

Harold Wilson's Efforts at a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War, 1965-67

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This article aims to provide an account of British Prime Minister Harold Wilson's diplomatic attempts to settle the Vietnam War. There are some previous studies discussing his initiatives in 1965, but little research focussing on his continuous trials in the following years. Starting with an analysis of Wilson's concept of an Anglo-American 'division of function' in Vietnam, this article then examines Anglo-Soviet summit meetings in 1966-67 and investigates the Wilson-Johnson confrontation over America's secret efforts at a dialogue with the Hanoi regime. In conclusion, it will consider the factors contributing to the ultimate failure to produce significant results of Wilson's peace-making efforts.

Introduction

'Neither side can expect victory in the struggle. Equally neither side need expect defeat. The United States have no national interest involved in Vietnam. ...[T]hey are ready to leave provided they can do so without loss of prestige'.¹ This was British Prime Minister Harold Wilson's view of the Vietnam War and the motivation behind his pursuit of a negotiated settlement of the Far Eastern conflict. He feared its escalation into 'a major land war, or even a nuclear conflict in

¹ The National Archive, Kew [hereafter TNA PRO] PREM13/695, Wilson to Paymaster General, 22 June 1965.

Asia' and was anxious to prevent the Asian war from 'poisoning world relationships' in other parts of the globe.²

As earlier studies have shown, from the outset of his government, Wilson was keen to play a role in mediating the Vietnam War, and made several attempts at restoring peace in 1965.³ This article aims to provide an account of his extensive efforts in the following years.⁴ In doing so, it focuses on his personal contacts with American and Soviet leaders at the top level. While the existing literature on this topic tends to focus on London's efforts to restrain US military escalation in Vietnam, this article pays equal regard to Wilson's eagerness to engage the Soviet leadership in the resolution of the Far Eastern conflict and the implications of deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations for his Vietnamese policy.

Amongst the questions investigated in this article are: what the Prime Minister's intellectual basis for his mediating diplomacy was; to what extent his policy assumption fitted the reality of the day; and why his peace-making effort, in the end, failed. The analysis here will give not only a detailed account of Wilson's diplomacy towards Vietnam, but also some clues to understanding the dynamics of international politics in the mid-1960s, such as the ever increasing Anglo-

² TNA PRO PREM13/695, record of a conversation between Wilson and Sayed Marei, 28 June 1965.

³ Simon Kear, 'The British Consulate-General in Hanoi, 1954-73', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 10 No. 1 (Mar.1999), pp. 215-39; Rolf Steininger, "'The Americans are in a Hopeless Position': Great Britain and the War in Vietnam, 1964-65', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol 8:No.3, (November 1997), pp.237-85; John W. Young, 'The Wilson Government and the Davies Peace Mission to North Vietnam, July 1965', *Review of International Studies*, Vol.24 (1988), pp.545-62.

⁴ Silvia Ellis's recently published book is an exception in that it covers the entire process of Wilson's policy with regard to the Vietnam War beyond 1965. See Sylvia Ellis, *Britain, America, and the Vietnam War* (West Port: Praeger, 2004).

American power gap, closer US-Soviet relations and an intensifying Sino-Soviet rivalry.

Wilson's Aims

In trying to understand Wilson's enthusiasm for a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam War, it is important to note that he conducted his personal initiative based upon a certain premise. In his memoirs, the Prime Minister emphasises that British diplomatic mediation was predicated on his notion of an Anglo-American 'division of function'. He had reached this tacit understanding with US President Lyndon B. Johnson at the UK-US summit meeting of April 1965:

[T]hese April talks set out a division of function which he [Johnson] more than once stressed publicly. The American Government would not be deflected from its military task; but, equally, he would give full backing to any British initiative which had any chance of getting peace-talks on the move.⁵

For Wilson, it was quite natural that he would harbour this sense of a British responsibility in the Far East. Traditionally, all his predecessors, from Clement Attlee to Harold Macmillan, had recognised that Britain should exercise a moderating influence on US military actions in the region, and, on such occasions as the Korean War, the Indochina conflict and the Taiwan Strait crises in the 1950s and the Laos crisis in 1961-2, British prime ministers had played a crucial role in opening negotiations with the communists.⁶ Wilson

⁵ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson and Michael Joseph, 1971), pp.95-6.

⁶ Michael Dockrill, 'Britain and the First Chinese Offshore Islands Crisis, 1945-55' in Michael Dockrill and John W. Young (eds.), *British Foreign Policy, 1945-56* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp.173-196; Peter Lowe, 'The Settlement of the

attached great significance to the Anglo-Soviet co-operation established by the Eden-Molotov co-chairmanship of the Geneva conference of 1954 during the Indochina crisis, and he was determined that his own efforts should build upon this.

In addition to the UK's traditional role in Asia, Wilson had a particularly strong desire for, and felt the necessity of, a British diplomatic involvement in Vietnam. He had become prime minister at a time when the foundations of the UK's international power had been diminished in the wake of the liquidation of the British Empire, and while its replacement, the enlarged Commonwealth, was in its infancy and London's association with Western European integration remained largely thwarted. Furthermore, the timing was crucial in that the Vietnam War was deteriorating just as British military disengagement from east of Suez was being discussed in the Cabinet.⁷

Obligated to make choices between the UK's diminishing power resources and a lingering desire for a

Korean War' in John W. Young (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of Churchill's Peacetime Administration 1951-1955* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988); Kevin Ruane, 'Anthony Eden, British Diplomacy and the Origins of the Geneva Conference of 1954', *The Historical Journal*, Vol.37 No.1 (1994); Kevin Ruane, "'Containing America": Aspects of British Foreign Policy and the Cold War in South-East Asia', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol.7 No.1 (1996); Geoffrey Warner, 'From Geneva to Manila: British Policy towards Indochina and SEATO, May-September 1954' in Lawrence S. Kaplan, Dennis Artaud and Mark R. Rubin (eds.), *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954-1955* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1990).

⁷ For Britain's withdrawal from east of Suez, see for example, Philip Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); Saki Dockrill, 'Britain's Power and Influence: Dealing with Three Roles and the Wilson Government's Defence Debate at Chequers in November 1964', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol.11 No.1 (March 2000); Jeffrey Pickering, *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: The Politics of Retrenchment* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

strong international role, the Wilson administration felt compelled to demonstrate her usefulness to the world, and the Vietnam War seemed to provide a prime opportunity for this. As much a matter of his concern over an escalation of the Asian conflict, thus, was Wilson's eagerness for its diplomatic settlement augmented by his determination to prove Britain's world-wide capacity.

As post-war Anglo-American relations suggest that the UK's self-image as America's dependable ally was one not always shared by US administrations, it seems problematic that Wilson's notion of the US-UK division of labour was fully appreciated by the Johnson government. From our vantage point, we know that there were several early indications of the President's hesitancy to allow the British Prime Minister to be America's special envoy to the Communist world. For one thing, on a personal level, the Wilson-Johnson relationship was not characterised by perfect chemistry, nor did it develop into a more intimate one later on. As US Secretary of State Dean Rusk recalls, the President had an 'underlying mistrust' of Wilson's capacity to 'accurately reflect his views'.⁸ In the British Foreign Office as well, it was acknowledged that '[g]iven the President's secretive nature, high-level approaches to him [were] difficult' and that 'it would be optimistic to expect the right to be informed in close detail and still less to be able to exercise a veto over United States actions'.⁹ These observations on UK-US relations at the top level justify Ellis's characterisation of the Wilson-Johnson personal relationship as being 'limited, at best' and 'certainly one-sided' in the sense that the British prime minister desired

⁸ Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It: A Secretary of State's Memoirs* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1991), p.409.

⁹ TNA PRO PREM13/695, 'Anglo-American Relations' (undated).

to have as frequent contact with the President as possible, while Johnson wanted to 'avoid or minimise' his exchanges with his British counterpart.¹⁰

The rather strained personal relationship of the two leaders manifested itself in a telephone conversation in February 1965. Anxious about America's military step-up following the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in Congress the previous August, Wilson proposed a UK-US summit to discuss Vietnamese issues. Johnson's categorical rejection of Britain's counsel shocked Wilson, who considered himself an 'extremely loyal' ally to the US. The President said bluntly: 'The President of America rushing to the UK to ask their advice might just look overdramatic in the eyes of the world.... I won't tell you how to run Malaysia and you don't tell us how to run Vietnam', and followed this up with a demand for a military contribution from London, in order to combat Vietnamese guerrillas.¹¹

This episode shows the difficulty of the British having an effective voice in White House decision-making without having to commit their troops on the battleground. From the US point of view, Britain's mere utterances of moral support were far from satisfactory given the fact that the UK was a signatory to Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), which covered South Vietnamese security. The British military detachment could undermine the credibility of the Western collective defence system. Some years later, Rusk revealed the extent of American irritation at that time and posed a question to Britain's Minister of Defence Dennis

¹⁰ Sylvia A. Ellis, 'Lyndon Johnson, Harold Wilson and the Vietnam War: a Not So Special Relationship?' in Jonathan Hollowell (ed.), *Twentieth Century Anglo-American Relations* (London: Palgrave, 2001), pp.184-5.

