

The Commonwealth Interest in South East Asia: The Ultimate Choice of West Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: *The imperial interest of Britain after the Second World War called for desperate measures to maintain British strong foothold in Asia. The responsibility of South East Asia Command was considerably increased in guarding the colonies in the South East as well as the Far East of Asia. While trying to secure the Commonwealth interest in the post war world, the Anglo-American allies went too far for the whole situation to break into a devastating end in the case of Jammu and Kashmir State. The tilt of British diplomacy in favour of Pakistan on the battlefield as well as in the UNO bore an everlasting problem for the continent of Asia and the world on the whole.*

KEYWORDS: *Commonwealth of Nations; India; Jammu and Kashmir; Britain; South East Asia: Lord Mountbatten*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The region of South Asia was an attractive territory in terms of resource and labour. For years, it was coveted by the imperial powers and remained a bone of contention amongst them. With its superior diplomacy and military might Britain came out victorious in retaining the maximum of the South Asia in the form of various colonies. The area was a major source of rubber, tin and labour for Britain. Many unexplored areas of the South Asian islands were brought under full exploitation. When the promising resources and full potential of the area was recognized, a South East Asia Command was formulated in the year 1943 and placed under the effective control of Lord Louis Mountbatten. The area comprised of Burma, Thailand, Indochina, Indonesia and Malaya (consisting of Singapore and North Borneo). Such a vast region required powerful influence of the imperial force. However, the second Great War exhausted the military resource and economy of Britain considerably. Although, Britain was among the victors but it was not in a position to guard such a huge empire with meagre leftover resources. To add to this, being the sole power controlling the majority of South East Asia, Britain was left in charge of far more territory. The sudden surrender of Japan in 1945 left Britain to supervise even the Far East. Britain's troubles started after the war ended. There were some very crucial issues that needed to be addressed soon:

- i) Extending effective British control in the Far East
- ii) Confront the increasing demand for self-government in various colonies of South East Asia
- iii) Bring down the rise of Chinese Communism in Malaya and other islands
- iv) Indian nationalism and demand for British withdrawal from India

Therefore, the Foreign office in Britain was especially troubled by the turn of events for Britain. The South East Asia Command was already crucial to anchoring the imperial imprint in the area but this Command was required to be stretched over to include new areas far and wide. India was the only British territory which could reinstate British stronghold in the whole of Asia and ultimately the world, but the Indian leadership had declined various wartime efforts of Britain; it was no more possible to hold India into the empire. This turn of events greatly disturbed the American interests too. The tattering British control in Asia was sure to give way to Communism which was already starting to influence the Asian nations in the making. In this scenario, the Foreign Office of Britain came up with a bold scheme of regional cooperation in South East Asia. But it had to have India as a protagonist of the group. India's significance was being felt during the climax of the war. 'The advent of the war with Japan in December 1941 underlined the strategic importance of India for the security of South- East Asia and the Pacific'.¹ After the fall of Singapore in 1942, Britain had concentrated its thought on retaining the Indian empire as it became all the more pivotal to Britain's Eastern strategy. '...particularly after the fall of Singapore in February 1942, India became a critical part of Britain's Eastern strategy. It was essential at a minimum to keep India quiet.'² The country was crucial to the empire because of its strategic location in the

¹ Moore, R.J. *Escape from Empire. Page 9. UK*

² Reid, Walter. 2016. *Keeping the jewel in the Crown, the British betrayal of India. UK*

Indian Ocean Area. With her unlimited resources India had hitherto supported and provided for the imperial expeditions and interests all over the world. The imperial control on the oilfields of the Middle East and also on the colonies of the Far East was unthinkable in the absence of India from the British territorial possessions. India's military resource was incredible and had sustained the British hold all over the world. Also, the existence of British military reserves and air bases in India were indispensable to maintain British supremacy in an era of airplanes and fighter jets. Not only this, the British presence in India was crucial to check the Russian advance southwards to the Middle Eastern oil-fields.³ All in all, both the Foreign Office and the Colonial office in England agreed on the significance of keeping India into the scheme of regional cooperation in South East Asia.⁴ Also, in 1944 Wavell- the Viceroy of India had made it very clear to Winston Churchill that the British plans and policies in the South East Asia and the Far East were solely relying on what happened in India.⁵ The imperial domination on the world was to be ensured by critical policy of the diplomats along with the Military Chiefs. In 1944, the Chiefs of Staff had been directed to submit a paper on the combined defence of the British colonies within the Commonwealth. Such a Commonwealth of Nations would come about after the end of the war and ensure the defence on regional lines. In such a scheme, India was to remain a centre point for watching the region from Burma to the Persian Gulf, Australia and New Zealand was to form another region- the Pacific Group watched with Dutch assistance. In the other continent, South Africa was pivotal to the territory extending to Kenya and Canada with American cooperation would defend the Atlantic as well as the Pacific interests. This elaborate plan was set in an appraisal by the Chiefs of Staff.

