economically) United States to sustain its own status as a great power. Therefore, Britain's gradual shift toward “Atlanticism” after World War II and its emphasis on its natural relationship with the United States was, in itself, a reasonable trend.

Impact of the Suez Crisis

Although in negotiations and decision-making, the special relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States tends to result in a more equal footing rather than one that truly reflects the disparity in their national power, since the end of World War II (particularly following the Second Middle East War in 1956), there has been a marked pattern of alternating dominance between the two nations. Peden (2012) notes that when discussing the impact of the Suez Crisis on the decline of British hegemony, many British political officials took a positive view, attributing it to the crisis's exposure of Britain's inability to handle difficult situations independently of the United States, as well as the ineffectiveness of the Commonwealth system.

The hasty resolution of the Suez Crisis undoubtedly exposed several factors contributing to the decline of British hegemony, including, but not limited to, the country's growing dependence on the postwar United States, which was emerging as a dominant power, in areas such as the economy, defense, and postwar reconstruction; the broader trend of decolonization, which led to the contraction of Britain's global trade network and a decline in foreign exchange earnings; and the signs of fragmentation within the Commonwealth system, which compelled Britain to shift its focus toward strengthening its relations with continental Europe.

Another view holds that the shift in hegemony that occurred around the time of the 1956 Suez Crisis cannot be understood simply through the lens of a struggle for hegemony, given the unique nature of bilateral relations between the United Kingdom and the United States. For instance, Smith (2012) argues that Britain's strategic shift was not intended to be a complete "retreat" from the Middle East, but rather a pursuit of "persistence" in the region; correspondingly, the United States during this period had little intention of actively replacing Britain, as it feared that inheriting this colonial inheritance, including British commitments to the region, would sustain massive opposition or other costly consequences.

The "Great Power" Identity as the Groundwork for Emulation

From this situation, the "special relationship" between the UK and the U.S. is, in fact, built on a foundation of mutual affirmation. Specifically, this is manifested in the fact that Britain has consistently viewed itself as a great power and has never relinquished its ability to project power over long distances, a fact reflected in its emphasis on the Middle East. This self-identification as a "great power" and a global actor has exerted a significant influence on subsequent British defense reforms, providing considerable motivation for the country to maintain its status as a great power by emulating the United States' "best practices" in the military sphere. The United States, for its part, has acknowledged Britain's indispensable and unique capabilities in managing its former colonies, recognizing its certain responsibilities inherent to a global empire, albeit one in decline. This shared self-perception and mutual recognition also provided a basis for Britain's subsequent emulation of the United States' Revolutions in Military Affairs (RMA) which serves its strategic purpose.

Defense Reform and British Strategic Culture

"Selectiveness" in the Reform

Following the Labour Party's return to power in 1997 after the end of the Cold War, the Labour government launched a series of defense reforms. Notable efforts included, but were not limited to, the release of the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR; Great Britain Ministry of Defence, 1998), the addition of a new chapter in 2002, the publication of the 2003 Defence White Paper (Great Britain Ministry of Defence, 2003), and the 2010 Strategic Defense and Security Review (SDSR), among other policy innovations. Although the specific outcomes of these initiatives varied in effectiveness and each faced its own constraints, Britain's defense reforms can generally be considered a success. While the emulation of the United States drew criticism for an "overreliance on transatlantic relations," in reality, Britain engaged in a form of "selective emulation," in other words, adapting certain elements rather than adopting the idea entirely.

Specifically regarding this concept of "selective emulation," a view that has emerged in recent years holds that the UK's defense reforms have merely adopted a superficial, cosmetic version of the U.S. RMA, while the actual substance of its defense reforms is more distinctive to the UK itself, including but not limited to a greater emphasis on cultural and social factors, as well as the stabilization operations, which is, a greater focus on the "human" factor rather than purely technological factors.

Morgan (2024) is a representative article on this topic, and it uses the example of the United Kingdom developing its own concept of *Multi-Domain Integration* (MDI) based on the U.S. RMA's concept of *Multi-Domain Operations* (MDO) as a case study. In this example, he primarily explains his disagreement with the discourse of "emulation," arguing that the U.S. concept of MDO is itself highly fluid and uncertain, and that the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Space Force are all using this concept to advance their own

interests rather than genuinely focusing on multi-domain integration. This demonstrates that the MDO concept is highly U.S.-specific and has been reinterpreted by the U.S. militaries.

Similarly, the implementation of defense reform in the United Kingdom has been significantly influenced by its domestic political environment. As Morgan (2024) notes, the “emulation” narrative overlooks the complexities of domestic politics, particularly the overemphasis placed on the role of “civilian intervention.” In the context of UK defense reform, the earliest successful reforms were first achieved at the tactical level and within the British Army, while the civilian establishment, represented by the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ), has long played a constraining role in the reform process. This shift, driven by mid-level networks rather than the strategic leadership, reflects the distinctive British strategic culture manifested in the UK’s defense reform. It also serves as strong evidence that the UK’s defense reform was not merely a slavish emulation of the U.S. RMA.

The Labour’s Contributions and Its Strategic Objectives

In May 1997, the Labour Party defeated the long-ruling Conservative Party and returned to power in the United Kingdom. This marked the beginning of Tony Blair’s first cabinet. Tony Blair was known for his unconventional “Blairism.” Specifically, his reforms in both domestic and foreign affairs bore distinct characteristics: his opposition to nationalization in domestic policy was quite “un-Labour-like,” while in foreign relations, he placed greater emphasis on developing ties with Europe. At the same time, the Blair government’s rise to power largely coincided with the launch of British defense reforms. Although the process of defense reform was fraught with difficulties, it is undeniable that during the process, the Labour government under Blair has played a significant role, leaving a distinctive mark on it. This trajectory, shaped by domestic political shifts, reflects the influence of Britain’s strategic culture.