¹¹ TNA PRO PREM13/598, record of a telephone conversation between Wilson and Johnson, 11 Feb. 1965.

Healey: 'What if the American reaction to an act of aggression under NATO protection was the same as the British reaction under SEATO?' The British Minister awkwardly evaded the query by commenting that it was 'an "indecent question"'.¹² No doubt, Britain's refusal to provide military assistance to the US troops seriously diminished her influence with the Johnson administration, which tended to 'value allies not for any sentimental reasons but to the extent of their practical contributions to the western alliance.'¹³

Recently published studies point to various constraints forcing the Wilson government's continued refusal to participate in US military operations. At the heart of the British unwillingness were two main reasons: domestic and external. First, as John Young and Sylvia Ellis have argued, throughout the period examined here the government in London was confronted with a hostile domestic public, heavily denouncing US military involvement and demanding Britain's detachment from her wrong-headed ally. As time passed, more frequent anti-war demonstrations were to be witnessed and, to make matters worse, the Labour Party itself was deeply divided; Wilson was under the constant strain of dissent within his own party in Parliament over policy towards Vietnam. In order to pacify an antagonistic public and his Labour opponents, the Prime Minister endeavoured to create a public image of himself as a keen promoter of peace in Vietnam while carefully avoiding being branded as sympathetic to US military actions.¹⁴

¹² Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p.395.

¹³ Jonathan Colman, 'The London Ambassadorship of David K. E. Bruce during the Wilson-Johnson Years, 1964-68,' *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol.15 No.2 (June 2004), p.334.

¹⁴ John W. Young, 'Britain and "LBJ's War", 1964-68', *Cold War History*, Vol.2 No.3 (April 2002), pp.76-83; Ellis, *Britain, America, and the Vietnam War*.

Second, on the external factor front, it must be considered that, since the early 1960s, Britain had been faced with Indonesian President Sukarno's 'confrontation' policy, designed to block the establishment of Malaysia out of fear of the expansion of her neighbour under British influence. From the early 1960s to mid-1966, London had been preoccupied with that part of Southeast Asia through military campaigns against Indonesia, involving over 50,000 troops at its peak. With diminishing financial resources, the Wilson government could not afford to deal simultaneously with the two fronts in Southeast Asia, and naturally decided to concentrate the UK's energies on resisting Sukarno for the defence of the infant Malaysia, which held more direct British interests. Although there was no formal agreement reached between the UK and the US, the Wilson government insisted on an Anglo-American division of labour in Southeast Asia, with Britain bearing the burden of defending Malaysia and the US assuming chief responsibility for fighting the Vietnamese communists. Even if temporarily, this formula for compromise helped justify Britain's minimal military presence in Vietnam, despite the fact that Johnson became increasingly irritated with Wilson's non-committal stance.¹⁵

Under these gradually intensifying constraints at home and abroad and with the UK-US division of labour in mind, Wilson embarked upon a series of attempts at mediating the warring parties in Vietnam in the second quarter of 1965. In the middle of April he made an attempt to

¹⁵ For Britain's policy towards Sukarno's 'Confrontation', see for instance, John Subritzky, *Confronting Sukarno: British, American, Australian and New Zealand Diplomacy in the Malaysian-Indonesian Confrontation, 1961-5* (London: Macmillan, 2000); *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia 1961-1965: Britain, the United States, Indonesia and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

lay the groundwork for this mediation by sending former foreign secretary Patrick Gordon Walker on a fact-finding mission to Southeast Asia. Walker's visit, however, was rejected by the Communist countries of North Vietnam and China as a disguised extension of US imperialist policy,¹⁶ but Wilson quickly entertained another idea: the so-called 'Commonwealth Mission'. When the prime ministers of the Commonwealth countries met in London that June, Wilson exploited this top-level meeting to garner support for his mediation in the Vietnam War, and succeeded in establishing a mission composed of four prime ministers from Britain, Ghana, Nigeria and Trinidad-Tobago. Once again, however, Wilson's plan met with rejection from the Asian communists. In a final effort to salvage the plan, Wilson despatched Harold Davies, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance, to Hanoi in early July. Davies had been a regular visitor to Hanoi and kept contact with two North Vietnamese officials in London, who called themselves journalists.¹⁷ As described by Young, however, the Harold Davies tour ended as yet another failure, with Davies unable to meet any key figures in power in Hanoi.¹⁸

Thus, while the first half of 1965 had witnessed unsuccessful attempts on the part of the British to resolve the problem of Vietnam, towards the end of the year the US government began to show some interest in a political solution to the war. Though largely 'propaganda' exercises to

¹⁶ TNA PRO FO371/180587, 'Viet-Nam and Negotiations' by James Cable, 12 July 1965.

¹⁷ TNA PRO FO371/180569, 'Proposed visit by Mr Harold Davies, M.P to Hanoi,' 1 July 1965.

¹⁸ For these successive attempts by the Wilson administration, see Young, 'The Wilson Government and the Davies Peace Mission to North Vietnam, July 1965'; Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970*, chapter 8.

'improve the American image' in the eyes of world opinion,¹⁹ President Johnson declared that he 'd[id] not want to leave any stone unturned in the search for peace'.²⁰ For example, during the 37-day truce starting on Christmas Eve in 1965, the US launched a 'peace offensive', and such figures as Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Governor Averell Harriman and the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, travelled to 14 countries in order to probe possible leads to peace.²¹

In light of these American initiatives, it should be remembered that the fundamental problem Wilson faced during the period under discussion was not in fact a refusal on the part of Washington to negotiate with the North Vietnamese. Rather, the central issue was, as we shall see below, a lack of co-ordination between UK and US peace efforts and a feeling on the British side that they were being circumvented by the Americans, who kept their own missions secret from London. As Wilson later complained, America's Christmas peace offensive itself had never been presented to his government in advance for discussion, or even as a point of information.²²

¹⁹ David M. Barrett (ed.), *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers: A Documentary Collection* (Austin, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), note of the President's meeting with foreign policy advisers 18 Dec. 1965, p.291; Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: The Full Story of US Involvement in Vietnam from Roosevelt to Nixon* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1970), p.293.

²⁰ TNA PRO PREM13/1271, Johnson to Wilson, 29 July 1965.

²¹ For Johnson's peace probing efforts, see Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p.405; Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, chapters 12-14; W. Averell Harriman, *America and Russia in a Changing World: A Half Century of Personal Observation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), pp.76-156.

²² TNA PRO PREM13/1917, record of conversation between Wilson and the US ambassador David Bruce, 10 Jan. 1967.

At the end of 1965, however, this poor UK-US communication had not yet come to the fore. Inside the White House, there were those such as Rusk and Bundy who prompted the President to keep the British informed of his Vietnamese policy. Unlike France's Charles de Gaulle,²³ who had been a sharp critic of US policy, the UK was an ally 'of real value' in spite of her refusal to military commitment. 'The only price' the US would pay for the ally was, they claimed, 'to keep the British on board' and to give them 'the feeling that they are in the know as we go ahead'.²⁴ And indeed, the year 1965 ended with a demonstration of Anglo-American unity over Vietnam. During his stay in Washington, Wilson joined Johnson in lighting the White House Christmas tree, and obtained the President's public reassurance of his 'full support' for British peace-making endeavours. 'It was a far cry from that hot-line explosion ten months [ago]', the Prime Minister was pleased to remark.²⁵ Although at this point still ignorant of Johnson's planned 'peace offensive', it was with a sense of Johnson's full confidence in his initiative that Wilson embarked on two Anglo-Soviet summit conferences in 1966.

²³ For de Gaulle on the Vietnam War, Anne Sa'adah, 'Idées Simples and Idées Fixes: De Gaulle, the United States, and Vietnam', in Robert O. Paxton and Nicholas Wahl (eds.), *De Gaulle and the United States: A Centennial Reappraisal* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), pp.295-315.

²⁴ Barrett (ed.), *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers*, M. Bundy to Johnson, 6 Mar. 1965, p.134; M. Bundy to Johnson, 3 June 1965, p.164.

²⁵ TNA PRO PREM13/1271, record of a conversation between Wilson and Johnson, note by Wilson, 17 Dec. 1965; *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter, *FRUS*), 1964-1968, XII: Western Europe (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2001), memorandum prepared by the Executive Secretary of the State Department (Read), 15-19 Dec. 1965, p.512; Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970*, p.188.

The Anglo-Soviet Talks of 1966

On 2 January 1966, taking advantage of the US bombing cessation, Wilson appealed to Alexei Kosygin, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, to resume Anglo-Soviet co-operation over Vietnam. As co-chairmen of the Geneva conference, the two countries, Wilson reasoned, should feel compelled to persuade their allied powers to enter into a dialogue. The Prime Minister assured the Soviet leader that the Americans were 'in dead earnest' to restore peace and proposed a visit to Moscow in order to lay the ground for wider negotiations.²⁶ Although it was hardly anticipated that this top-level exchange of opinion would yield any immediate results,²⁷ Wilson was keen to invest his energies in cultivating a Soviet channel.