The growing communal problem in India was sapping the days left with the British Raj in India. Apparently the demand for the creation of Pakistan was hampering the smooth transfer of power to India. Also, the transfer of power to the Government of India was to primarily agree with the provisions for the defence of the South East Asia region which now came to be called as the 'Indian Ocean Area'. Before the despatch of the Cabinet Mission, there were significant discussions in the India Committee. The appraisal of the Chiefs of Staff was made available to the Cabinet Mission of 1946, week before its departure to India emphasizing on appealing the cooperation of India for the coastal defence and internal as well as external security (extending from the Middle East to the Far East). Also, it was made amply clear that the agreement on the communal problem was inevitable to ensure 'the peaceful disengagement that Britain's world's interests required'⁶ Thus, when Lord Mountbatten entered as the Viceroy, in March 1947, to an India leaping towards independence, he had pre-planned policies towards the Indian problems in general and the British interests in South East Asia in particular. With certain briefing from the HMG, he came to India with the twin aims of accelerating the Indian independence and most importantly retaining Indian assistance in the Commonwealth or in case that became unacceptable to India in maintaining her sovereignty, to conclude, at least, a defence treaty with her. Hence, the new Viceroy was asked to 'obtain a unitary government for British India and the Indian states, if possible, within the British Commonwealth'.⁷ And although the government, especially Attlee, understood that the settlement was not going to be a united one, yet the arrangement with respect to the Commonwealth was fundamental.⁸

Lord Mountbatten, identifying with these hopes of the British Government and committed to provide a peaceful departure to the imperial authority from India, held immediate meetings with the political leadership of India. In these individual meetings with Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, he came to an understanding that India was non-negotiable on the prospects of participating in the Commonwealth of Nations; on the other hand, Jinnah had asked for Pakistan's need for British assistance and association right from the day of its birth. Calculating the risks and advantages, the Whitehall issued fresh directions to Lord Mountbatten. If India was going to sever every linkage with the Raj, the existence of Pakistan would be as necessary in maintaining the imperial interests in the Asian continent. A territorial chunk of the Indian mainland under British influence would be as strategic as possible at that time. The same air bases, military reserves, manpower and ports would be found in Pakistan in the absence of India from the Commonwealth. Thus, the partition of India was finalised and boundary lines drawn with a little employment of thought and time. Although, the

³ **Jamwal, Chahukeshi. 2018. *Ambitions and conflict: the role of British officers in the partition of India*. Page 2 in the *International Journal of Research and Analytics Review*, Volume-**

⁴ **Initially The Colonial Office was not agreeing on this scheme as it would invite America to meddle with British affairs in the region.**

⁵ **Op.Cit. Moore. Page 18.**

⁶ **Op.Cit. Moore. Page 64**

⁷ **Patrick French, *Liberty or Death: India's Journey to Independence and Division*, pbk edn, p. 277.**

⁸ **The unitary government was emphasized upon to gain a strong military reserve for British interests in the SEA region.**

British control on India lapsed on August 15, 1947, yet Lord Mountbatten persuaded the Prime Minister of India to retain a large number of British military officers at the head of the Indian army. As it was to prove later, these Military officers became significant in the relations existing between India and Pakistan. Soon after partition, Pakistan invaded the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. This led to a war between India and Pakistan when Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India. As later events unfolded, the first war between India and Pakistan unveiled a series of British diplomatic and military actions in favour of strengthening Pakistan. The visits of Lord Mountbatten to J&K in the summer of 1947 to ease the prince for acceding to Pakistan, the questionable and delayed responses of the Indian Commander-in-Chief General Lockhart, the replacement of British military officers and termination of the Supreme Headquarters during the middle of the India-Pakistan war, the occupation of the Indian territory of Gilgit by Pakistan with the active help and aid of the British military officers, the reversal of the British military protocol of 'Stand Down' issued repeatedly by the supreme Commander Auchinleck in favour of Pakistan⁹, etc. are some of the examples which are being researched in depth. Even after the internationalisation of the Kashmir issue at the UNO, the Anglo-American imperial interests reflected clearly in issuing various statements in favour of Pakistan that demeaned the Indian case. These were the statements of important British officers like Noel Baker which were surprisingly in harmony with the accusations made by Pakistani representatives at the UNO. However advanced might the situation become in the UNO, the base of the problem remained the same which was to reconcile with and fully utilise the British links of Pakistan in the absence of India from the British Commonwealth of Nations. It was planned to ultimately strengthen the British defence of the whole of Asia.

The British officials in the Cabinet of Britain as well as at the UNO worked in unison to protect British influence in the South East Asian region after the demise of the empire. It was but natural of such a huge empire to keep itself from ending abruptly. The British Government worked through its officers with utmost caution to disengage peacefully in the region. However, her strategic interests and a hunger for power eventually gave birth to a volatile spot in South East Asia in the form of the most active border between India and Pakistan that continues to exist even today.

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⁹ The 'Stand Down' instructions referred to the secret code to be issued to the British military and its Officers appointed in India and Pakistan in case of an inter-dominion war between the two sister countries.