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BRITAIN'S ROLE IN EUROPEAN AND WORLD AFFAIRS IS AT ONCE STRENGTHENED
AND WEAKENED BY HER COMMONWEALTH TIES

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BRITAIN'S ROLE IN EUROPEAN AND WORLD AFFAIRS IS AT ONCE STRENGTHENED AND WEAKENED BY HER COMMONWEALTH TIES.

Before going into the question, a definition of the Commonwealth and an explanation of its status will help to clarify our ideas. The British Commonwealth of Nations includes at present, the United Kingdom, the four countries called "Dominions" in the Statute of Westminster (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa), the three countries which obtained independence in 1947 and remained within the Commonwealth (India, Pakistan and Ceylon), and the first of the African countries, Ghana. The tenth is the Federation of Malaya which only obtained its independence on August 31, 1957. Besides all these self governing democratic nation-states, the Commonwealth includes many dependencies which are scattered over the world from the northern-most Gibraltar to Graham land, stretching to the south pole. Though all the members of the Commonwealth speak a common political language and, in spite of diversities of race and tradition, possess a broadly similar pattern of institutions, whether legislative, executive, or judicial, everyone of the member nations is in the association entirely of its own choice. They are free to join international organizations irrespective of the decision of any other member, and they are wholly responsible for their own foreign and defence policies. The British Commonwealth is for its member nations a bulwark against aggression. Every member nation is strengthened by the knowledge that a challenge to world peace or a threat to their own existence would enlist the support of their partner states in the Commonwealth. In ordinary international affairs each member of the Commonwealth in the counsels of the nations will exert more influence and weight in that it is a member of a world-wide group of states. Thus, the Commonwealth is valued for its very variety and multiplicity of outlook, its member governments

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sometimes acting in unison, sometimes separately, but always freely exchanging views and information and always adding something to a common pool of mutual understanding. This fact can be illustrated in the words of Lord Listowel: "We have do not regard membership of the Commonwealth as something to be thrust by force upon a reluctant people, but as a priceless privilege granted only to those who deeply desire it and are conscious of its obligations as well as its advantages".

The right of each member nation to determine its own external affairs and defence policies, however, may strengthen or it may weaken Britain's role in European and world affairs. Britain's role is plainly weakened if the responsibility for action which represents that unity is not visibly shared by all, and Britain has to consider the feelings of the Commonwealth countries in her policies. On the other hand, Britain's role is immeasurably strengthened if on vital issues it can obtain the support of the Commonwealth countries in achieving a common policy expressed not by a single vote, but by the unison of many.

Britain's role in European affairs in the respect that the Commonwealth both strengthened and weakened her policies can be traced in the part she played in (1) the O.E.E.C. and (2) the N.A.T.O.

Threatened by the rise of Germany's industry and the creation of the Common coal and steel market, Britain saw that the only way to protect her own trade is by joining the O.E.E.C., the Common Market area which already accounted for 1/8 of Britain's external trade and was expanding faster than the sterling area. The British were therefore greatly lured to the idea of joining the O.E.E.C. But full basis of British Trade policy since 1931.

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Whereas products from her Commonwealth countries now entered Britain at a lower tariff rate than products outside the Commonwealth, full membership in the Common Market would mean that products from the countries outside the Commonwealth would enter duty-free while that from the Commonwealth would have to pay the common tariff. Thus Britain, weakened by consideration for her Commonwealth, rejected a full-scale membership into the O.E.E.C. in spite of all the logical economic arguments for her joining the community. On the other hand, however, Britain counting on the support of her Commonwealth countries proposed in 1957 for a free trade area which would move toward the gradual elimination of tariffs among most of the O.E.E.C. countries. This action of Britain's would enable Great Britain to erase tariff barriers with the Commonwealth Market countries and in the mean time enable to to keep its own tariffs on trade with outside countries, while maintaining her system of imperial preference. In order to safeguard the imperial preference system, Britain went a step further in proposing the exclusion of certain agricultural and raw products which constitute an important part of Britain's Commonwealth commerce. This proposal proved unfair to those European states which export farm products and import manufactures, and Britain abandoned her scheme when French, Belgian and Dutch colonies were admitted to the Common Market which would mean that they would enjoy a preferred position in the European Market over the exports of the Commonwealth countries.

Besides the O.E.E.C., the North Atlantic Treaty Organization also showed similar action of the Commonwealth in strengthening and weakening British policy. Britain is geographically and traditionally a part of Europe. On the economic side, she is playing a leading part in the work of O.E.E.C., but it has been impossible for her to join in any European federal system. This is because Britain, with all her Commonwealth nations has to consider every action of hers in a many-sided and complex manner. Her economic

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Life is very much weakened in that it depends on a blend of European and overseas commerce, of visible and invisible earnings, of trade and finance, transport, banking and many other activities. On the other hand her significance as a great Power depends largely on her position within the Commonwealth, and her connection with many parts of the world. This is why she warmly welcomed the growth of the North Atlantic Community in the association of which she discerns the harmony of so many of her thoughts and feelings. Thus, while she could not join any European federal system because of her strategic position, i.e. her proximity by language and background to the Commonwealth and to the United States, she was able to play the important role in the N.A.T.O. as the interpreter of one world to another.