In the formulation of Wilson's decision to approach Moscow, there are two points worthy of special attention. First, it seems that Wilson had learnt a lesson from his several failed attempts at a British direct involvement in Vietnamese conflict resolution the previous year and instead shifted to indirect contacts with the North Vietnamese authorities. All of Wilson's attempts at a direct engagement described in 1965, however, had either been ignored by the Asian Communist powers or had come to nothing. As soon as Harold Davies's mission failed in July 1965, therefore, Wilson reoriented his Vietnam policy and decided to adopt an indirect approach to Hanoi, through Moscow.²⁸

²⁶ TNA PRO PREM13/1271, Wilson to Kosygin, 2 Jan. 1966; PREM13/1271, record of a conversation between Wilson and the Soviet *Chargé d'Affaires* Vasev, 3 Jan. 1966.

²⁷ TNA PRO PREM13/598, J.O.Wright to Bridges, 16 July 1965.

²⁸ TNA PRO PREM13/598, Wilson to Kosygin, 16 July 1965. Each of Wilson's attempts at mediating the Vietnam War was met with rejection by North Vietnam and China, and this seemed to have been a fundamental source of

Second, Wilson intended to supplement America's peace efforts through his contact with Moscow. As he told Goldberg, Wilson was apprehensive that US peace missions had been focused on East European countries such as Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia and that the USSR had been 'given insufficient information directly' and 'might resent hearing some of the details first through satellite Governments'.²⁹ Moscow 'should be put more fully in the picture' on the Western initiative, he insisted.³⁰ Yet at the same time, Wilson was well aware that Johnson was reluctant at the moment to initiate top-level contact with the Soviet regime since 'to do so would invite a negative reaction', for instance, a Chinese accusation of US-Soviet superpower 'collusion'.³¹ Accordingly, he aimed to fill the gap in America's Vietnamese policy and to achieve the 'orchestration' of UK and US actions. Specifically, he wished to see 'a double move' by Britain and America: While the US would try to establish communication with Moscow at the foreign ministers' level with Gromyko, for the purpose of setting out the US position on Vietnam, the UK would attempt to strengthen top-level contact with Kosygin

frustration in Britain's Vietnamese policy. It can be argued that North Vietnamese and Chinese either ignorance of, or opposition to, Wilson's plans drove him to rely exclusively upon Moscow as a point of contact in the communist world, which in turn, unfortunately, proved to further antagonise the two Asian powers. For China's policy towards the Vietnam War and its reaction to the British response, see for example, Chen Jian, 'China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-69', *China Quarterly*, Vol.142 (June 1995), pp. 356-387; Yang Kuisong, 'Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude toward the Indochina War, 1949-1973', *Cold War International History Project*, working paper no.34 (February 2002); Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

²⁹ TNA PRO PREM13/1271, note of a conversation between Wilson and Goldberg, 3 Jan. 1966.

³⁰ TNA PRO PREM13/1271, Derek Mitchel to McGeorge Bundy, 2 Jan. 1966.

³¹ TNA PRO PREM13/1271, 2 Jan. 1966.

and revive the Geneva conference.³² Britain's own efforts, Wilson argued, should be concentrated on Hanoi and Moscow, 'the two capitals where there [was] hope of exerting some influence for peace'.³³ After the failures of direct contact with Hanoi, he judged it more realistic to take a path via Moscow to North Vietnam.

On 22 February, Wilson landed in the Soviet capital and stayed for several days. At meetings with Kosygin and N.V. Podgorny, the President of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, he began discussions by sketching the history of Anglo-Soviet relations and the current world situation. According to the British Prime Minister, UK-Soviet relations 'had always been symbolic of relations generally in the world' and 'they could be a causal factor in bringing an improvement or a deterioration in [those] relations,' which suggested that a stability in Vietnam would be considerably dependent upon the two powers' co-operation.

Wilson then pointed out two outstanding phenomena featured in the decade from 1955 to 1965 and recent drastic changes in 'the balance of world problems.' Within this decade 'the thermo-nuclear striking power' of the East and the West 'had become so great and so balanced that each side recognised that a thermo-nuclear war would virtually destroy the world'. In addition to the emergence of this balance of terror, the years also had witnessed 'the growing importance of Asia and Africa on the world stage and the corresponding diminution of the status of Europe as the centre of the world and its problems'. '[L]ooking forward

³² TNA PRO PREM13/1271, note of a conversation between Wilson and Ambassador Goldberg, 3 Jan. 1966.

³³ TNA PRO PREM13/1271, Wilson to the President of Italian Republic, 6 Jan. 1966.

over the next 10 years', Wilson predicted 'a further shift of the forces of danger from Europe to the third world – to Africa and Asia'. In specific terms, '[r]ace, colour, and the desire to assert the dignity of man would...present serious problems in the coming years'.³⁴

This recognition of the Vietnam War as a new form of international conflict, although previously unacknowledged as being such in studies to date, was another factor intensifying Wilson's sense of urgency in dealing with it. His objective in sketching the past and future international situation was to drive home the point that the Vietnam War had to be understood in this context of world transformation and so must be treated as a test case similar to problems lying in the period ahead. 'While the balance of nuclear power created an uneasy stability which...made war in Europe more unlikely, the world was becoming dominated by ...problem[s] of ...developing countries.'³⁵ In the coming era, Britain and the Soviet Union would have a greater responsibility for assisting developing countries in settling their issues.

To Wilson's disappointment, however, Kosygin made clear that the Soviet government had no readiness for diplomatic intervention without a North Vietnamese official request for it. Given Hanoi's repeated assertion that it would not open peace negotiations until the US had stopped 'the acts of aggression' and had withdrawn from 'the soil of Vietnam', it was hardly possible for the USSR to call for a conference with Britain. Kosygin, even while frankly admitting that his

³⁴ TNA PRO PREM13/1216, record of a meeting between Wilson and Podgorny, 22 Feb. 1966.

TNA PRO PREM13/1216, record of a meeting between Wilson and Kosygin at 10 a.m., 22 Feb. 1966.

³⁵ TNA PRO PREM13/1216, record of a meeting between Wilson and Podgorny, 22 Feb. 1966.

government was supplying arms to Hanoi 'on an increasing scale', expressed his determination to continue 'all possible help'.³⁶ Throughout Wilson's stay, the Soviet leaders thus took a non-committal attitude towards diplomatic collaboration with London. The chance of Anglo-Soviet co-operation became even slimmer when the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Chalfont, who had accompanied the Prime Minister in Moscow, encountered a North Vietnamese *chargé d'affaires*' categorical rejection of negotiations with the USA.³⁷

As his telegrams to Johnson show, Wilson found 'absolutely no progress at all' on Vietnam³⁸ and expected that 'there would be no give in the Russian attitude' in the near future.³⁹ Despite a want of substantial progress, however, he enjoyed private conversations with the Soviet leaders and left the Russian territory optimistic about a future improvement in UK-Soviet collaboration. From the outset, Wilson had not expected anything spectacular to come out of these meetings, as he believed the Kremlin was still involved in 'trying to establish their influence in Hanoi'.⁴⁰ Rather sympathetic to the Soviet communists, Wilson confided to the US government his belief that Moscow's reluctance to exert influence on the North Vietnamese leader, Ho Chi Minh, was due not to their

³⁶ TNA PRO PREM13/1216, record of a meeting between Wilson and Kosygin at 10 a.m., 22 Feb. 1966; PREM13/1216, record of a meeting between Wilson and Kosygin, 23 Feb. 1966.

³⁷ TNA PRO PREM13/1216, record of a meeting between Lord Chalfont and the North Vietnamese *chargé d'affaires* in Moscow, 23 Feb. 1966; CAB128/41, 24 Feb. 1966. This meeting between the UK and the North Vietnamese representative had been proposed by British Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart. PREM13/1272, PM66/13, Stewart to Wilson, 10 Feb. 1966

³⁸ TNA PRO PREM13/1216, text of personal message from Wilson to Johnson, 26 Feb. 1966.

³⁹ TNA PRO PREM13/1272, Wilson to Johnson, 23 Feb. 1966.

⁴⁰ TNA PRO PREM13/1272, Wilson's letter to Jens Otto, 18 Jan. 1966.

lack of interest in peace in Vietnam but to their concern about the 23rd Party Conference only a month away. For the Kosygin-Brezhnev leadership, it was their 'maiden performances', and they would not wish to indicate any appearance of 'appeasing the capitalist world'.⁴¹ Taking this Soviet limitation into account, Wilson's main purpose in the current trip was to renew his personal relations with Soviet leaders, particularly with Kosygin, whom Wilson had known for 20 years since their trade negotiations in 1947. Wilson left the Soviet Union with 'a much clearer personal knowledge of the men' in the Kremlin, which was 'a very good thing in itself'.⁴²

Johnson appreciated Wilson's efforts in Moscow and encouraged the Prime Minister to keep 'hammering away'.⁴³ America's continued support for Britain's mediating role was repeated by Harriman during his visit to London in early May. The President's emissary stressed how grateful Johnson was for Britain's support of his Vietnamese policy, 'to a much greater degree than from America's other European allies'. Perhaps partly pleased by this American appreciation, Wilson came to feel that he had 'an excellent informal relationship with the President' by the summer of 1966.⁴⁴

Despite Johnson's remarks of encouragement, it is unclear to what extent the US administration actually looked to the Anglo-Soviet channel as a means to peace as the US

⁴¹ TNA PRO PREM13/1273, record of a conversation between Wilson and Governor Harriman, 4 May 1966.