Another view holds that the Blair government’s defense reforms were in fact based on continuity and did not bring about fundamental changes; in other words, they deviated from the original intent of updating Britain’s strategic objectives. For instance, Miskimmon (2013) argues that despite Blair’s foreign and security policy ostensibly promoted a common defense mechanism with the EU, as evidenced by actions such as signing the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration and joining the mechanism of European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), its essence still largely reflected continuity in British defense affairs: an emphasis on “transatlantic” relations, i.e., collaboration with the United States, and a tendency toward interventionism and global expansion rooted in its colonial history. In practice, both strategic cultures were evident in the UK’s participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and the intervention of the 2003 Iraq War.

Miskimmon (2013) argues that the American factor served as an anchor in British defense reform, constituting the direct cause of its continuity. He further contends that Blair’s Europeanization came consistently secondary to the Atlanticism of Anglo-American relations, thereby causing British defense reform to run counter to its true strategic objectives and failing to genuinely achieve European defense autonomy through UK-EU coalition. However, he disregarded a crucial point: since the contraction of British hegemony in the 1950s, the UK’s global influence has largely depended on its special relationship with the United States. If one considers only the shifts in British and European power and views “Europeanization” as the strategic objective, then the reforms were undoubtedly disappointing. However, if Britain’s strategic objectives are perceived as pragmatic goals of “maintaining the status of a secondary power” and “managing decline,” then its defense reforms, grounded in the Anglo-American relationship, were successful and well-aligned with these objectives.

Neoclassical Realism Analysis

The Debate Over the Achievement of “Strategic Goals”

There is a view that Britain’s post-Cold War defense reforms were, overall, stagnant and, consequently, a failure. Dyson (2011) analyzed the defense reforms of the Labour era through the lens of neoclassical realism, focusing on domestic politics during that period, as he believed that shortcomings at the strategic leadership level led to strategic inertia in Britain’s defense reforms. Specifically, new breakthroughs at the tactical level could not be translated into fundamental shifts at the strategic level due to the negative impacts of inter-service rivalry, organizational/bureaucratic politics, and electoral cycles. His central argument is that the lack of strategic autonomy within the core executive branch during this period led to strategic inertia. This assessment is correct at its core. However, it should also be noted that at the international system level, the UK successfully maintained its international status as a secondary power, through its enhanced interoperability with the United States and the RMA selective emulation.

In other words, what requires further discussion is whether this “inertia” represents a strategic failure or a deviation from overarching strategic objectives. It should be noted that many aspects of the defense reforms during the Blair era were consistent with the UK’s goal of maintaining its status as a major power. These include, but are not limited to: retaining nuclear deterrence, maintaining a navy with expeditionary capabilities, retaining aircraft carriers, maintaining strategic “interoperability” with the United States, and maintaining a relative leadership role within NATO. These objectives were reflected in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR; Great Britain Ministry of Defence, 1998) through the attempt to replace traditional territorial/alliance defense with “forward defense”; they were also reflected in the 2003 Defence White Paper (Great Britain Ministry of Defence, 2003), which sought to expand force projection capabilities from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to a global scale. All of this demonstrates that the Labour Party’s defense reforms were not entirely divorced from the UK’s contemporary strategic needs.

Reasonable Strategies vs. Irrational Allocation of Resources

As Edmunds (2010) noted, the Blair government’s defense reforms were plagued by a series of institutional and resource-related issues, including: insufficient resources that prevented the reforms from being fully implemented; institutional politics among the three services that hindered reform; a mismatch between high-end platforms and stabilization missions; and the declining status of defense within the political system. However, this does not detract from the strategic rationality of the defense reforms themselves, as they aligned with the systemic pressures of the time, namely, the need to address and prevent transnational threats such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and terrorism, as well as the need to strengthen alliance obligations within NATO and the ESDP.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive discussion of the strategic culture reflected in the Labour Party’s defense reforms, covering not only elements tied to Anglo-American relations, such as the selective emulation of the U.S. Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and the strengthening of interoperability, but also internal aspects including the UK’s own context-specific reforms and the constraints imposed by domestic bureaucracy and organizational politics. Crucially, the concept of “selective emulation” demonstrates that British defense policy was not a slavish imitation of the American model but rather a pragmatic adaptation tailored to the UK’s

strategic needs, resource limitations, and institutional realities. By prioritizing interoperability with the United States while retaining distinctively British approaches, these reforms enabled the UK to punch above its weight in NATO and coalition operations, thereby reinforcing its status as a secondary power capable of global expeditionary action. Hence, it concludes that post-Cold War British defense reforms have not deviated from their strategic mainline.

The “inertia” observed during the reform process, namely, resource shortages and insufficient capacity-building in counter-insurgency (COIN), despite exposing shortcomings in the reform efforts, however, does not preclude the conclusion that the overarching strategic objectives of the reform have been predominantly achieved. Measured against the realistic benchmark of preserving Britain’s great-power identity, sustaining the Anglo-American special relationship, and ensuring cost-effective military modernization, the reforms must be judged a rational and largely successful response to systemic pressures. Neoclassical realism thus offers a nuanced lens that reconciles structural necessity with domestic political and cultural factors, moving beyond simplistic narratives of failure or uncritical emulation.

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