⁴² TNA PRO PREM13/1216, text of personal message from Wilson to Johnson, 26 Feb. 1966. Wilson judged Kosygin to be 'a very tough, not very humorous administrator' and Brezhnev to be 'a very impressive more extrovert figure'.

⁴³ TNA PRO PREM13/1216, Johnson to Wilson, 3 Mar. 1966.

⁴⁴ TNA PRO PREM13/1273, record of a conversation between Wilson and Harriman, 4 May, 1966.

policy-makers recognised that the Soviets would be unable to take any decisive action towards a diplomatic settlement. Although it was possible that the national interests of the US and the USSR might converge to prevent disorder in the Third World and that the two countries could take 'parallel action' in the region,⁴⁵ superpower understandings in Vietnam were deterred by the intensifying Sino-Soviet rivalry. By then, Vietnam was a battleground on which the two Communist powers were vying for leadership, and the Soviets were careful not to give the Chinese any pretext for attacking their actions as being pro-Western. Moscow was now 'engaged in a two-front cold war' with the US and China, and the leaders in the Kremlin had to proceed cautiously to ensure that neither of the two rivals would 'come out on top' in Vietnam.⁴⁶

Unaware of these American views, Wilson paid his second visit to Moscow in mid-July. The visit was prompted by his fear of the escalating American military offensive. US bombings on city regions in Hanoi and Haiphong in June provoked a world-wide outcry and Wilson articulated a British 'dissociation' from the military conduct in the House of Commons.⁴⁷

In Moscow, he was confronted with Kosygin's outpourings of anger at American aggression. The Soviet premier repeatedly condemned Johnson as 'a sick man' and 'a madman', comparing the recent bombings to Benito

⁴⁵ *FRUS*, 1964-1968, XIV: The Soviet Union (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2001), 'Prospect for détente with the USSR', 23 Mar. 1966, p.384.

⁴⁶ *FRUS*, 1964-1968, XIV, memorandum from the Ambassador at Large (Thompson) to Johnson, 15 July 1966, pp.404-5; *FRUS*, 1964-1968, XIV, 'Current Soviet attitudes toward the US', 28 July 1966, p.408.

⁴⁷ *House of Commons Parliamentary Debates: Weekly Hansard* (hereafter, *Hansard*), no.692, 29 June 1966, col.1796.

Mussolini's unrestricted assaults on civilians in Ethiopia during the Abyssinia War in the 1930s.⁴⁸

Preceded by this ill-timed US military operation, the top-level meeting reached no significant agreements on Vietnam. The Soviets only repeated their stance expressed in the February talks.⁴⁹ Yet, one interesting point emerged that is of relevance to this study, and that is a Wilson-Kosygin debate on how the British government could best exert influence on Washington. Simply put, the leaders discussed whether London's association with or dissociation from Washington could better influence US decision-making. Referring to de Gaulle's policy of independence from America, Kosygin urged Wilson to detach himself from American policy and argued that, in doing so, Britain would be capable of increasing her leverage with Washington and of enhancing her credibility as an honest broker in East-West relations.⁵⁰ If Britain continued to acquiesce, the US would come to think that they would have no need to 'take any notice' of London's view.

Wilson disagreed with the Soviet view, claiming that the contrary was the case. '[I]n practice', Britain's capacity to influence American policy depended on 'the extent to which

⁴⁸ TNA PRO PREM13/1218, record of a conversation between Wilson and Kosygin at 5.15 p.m., 16 July 1966; PREM13/1276; PREM13/1218, record of a conversation between Wilson and Kosygin before lunch, 18 July 1966; PREM13/1218, note of a conversation between Wilson and Kosygin during the banquet in the Kremlin on the evening of Monday, 18 July 1966.

⁴⁹ TNA PRO PREM13/1218, record of a meeting between Wilson and Kosygin at 10 p.m., 18 July 1966.

⁵⁰ As Ilya V. Gaiduk suggests, the Soviet government appears to have been more interested in de Gaulle's France than in Britain regarding the Vietnam problem as the French President, eager to become independent of the United States, could be used for its own purposes. Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), pp.77-78 and 268 (note 11).

[the British] gave their general support to United States policy as a whole'.⁵¹ The Labour Prime Minister shared a view commonly held by post-war British governments that '[o]nce the Americans feel that we are with them, they are then far more susceptible to advice and influence and there is much less talk about dragging of feet'.⁵² It is unknown whether Kosygin's call for British detachment from the US was a variation on traditional Soviet wedge-driving or a reflection of his genuine interest in London's more flexible position. At any rate, the Soviet premier concluded that the time was not ripe yet for a peace negotiation led by their two governments.

As in the February talks, Wilson remained optimistic about UK-Soviet relations on Vietnam in spite of his failure to pin down Kosygin to any concrete promises. 'Agreement' between the two countries was 'still beyond [their] grasp', but was nonetheless confident that 'we share a belief in the value of these periodical exchanges' at the top level⁵³ and was 'more convinced than ever that the sort of unsensational [sic] relationship that is growing up between Kosygin and myself has real – if still largely potential – value'.⁵⁴

Why was Wilson so optimistic about his relationship with the Soviet communists? On a practical note, he had acquired nothing from them and, as he himself admitted, 'the

⁵¹ TNA PRO PREM13/1276, record of conversation between Wilson and Kosygin at 5 p.m., 18 July 1966; PREM13/1218, record of a conversation between Wilson and Kosygin before lunch, 18 July 1966; PREM13/1218, note of a conversation between Wilson and Kosygin during the banquet in the Kremlin on the evening of Monday, 18 July 1966.

⁵² This is a remark by Sir Roger Makins, the British ambassador to the US in mid-1950s. Papers of the 1st Earl of Avon, Birmingham University Library, Birmingham, AP20/17/223, Makins to Eden, 16 Dec. 1954.

⁵³ TNA PRO PREM13/1218, Wilson to Kosygin, 19 July 1966.

⁵⁴ TNA PRO PREM13/1218, text of a message from Wilson to Johnson, 19 July 1966.

likelihood of any negotiations on Vietnam in the near future [was] still very remote'.⁵⁵ One explanation may be that the Prime Minister was much impressed by Soviet 'frankness' in informal talks.⁵⁶ Every post-war Conservative prime minister, Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, had held a firm conviction that vital issues with the USSR were more likely to be solved in personal, informal discussion, and indeed they often appeared to be under a Soviet 'spell'.⁵⁷ Wilson too was drawn by the evident charm of the Soviet leaders in these private sessions and, as Kosygin emphasised 'again and again' his government's deep concern about the Vietnam War, Wilson was led to believe that his 'long, private talk' with Moscow's leaders would 'come in some way and at some stage, to serve the cause of peace in Vietnam'.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ TNA PRO PREM13/1218, note by Wilson, 3 Aug. 1966.

⁵⁶ TNA PRO PREM13/1218, extract from record of meeting between Wilson and Johnson, 29 July 1966.

⁵⁷ Evidence to show post-war British prime ministers attached special significance to informal contact with Soviet leaders abounds. For Churchill's great interest in personal contacts with the Soviet leadership, see John W. Young, *Winston Churchill's Last Campaign: Britain and the Cold War, 1951-55* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Eden writes in his memoirs: 'in my experience, it was informal contacts with the Russians which were the more useful. This was especially true if, for internal reasons or otherwise, the Soviets were more disposed for serious discussion of our differences than they had been at any time since the war.' The Earl of Avon, *The Memoirs of Sir Anthony Eden: Full Circle* (London: Cassell, 1960), p.291. Macmillan wrote: 'there is always the chance...of some useful by-product emerging in the course of ...less formal discussions. It may happen that in such conversations among the Heads a phrase or a sentiment may emerge which will give us a line as to where we could most usefully probe a little further or where we might hope for possible concessions.' *FRUS, 1955-1957, V: Austrian State Treaty, Summit and Foreign Ministers Meetings* (1988), Macmillan to Dulles, 29 May 1955, p.205.

⁵⁸ TNA PRO PREM13/1218, note by Wilson, 3 Aug. 1966.

Wilson believed that the Soviets had a genuine desire for a Vietnamese settlement but that the radical Chinese leadership, that was 'willing to continue the war to the last drop of Viet-Nameese blood',⁵⁹ would hamper Moscow's progress towards the goal. Yet, this impression of his was based on intuition rather than on any tangible evidence from the USSR. In fact, he was uncertain whether the North Vietnamese regime was pro-Soviet, pro-Chinese or independent, and had no clear idea how much influence the Kremlin actually wielded with Hanoi.⁶⁰ As far as British official documents are concerned, there are few records to show that the Prime Minister tried to delve critically into the Soviet mind, hardly suspecting that the communists might be capitalising on the opportunity of the Vietnam War to exhaust American military and economic resources and generate international criticism of the US. On the American side, however, some officials such as Foy Kohler, the ambassador to the USSR, warned against viewing the Soviets as 'good guys' and the Chinese as 'bad guys' in Vietnam.⁶¹ It is important to bear in mind, thus, that Wilson did not necessarily have any solid evidence of any real Soviet influence with the North Vietnamese authorities.

The 'Marigold' Affair

Following his talks with the Soviet leadership, Wilson paid a visit to Johnson and informed him of the Moscow talks. As

⁵⁹ TNA PRO PREM13/1218, record of a meeting between Wilson and Kosygin at 10 a.m., 18 July 1966.

⁶⁰ TNA PRO PREM13/695, note of a meeting of Wilson and Pakistan's President Ayub Khan, 19 June 1965; PREM13/1218, PREM13/1276, record of conversation between Wilson and Kosygin at 5.00 p.m., 18 July 1966.

⁶¹ *FRUS, 1964-1968, XIV*, telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union (Kohler) to the State Department, 12 July 1966, p.401.

before, the President expressed appreciation of the British efforts and reiterated his commitment to the 'continuing close co-operation' of their countries in the 'cause of peace',⁶² even remarking:

Lord Palmerston once said that Britain has no permanent friends – she has only permanent interests. With due respect to that illustrious British statesman, I must disagree. For Americans, Britain is a permanent friend, and the unbreakable link between our two nations is our permanent interest.⁶³

Despite this confirmation of the Anglo-American unity of purpose, the Wilson-Johnson meeting in retrospect marked the end of relatively stable UK-US relations, and the second half of 1966 witnessed their growing disagreement over Vietnam. During the latter half of the year, it became evident that Johnson had little confidence in British mediating diplomacy and the President embarked upon his own secret attempts to break the impasse in Vietnam. By the autumn of that year, Johnson, for some reason, came to feel that US-Soviet relations were 'better at present' than at any other time since his inauguration.⁶⁴ In October, he had a meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, and the atmosphere was friendly. '[T]he essence of the conversation' was that the Soviet Minister 'admitted' Soviet influence in Hanoi and its readiness to use it if the US ceased bombing in Vietnam,⁶⁵ a

⁶² *FRUS*, 1964-1968, XII, circular telegram from the State Department to posts in NATO capitals, 30 July 1966, p.558.

⁶³ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson 1966*, part 2 (Washington: United Government Printing Office: 1967), 29 July, 1966, p.791.

⁶⁴ *FRUS*, 1964-1968, XIV, memorandum of conversation between Johnson and George Brown, 14 Oct. 1966, p.427.

⁶⁵ *FRUS*, 1968-1964, XIV, memorandum from Thompson to Rusk, 14 Oct. 1966,

disclosure that Moscow had never made to the British. In addition, Kosygin told the American ambassador that his regime would persist in its policy of peaceful co-existence with the United States and registered his wish for closer US-Soviet contacts. Reciprocating the Soviet gesture, Johnson wrote directly to the Soviet premier, maintaining that their governments had 'no basic conflict of interest' on the Vietnam matter.⁶⁶

Yet, it was in the last two months of 1966 that UK-US relations were seriously impaired by America's independent exploration of a diplomatic settlement. During these months, Washington's approach to Hanoi via the Polish government, code-named 'Marigold', reached a critical stage. The origin of the Marigold talks dated back to June of that year. By introduction of the Italian ambassador to South Vietnam Giovanni D'Orlandi, the US ambassador to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, had initiated contact with Janusz Lewandowski, the Polish representative to the International Control Commission, with a channel to Hanoi. On 15 November, Lodge presented American conditions for a peace conference to Lewandowski who was due to leave shortly for Hanoi. Besides the '14 points' declared by Rusk, including free elections in South Vietnam and the unification of Vietnam,⁶⁷ the US government submitted its 'Phase A-Phase B' formula, which proposed that the US suspension of bombing (Phase A) would be followed 'after some adequate period' by 'the execution of all the other agreed de-escalation actions' on both sides (Phase B).⁶⁸

p. 428;

⁶⁶ *FRUS*, 1964-1968, IV: Vietnam (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1998), Johnson to Kosygin, 6 Dec. 1966, p.908.

⁶⁷ For the details of the '14 points', see Rusk, *As I Saw It*, pp.404-405.

⁶⁸ Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, p.334.

On returning from Hanoi, Lewandowski reported that Hanoi was ready for discussion with the US in Warsaw. Soon, preparatory talks between the US and the Polish representatives started, but never led to a direct US-North Vietnamese dialogue.⁶⁹ This was partly because of an American accusation that the Polish misrepresented the peace conditions (Lewandowski had inappropriately reduced America's 14 points to ten and did not relay the Phase A-Phase B formula to Hanoi) and partly because of Polish indignation at the US bombings of Hanoi in early December, just a few days before the preparatory meetings were to begin. As each side continued to criticise the other, the North Vietnamese regime notified Polish Foreign Minister Adam Rapacki on 13 December that they would postpone their discussion with the US indefinitely.⁷⁰ America's rescue measure, a pledge of 'no bombing within ten miles of Hanoi city center', fell on deaf ears in Hanoi.⁷¹ At the end of the month, with no prospect of progress, Rapacki abandoned his attempt to build a bridge between Washington and Hanoi.⁷²

⁶⁹ For the US-Polish preparatory talks in Warsaw in December 1966, see *FRUS*, 1966, IV, pp.906-987.

⁷⁰ *FRUS*, 1966, IV, the Embassy in Poland to the State Department, 13 Dec. 1966, p.933.

⁷¹ *FRUS*, 1966, IV, the State Department to the Embassy in Poland, 23 Dec. 1966, p. 969.

⁷² *FRUS*, 1966, IV, Rostow to Johnson, 30 Dec. 1966, p.983. Hershberg's article, which is the most comprehensive analysis on the 'Marigold' affair so far, concludes that 'the reason, responsibility, and blame for its failure to take place remains unclear' while arguing that it should nevertheless not be dismissed as a complete 'sham' by the communists, as the American administration claimed at the time. At any rate, it seems reasonable to say that both the Americans and the Polish-North Vietnamese communist side were so mistrustful of each other that caution guided each to avoid the risk of being deceived by the other in pursuit of a shallow peace in Vietnam. James G. Hershberg, with the assistance of L.W.Gluchowski, 'Who Murdered

Throughout the entire Marigold initiative, the British government had been kept completely in the dark, and it was not until the Stewart-Rusk talks of 3 January 1967 that the project was brought to the attention of the British. Rusk expressed his deep regret at having been unable to consult with the UK government, owing to Polish and North Vietnamese insistence on 'absolute secrecy'.⁷³ To be fair to the Americans, it should be noted that it was not only Britain but also all other US allies who were kept in ignorance of this diplomatic trial. Even within the US administration, Johnson had 'ordered a sharp reduction in the number of people permitted to reach the relevant telegrams'.⁷⁴

Such secrecy on the part of the US, even though inevitable, might have damaged the British self-image as America's special partner. Still worse, the 'gravity' of the event was 'compounded' by British policy-makers' fear that the Soviet leaders had discovered London's ignorance of the Marigold exchanges and had thus begun to doubt British credibility as America's trusted envoy. Indeed, Foreign Secretary George Brown, completely ignorant of the American project, had visited Moscow on 22-25 November of the previous year and delivered the Phase A-Phase B formula as a confidential American plan, yet it had been already passed to the Polish by Lodge a week earlier.⁷⁵ There was no question

"Marigold"?: New Evidence on the Mysterious Failure of Poland's Secret Initiative to Start U.S.-North Vietnamese Peace Talks, 1966', *Cold War International History Project*, working paper no.27 (April 2000).

⁷³ TNA PRO PREM13/1917, Washington to FO, 3 Jan. 1967.

⁷⁴ Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, pp335, 340.

⁷⁵ TNA PRO PREM13/1917, Washington to FO, 3 Jan. 1967; The Americans themselves talked about the Marigold initiative with the Soviet ambassador Dobrynin. *FRUS*, 1964-1968, IV, memorandum of conversation, 30 Dec. 1966, p.982.

that the Soviet leaders had already been informed of the Marigold initiative by the Polish government. Tragically, the Soviets must have concluded either that Britain 'did not...enjoy full American confidence' or that the Two-Phase formula was Brown's own and in fact 'had no American backing'.⁷⁶ The Foreign Secretary's protest to the White House through the ambassador, Patrick Dean, was so fierce that 'even those officials in the White House who had become somewhat cool to Her Majesty's Government's tendency to "meddle" in Vietnam felt the need to soothe our angry ally'.⁷⁷

Responding to Wilson's demand, the US administration sent a State Department official, Chester Cooper, to deliver a brief on the Marigold affair. The American official described the President's "'psychotic" state about leaks not only in regard to top secret matter...but over anything that he wished to keep confidential', which was 'why there had been a total "clamp down"' on security in the Marigold project.⁷⁸ The Prime Minister was further frustrated to learn of another US project, a secret 'face-to-face dialogue' between US officials and the North Vietnamese *chargé d'affaires* that had begun on 10 January in Moscow.⁷⁹ In view of Kosygin's scheduled visit to Britain in early February, he was concerned to prevent any US 'disconcerting lack of frankness' during the Anglo-Soviet summit.⁸⁰ He complained of the American unilateral attitude:

Surely the key to our whole relationship, and the mutual support and counsel...and to the concept

⁷⁶ TNA PRO PREM13/1917, 'Vietnam', 4 Jan. 1967.

⁷⁷ Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, p.343.

⁷⁸ TNA PRO PREM13/1917, record of a conversation with Wilson and Chester Cooper, 18 Jan. 1967.

⁷⁹ Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, pp.345-346.

⁸⁰ TNA PRO PREM13/1917, 'Vietnam', 4 Jan. 1967.

of partnership...must be total confidence between us. I am bound in all honesty to say that, in the present case, this confidence seems to me to have been lacking.⁸¹

The Wilson-Kosygin Meeting of February 1967

Wilson's disappointment at the American failure to consult his government intensified his zeal for success in the coming Anglo-Soviet summit.⁸² Fortunately for him, the top-level meeting started at the beginning of a Tet (Vietnam's New Year) truce. Wilson believed that it was not a mere coincidence but rather Kosygin's intention to take advantage of the respite to initiate a wider negotiation.

On 6 February, much of the opening day discussion centred on Kosygin's accounts of Soviet-Chinese confrontation. The Soviet premier was 'obsessional [sic] about the Chinese problem', describing relations between the two Communist nations as being in 'the state of economic warfare'. 'China has gone mad', he feverishly continued, 'China is in chaos. China is an organised military dictatorship with no ideological principles. China's aim is not only to

⁸¹ TNA PRO PREM13/1917, second draft of Wilson's message to Johnson (undated). For Wilson's similar comments, see PREM13/1917, record of conversation between Wilson and the US ambassador Bruce, 10 Jan. 1967.

⁸² For other accounts of the Anglo-Soviet summit meeting of February 1967, apart from Ellis, *Britain, America, and the Vietnam War*, see George C. Herring (ed.), *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), pp.373-516; John Dumbrell and Sylvia Ellis, 'British Involvement in Vietnam Peace Initiatives, 1966-1967: Marigolds, Sunflowers, and "Kosygin Week,"' *Diplomatic History*, 27:1 (January 2003), pp.113-49, and Kevin Boyle, 'The Price of Peace: Vietnam, the Pound, and the Crisis of the American Empire,' *Diplomatic History*, 27:1 (January 2003), pp.58-70.

enslave Vietnam but also the whole of Asia'.⁸³ In the light of this deepening Chinese thirst for power, Kosygin contended that continued Soviet military assistance to Hanoi was indispensable to counteract Chinese influence with the North Vietnamese regime. So far, Hanoi had managed to stave off the Chinese, but a suspension of Soviet aid would facilitate Chinese assumption of military control in the war.⁸⁴

The problem for the Soviets was, however, not confined to the Asian Communist power: America's escalating military offensive provided Beijing with a good pretext for expanding her own intervention and strengthened her hand in Hanoi's decision-making. Kosygin emphasised that Britain held a key role in preventing an exacerbation of the Vietnamese conflict by applying political pressure on Washington. Significantly, after some routine comments about Britain's independence from the United States, the Soviet leader then referred to the importance of Britain's 'closest relations' with America and urged the British not to 'break or even strain [their] relations' with it.⁸⁵ This confirmed Wilson's impression that the Kremlin would like to maintain Britain 'as a useful channel to Washington'.⁸⁶

On 10 February, the Anglo-Soviet meeting seemed to take a significant step towards a Vietnamese settlement. Until then, Kosygin had shown no sign of changing his previous stance and refused British calls for a reconvening of the

⁸³ TNA PRO PREM13/2408, Wilson to Johnson, 11 Feb. 1967; PREM13/1840, extract from a conversation between Wilson and Kosygin, 6 Feb. 1967; PREM13/2408, Wilson to Johnson, 16 Feb. 1967.

⁸⁴ TNA PRO PREM13/1917, record of conversation between Wilson and Kosygin at 3:30 p.m., 6 Feb. 1967.

⁸⁵ TNA PRO PREM13/2408, Wilson to Johnson, 11 Feb. 1967; PREM13/1917, record of conversation between Wilson and Kosygin at 3:30 p.m., 6 Feb. 1967.

⁸⁶ Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970*, p.345.

Geneva conference.⁸⁷ At the morning session of that day, however, he indicated great interest in the American Phase A-Phase B formula, which he had turned down earlier in the week, and asked Wilson to give him the proposal in writing.⁸⁸ That afternoon, Cooper, with FO officials, drafted the two-stage formula. The American representative sent it to the State Department for authorisation and, in what later turned out to be a fatal mistake, judged that the absence of a reply signified an endorsement of his draft.⁸⁹

In Cooper's version of the Phase A-Phase B plan, it was postulated that the US 'will stop bombing North Vietnam as soon as they are assured that infiltration from North Vietnam to South Vietnam *will stop*' and '[w]ithin a few days of the bombing stopping' both sides will stop further military actions. Although it would be more difficult to observe a cessation of North Vietnamese infiltration than a US halt to the bombing, it was pledged that the American government would 'not demand any public statement from North Vietnam'.⁹⁰

With this proposal and a telegram from Washington that the US would extend the Tet truce 'for a further three days',⁹¹ Wilson went to a Soviet Embassy reception on the evening of the 10th. By that time, the Prime Minister had gained further confidence in the possibility of improving the Vietnamese situation, and his excitement led him to put

⁸⁷ TNA PRO PREM13/1917, record of first formal meeting at 4:30 p.m., 6 Feb. 1967; PREM13/1917, record of fourth formal meeting at 4:30 p.m., 7 Feb. 1967.

⁸⁸ TNA PRO PREM13/1917, record of a meeting between Wilson and Kosygin at 9:45 a.m., 10 Feb. 1967.

⁸⁹ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p.409.

⁹⁰ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, 'Vietnam', 10 Feb. 1967. [Italics added].

⁹¹ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, record of conversation between Wilson and Kosygin at luncheon, 10 Feb. 1967.

forward a 'dramatic' proposal to the Soviet premier. Wilson spelt out his plan that, in order to prompt negotiations based on the Phase A-Phase B formula, Kosygin and himself should visit Hanoi while Gromyko and Brown would go to Washington, and each team would prompt both parties to come to the negotiating table. Should the Soviet government refuse to join this plan, Wilson would consider making a solitary visit to Hanoi. Given his recognition of the Soviet-Chinese rivalry, it should have been obvious to Wilson that such a proposal was not realistic. Kosygin anticipated objections to the idea by the North Vietnamese as such a plan would certainly provoke the Chinese communists. The point that the British Prime Minister had failed to grasp fully was that Hanoi 'had not only to look to their front (the American troops)' but also 'had to look to their rear (the Chinese).' Although this proposal for Anglo-Soviet joint trips to Hanoi and Washington was rejected, the two leaders agreed that Kosygin would soon order the Kremlin to transmit the Phase A-Phase B plan for North Vietnamese examination.⁹²

Things seemed to be going well, and Wilson was delighted to find Kosygin in a more amenable frame of mind. His optimism about a breakthrough in Vietnam suddenly foundered, however, upon receipt of a telegram from Washington at 10:30 that night. In the telegram, the White House presented a new version of the Phase A-Phase B formula, a considerable change from the one Wilson had passed to Kosygin just a few hours earlier. There were two prominent alterations. First, the new version read: 'The United States will order a cessation of bombing of [the] North as soon as they are assured that infiltration from North Vietnam to

⁹² TNA PRO PREM13/1918, record of a conversation between Wilson and Kosygin at the Soviet Embassy reception, 10 Feb. 1967.

South Vietnam *has stopped*'.⁹³ This change of tense from 'will stop' to 'has stopped' meant that a US bombing stoppage was now conditional upon Hanoi's prior termination of infiltration into South Vietnam. In short, '[t]he sequence of Phase A and Phase B had been reversed' in the new version.⁹⁴ Second, the US now required the North Vietnamese regime *publicly* to announce their stoppage of infiltration. The US willingness to accept Hanoi's assurances on faith, as professed in the earlier version, had disappeared.⁹⁵ The British leaders were shocked by the amendments, but there was no time to reflect. Kosygin was about to leave on a short trip to Scotland. Wilson hastily despatched his secretary, Michael Halls, to Euston railway station, where he only just managed to deliver the new version to the Soviet premier.

The following day, a great political crisis in Anglo-American relations ensued. Cooper recalls that, in his two-decade diplomatic career, he had never seen anyone angrier than the British Prime Minister was at this time.⁹⁶ Wilson and Brown were not persuaded by the American argument that their changes were made entirely on account of continued North Vietnamese infiltration during the Tet truce, and were seriously concerned that the US failure of communication with them had 'impaired British credibility' in the eyes of the Soviets. The Prime Minister, who had nearly decided to declare British 'dissociation' from the US conduct at a Cabinet meeting that morning, doubted if Johnson really wanted peace in Vietnam. Informed that the US might resume bombing to block North Vietnamese military movement soon,

⁹³ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, Wilson to Kosygin, 10 Feb. 1967. [Italics added].

⁹⁴ Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, p.361.

⁹⁵ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, Wilson to Kosygin, 10 Feb. 1967.

⁹⁶ Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, p.362.

he became more indignant and spoke to US ambassador David Bruce of his readiness to take a 'more independent line in public'. Wilson was firm: 'Our relationship with the United States did not mean that we must automatically back everything the Americans did'.⁹⁷

Anglo-American relations were now so strained that some who observed the situation closely feared 'another Suez'. Cooper commented, 'Ten years before, during the Suez crisis, I had had a ringside seat at a major Washington-London squabble. Once again I sensed Anglo-American relations dissolving before my eyes.'⁹⁸ Wilson himself was concerned about a re-emergence of the bitterness of the Suez tragedy:

[I]n his opinion, things might not ever be the same again. Trust had been broken. Naturally, even if there were an act of dissociation, ...Anglo-American relations would recover. Nevertheless, neither side wanted another Suez. It was essential for the United States to put matters back on an even keel again.⁹⁹

His anger unappeased, Wilson sent a letter of protest to Johnson:

You will realise what a hell of a situation I am in for my last day of talks with Kosygin. ...I have to re-establish trust because not only will he have doubts about my credibility but he will have lost his credibility in Hanoi and possibly among his colleagues.

⁹⁷ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, record of a meeting at 10 Downing Street at 10:40 p.m., 11 Feb. 1967.

⁹⁸ Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, p.363.

⁹⁹ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, record of a meeting at 10 Downing Street at 10:40 p.m. 11 Feb. 1967.

The Prime Minister concluded that: 'he [Kosygin] and I have got to move to a slightly more central position, each of us loyal to our respective allies but each slightly more capable of taking a detached view which he and I could agree we will then press on our respective friends'.¹⁰⁰

Johnson did not shrink. He did not believe that 'the matter hangs on the tense of verbs', reasoning that Hanoi had been familiar with the Phase A-Phase B formula since the Marigold initiative but had never shown the slightest sign of interest. In addition, the President pointed to Britain's partial responsibility in this current incident. The US government had demanded an 'assured stoppage' of Hanoi's infiltration, but Wilson, in his version, transmuted it into 'an assurance that infiltration "will stop"'. Although he was 'always glad' to know that Britain was in his 'corner', Johnson was not about to grant anyone America's 'power of attorney'.¹⁰¹

To rub salt in Wilson's wounds, another telegram from Washington revealed that President Johnson had secretly despatched to Ho Chi Minh his version of the Phase A-Phase B plan, two days before Wilson had presented Kosygin with what he believed to be America's authentic version. Now the Prime Minister understood why the Soviet premier had suddenly been so interested in his version of the Phase A-Phase B scheme on the 9th. He speculated that Ho had informed Kosygin of Johnson's version and the Soviet government had then decided to choose the British version, it being the more acceptable of the two to the North Vietnamese.¹⁰² Wilson felt he had again been made a fool of by the American ally.

¹⁰⁰ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, Wilson to Johnson, 12 Feb. 1967.

¹⁰¹ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, Johnson to Wilson, 12 Feb. 1967.

¹⁰² TNA PRO PREM13/1918, Wilson to Johnson, 12 Feb. 1967; Cooper, *The Lost*

On the night of the 12th, the final day of the Anglo-Soviet talks, Johnson made a last-minute attempt to retrieve the situation, submitting a new proposal stating that the US would not resume the bombing of North Vietnam if Hanoi pledged 'before 10:00 a.m. British time' on the next day that 'all movement of troops and supplies' into South Vietnam would stop 'at that time'. If this was obtained, the US military build-up would then stop 'within a matter of days' and 'unconditional negotiations' would follow on 'a neutral spot'.¹⁰³ In possession of this new proposal, Wilson and Brown hurried to Claridges Hotel in London where the Soviet delegation was staying. The British leaders urged an unenthusiastic Soviet premier to recognise that 'peace was now available and within grasp' and that 'the fate of the world lay in their hands'. After patient persuasion into the early hours of the morning, the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary finally won Kosygin's promise to deliver the American message to Hanoi.¹⁰⁴

Obviously, the time allotted to inform and receive a response from Hanoi was too short.¹⁰⁵ Wilson, Bruce and Cooper managed to extract an extension of another six hours and, on the morning of the 13th, all in London anxiously awaited a reply from Hanoi. Kosygin left Britain at noon.

Crusade, p.363.

¹⁰³ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, Johnson to Wilson, 12 Feb. 1967.

¹⁰⁴ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, record of a conversation in Claridges at 1:00 a.m., 13 Feb. 1967.

¹⁰⁵ TNA PRO PREM13/1271, Wilson to Johnson, 31 Dec. 1965. Wilson had always argued that negotiations with the communists would take a long time. He once wrote to Johnson: 'we in the West can easily under-estimate the time required by Communists, particularly such relatively unsophisticated and suspicious Communists as the North Vietnamese, to take stock of a new development, to argue it out among themselves, to consult their allies and to communicate a new decision to their forces in South Viet-Nam'.

There was still no news. At four o'clock in the afternoon, the telephone rang. All remaining hopes of peace were dashed; the State Department Operations Center informed London that bombing had resumed.¹⁰⁶

The Aftermath

As his remarks at a Cabinet meeting and the House of Commons soon after the Anglo-Soviet summit clearly indicate, Wilson deplored the loss of a crucial chance for peace through an inappropriate American response.¹⁰⁷ To Washington's 'gravest concern', he told the Commons, 'there were moments' when a Vietnamese settlement 'could have been very near'.¹⁰⁸ Wilson wondered how the US could repeat a 'significant failure in communication' despite the lessons of the Marigold episode. He confessed frankly to Johnson's new National Security Advisor, Walt Rostow, then staying in London, that 'there had been times when he wondered with whom he was struggling'.¹⁰⁹

Numerous unanswered questions presented themselves to Wilson: why did the US government change the Phase A-Phase B formula in the midst of his meeting with Kosygin?; was it really because of North Vietnamese infiltration, as Washington had insisted?; if the US had been

¹⁰⁶ For more detailed accounts of the events of 12-13 Feb., see Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, pp. 364-7; Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970*, pp.361-5.

¹⁰⁷ For the Cabinet discussion, Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, vol.2: Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons 1966-68* (London: Hamish Hamilton & Jonathan Cape, 1976) 14 Feb. 1967, pp.237-238. For Wilson's remark in the Commons, *Hansard*, no.713, 14 Feb. 1967, col.346.

¹⁰⁸ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, 'Anglo-American relations over Vietnam', 17 Feb. 1967.

¹⁰⁹ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, record of a conversation between Wilson and Rostow, 24 Feb. 1967.

obliged to modify the formula at all, why could it not have done so and informed the British of the changes before he handed the Soviet premier the obsolete version?¹¹⁰ Possibly, was he 'in fact' 'not in the confidence' of the US President from the outset?¹¹¹ Despite Brown's advice against 'run[ning] the risks of unnecessarily irritating' Johnson in further pursuit of the case,¹¹² Wilson insisted that the Americans made a full investigation into the causes of the miscommunication. Whether or not it would 'irritate the President', he wanted Johnson 'to be in no doubt of the fact' that he was 'worried about the way things went during the week'.¹¹³

Wilson's indignation at the USA's misconduct was so fierce that he began to doubt the truth of his own assertion in the 1966 talks with Kosygin that the UK's influence with America was greatest when it maintained a close relationship with Washington. In conversations with Humphrey in early April, the Prime Minister once again threatened to 'adopt a slightly more "central position"' between the two sides of the fighting parties in Vietnam than he 'had done hitherto'. The Vice President warned of the danger of Britain's 'shift...away from Washington and towards Hanoi'. Johnson would, he cautioned, take such ally's action 'in intensely personal terms' and would have a 'violent' reaction if he felt 'betrayed' by the British. Humphrey tried to appease the Prime Minister by

¹¹⁰ TNA PRO PREM13/2458, draft message to Johnson from Wilson, 30 Mar. 1967.

¹¹¹ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, record of a meeting at 10 Downing Street at 10:40 p.m., 11 Feb. 1967.

¹¹² TNA PRO PREM13/2458, PM/67/31, 'Vietnam', Brown to Wilson, 14 Mar. 1967; FCO15/633, 14 Mar. 1967.

¹¹³ TNA PRO PREM13/2458, Wilson to Brown, 15 Mar. 1967. Wilson sent a letter which required Johnson to give him an explanation of the event. PREM13/2458, Wilson to Johnson, 17 Mar. 1967.

reminding Wilson that he was one of the only two allied leaders on whom the President 'could really rely', the other being Harold Holt of Australia.¹¹⁴

In contrast to Vice President's words, however, Johnson himself did not have high regard for Wilson's painstaking efforts with the Soviets. Reportedly, he accused Wilson of 'having ludicrously magnified his role to reap a domestic political dividend'.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, in an interview with Patrick Dean on 10 April, Johnson accepted neither that there had been 'a breakdown' in Anglo-American communication nor that the UK-USSR summit had been a missed opportunity. No remarks of regret, let alone of apology, were heard from the President during this conversation.¹¹⁶

What is notable is that, following the Anglo-Soviet summit, Johnson came to the conclusion that 'mediation in the conflict' by a third party, whether between the US and North Vietnam, or between the US and the Soviet Union, was 'becoming counter-productive' and that it 'tended to create confusion and misunderstanding' about American policy 'among world opinion'. '[T]he best prospect for the future' instead 'might well lie in direct contacts' with Moscow and Hanoi.¹¹⁷ In fact, as Ilya V. Gaiduk points out, the US governments had been in occasional contact with the North Vietnamese Embassy in Moscow via the Soviet government

¹¹⁴ TNA PRO PREM13/1919, record of a conversation between Wilson and Humphrey, 2 Apr. 1967; PREM13/1919, record of a conversation between Wilson and Humphrey, 4 Apr. 1967.

¹¹⁵ *The Observer*, 5 Mar. 1967.

¹¹⁶ TNA PRO PREM13/2458, 'Vietnam and Kosygin's visit' (a meeting between Patrick Dean, Johnson and Rostow), 10 Apr. 1967.

¹¹⁷ TNA PRO PREM13/1918, extract from a conversation between Palliser and W. W. Rostow, 23 Feb. 1967; PREM13/1918, record of a conversation between Wilson and Rostow, 24 Feb. 1967.

during this period.¹¹⁸ How significant these informal US-North Vietnamese contacts by Soviet mediation were is still unknown, however, given the deteriorating UK-US relationship, it would appear that Washington's policy makers judged it better to strengthen communication with the Soviet leadership without further involvement from Wilson.

And, as it happened, the summer of 1967 saw the development of direct US-USSR contact. While Wilson continued to argue that 'the key to peace lay through the Soviet Union and the key to the Soviet Union lay with Britain',¹¹⁹ American high-ranking officials such as Bundy recommended that 'Johnson to Kosygin [was] a vastly better channel than Johnson to Wilson to Kosygin'.¹²⁰

Johnson's direct request of 22 May to Kosygin for a Kremlin exercise of influence on Hanoi met with a positive Soviet response.¹²¹ About one month later, the Johnson-Kosygin summit was held, in which the Soviet leader, for the first time, offered Moscow's help in resolving the Vietnam conflict from his side. The two superpower leaders shared the view that the Vietnam War was undermining the chances of US-USSR détente and agreed that finding a solution was in their common interest in their search for international stability.¹²² Although, as it happened, this US-Soviet encounter did not have any immediate effects on the course of peace-

¹¹⁸ Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, p.50, 75, 84, 85, 95-8.

¹¹⁹ *FRUS*, 1964-1968, XII, telegram from the Embassy in the UK to the State Department, 4 Apr. 1967, p.564.

¹²⁰ *FRUS*, 1964-1968, XIV, memorandum from Bundy to Johnson, 21 June 1967, p.499.

¹²¹ For Johnson's letter to Kosygin, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, XIV, telegram from the State Department to the Embassy in the Soviet Union, 19 May 1967, pp.485-6.

¹²² *FRUS*, 1964-1968, XIV, memorandum of conversation, 23 June 1967, pp.531-5.

making in Vietnam, it is important to note that this direct contact of the two leaders considerably reduced the room for Britain's activity as a go-between. When Wilson paid another visit to the Soviet capital in January 1968, he found he had little impact on the Soviet leadership regarding Vietnam.¹²³ Moreover, there is no evidence that Britain made any effective contribution to the eventual peace talks that began in Paris in May 1968. Whether or not it had been a missed opportunity, as Wilson claimed, it is certain that the Anglo-Soviet summit of February 1967 had been the climax of his own peace-making efforts.

Conclusion

Ironically, Wilson's personal efforts to mediate the Vietnamese conflict as a confidant of the United States brought to light the widening Anglo-American differences over the war. The British Prime Minister was frustrated by Washington's unilateral peace initiatives and regretted the lack of Anglo-American orchestration in their foreign policy. Given these frustrating episodes, it is possible to speculate that Wilson emphasised the UK-US division of function in his memoirs in order to highlight the Americans duplicity in their relationship with his government.

What hindered open communication between the two allies in spite of their common desire for a conclusion to the Vietnam War? On the side of the United States, one cause of miscommunication, beyond simple administrative failures in communication, can be found in a tendency to regard London's attempts with the Soviets as 'a sideshow' to their

¹²³ TNA PRO PREM13/2402, record of a meeting between Wilson and Kosygin at 5 p.m., 22 Jan. 1968; PREM13/2402, record of a meeting between Wilson and Kosygin at 10 a.m., 23 Jan. 1968.

own peace efforts, and so no real attention had been paid to them in Washington. As Cooper recalls, there was a suspicion in the minds of US policy-makers that Wilson's 'underlying motivation' for mediation was 'to bolster his own and England's prestige' and he was competing for the 'credit' for peace with the President.¹²⁴ Behind these US views were their cool analysis of Britain's international standing in the 1960s. US Under-Secretary George Ball concluded in a memorandum of July 1966, for example, that Britain was 'no longer the center of a world system' and that it was 'basically unhealthy to encourage the United Kingdom to continue as America's poor relation, living beyond her means by periodic American bailouts'.¹²⁵ With their declining confidence in Britain's international capacity, it was not surprising that the Americans were hesitant to stake their security and prestige in Vietnam on the British. This lack of American faith in the UK is all the more understandable when it is considered that Wilson, not infrequently hinting at British dissociation from US military actions, did not give the Americans what they wanted most on the Vietnamese battlefield. In short, the UK-US friction occurred in a perception gap in which Wilson intended to act as America's special emissary with her full backing, while Johnson perceived the Prime Minister as *one* of his channels to the communist world, alongside others, such as the East European countries, the UN and the Pope.

This study further suggests that, even with smoother Anglo-American communication, Wilson's efforts would have scarcely brought about a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam War. Although Wilson continued to believe that peace could

¹²⁴ Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, pp.355-6, 367-8.

¹²⁵ *FRUS*, 1964-1968, XII, memorandum from Ball to Johnson, 22 July 1966, p.545.

have been secured had he acquired a 48-hour extension of the bombing pause in February 1967,¹²⁶ his stated conviction concealed an important fact from public attention: it was the worsening Sino-Soviet confrontation that was as fundamental an obstacle to Wilson's mediating diplomacy as were his fluctuating relations with the Johnson administration.¹²⁷

The Prime Minister was never sure how much influence Moscow would have been able to exert on Hanoi, and he was well aware that the intensifying Soviet-Chinese rivalry lay in the way of Moscow's mediation in the war. Judging from his recognition of the Soviet-Chinese confrontation as 'the root cause' of Soviet difficulty with active peace-brokering,¹²⁸ it must have been clear to Wilson that his bilateral contact with Moscow, in the absence of any approaches to Beijing,¹²⁹ would yield no effective solution to the Vietnam conflict.

Much is yet to be learned about Moscow's real intentions in Vietnam (and for this we will have to wait until the opening of Soviet archives on the war), but the British records referred to in this study demonstrate that the Soviet leaders were, at the time of Wilson's peace campaign,

¹²⁶ Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, p.367.

¹²⁷ Ellis appears to pay insufficient attention to the implication of the Sino-Soviet confrontation for Wilson's Vietnamese policy, while her accounts of Anglo-American relations are extensive and detailed. See Ellis, *Britain, America and the Vietnam War*. And, though Boyle argues that 'there is substantial evidence' that the UK-Soviet summit of February 1967 'could have brought' the Americans and North Vietnamese 'to the peace table,' it seems that he also fails to understand the critical effects of the Sino-Soviet confrontation on Wilson's mediating diplomacy. Boyle, 'The Price of Peace,' p.69.

¹²⁸ TNA PRO PREM13/1218, text of a message from Wilson to Johnson, 19 July 1966.

¹²⁹ TNA PRO PREM13/1271, Wilson to Johnson, 31 Dec. 1967.

preoccupied with competition with the Chinese for Hanoi's favour, and it is hard to imagine that they could have been persuaded by the British Prime Minister to become a mediator, and risk Chinese accusations. As stated earlier, Wilson was apt to take Kosygin's remarks at face value, and it appears that his wish to rely on the Soviets to put him through to Hanoi led him to overestimate Soviet relative power in the Communist world of the 1960s.