Besides in European affairs, Britain's role in world affairs also revealed various incidents in which the Commonwealth at once strengthened and weakened her policies. These incidents can be traced in Britain's relationship and negotiations with Asia, the U.S.S.R., the Middle East, the U.S., the United Nations, and her interest in disarmament.

Hong Kong, the pearl of the Orient, can best be taken as an example of Britain's relationship with Asia. The late problem arising over the import of cheap cotton goods from India, Pakistan and especially Hong Kong into the United Kingdom thus endangering Britain's cotton industry in Lancashire can serve as a good example here. In order to adjust herself to the awkward position, Britain must take great care that "mutually satisfactory voluntary agreement on a comprehensive basis should be reached." said Mr. Harold Macmillan, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Britain must fully understand the fact that the desperate needs of the poorer countries such as Hong Kong in the Commonwealth, can be met if they can expand their trade. She must also understand

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that China is now flooding Asiatic countries with textiles undercutting Hong Kong's cotton products to such an extent that Hong Kong producers are impelled to sell their goods in Britain, where Chinese imports are restricted. On the other hand, Lancashire's cotton industry is one that is long established. Is Britain going to fight for the "soul of the uncommitted peoples of Hong Kong", as expressed by Mr. Macmillan, at the expense of the closing of hundreds of Lancashire mills and throwing thousands of cotton workers out of employment? If she takes the reverse alternative, how is she going to justify herself in working to get free trade in Europe if she can do nothing as a government to improve conditions within the sterling area? Thus the British policy is very much weakened in these considerations by her ties to the Commonwealth. But, on the other hand, British policy is very much strengthened in that it is using Hong Kong as a defence base to safeguard her military power in the Orient. Hong Kong is now working day by day into world importance and it is the last colony that Britain can afford to do without.

Another example can be found in Britain's trade with the U.S.S.R. Britain in deciding whether or not to carry on trade with U.S.S.R. however, is weakened by her Commonwealth Ties. Non recognition on her part of trading with U.S.S.R. would mean that not only she but all the Commonwealth countries, would be hindered from trading with the U.S.S.R. This is because if Britain did not carry on trading negotiations with U.S.S.R. then any Commonwealth countries who deliberately decided to trade with U.S.S.R. would be standing in defiance against Britain and would be considered out of the Commonwealth because concerted action, the main bond between the Commonwealth countries is no longer present. On the other hand, trade with U.S.S.R. may weaken her tie with other countries e.g. United States, that are not trading with U.S.S.R. Besides, Britain

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in trading with U.S.S.R. must make sure that the transactions she is carrying on with U.S.S.R. are only in items that cannot be produced or are in insufficient quantities in any of the Commonwealth countries. This is because goods that are produced in the Commonwealth countries should be first choice to British customers because of the existence of protective tariffs. Thus in all these respects, the Commonwealth ties are weakening Britain's policy in regard to trade with the U.S.S.R.

The relationship of Britain with U.S.A. and with the Middle East i.e. India and Pakistan can be considered together. In 1956, Egypt's dictator, Nasser, took advantage of the evacuation of the canal zone by British troops to oust the international company and nationalized the canal. Great Britain considered this move as an immediate threat to her imperial life line and her all important fuel supply from the Middle East oil wells. The Suez Canal is the most important water lane that Britain uses to reach her Commonwealth countries, and it is an enterprise in which Britain had invested a large sum of money. To all these natural arguments for going to war with Nasser, the Commonwealth countries, such as Australia and Canada, persuaded and spurred her to take steps together with France to re-occupy the canal zone by force. But, though backed up by a few of her Commonwealth countries, the neutral policy of India and Pakistan weakened her. India and Pakistan, lured by Nasser's scheme of establishing a united Arab republic in the Middle East, had defended Egypt's right to nationalize the Canal Company. This lack of support from all the Commonwealth countries coupled with the fact that U.S.S.R. and Egypt were on friendly terms, while U.S. objected to Britain together with Britain's under-estimation of her oil fuel reserves were of great disadvantage to Britain in the crisis.

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Britain's role in the United Nations also deserves special notice. Britain and all the member nations of the Commonwealth are members of the United Nations whose chief function is the maintenance of peace. Since each of the Commonwealth countries differs from every other Commonwealth country both economically and geographically, there is certain to be occasional impatience on one side and occasional sentiment on the other. It would be strange indeed if they always agreed on every topic. Thus Britain's role in world affairs is very much strengthened if the Commonwealth countries represent a measure of co-incidence upon which a solid foundation for international cooperation and peace can be built, and in practice, as Commonwealth solidarity in two world wars has shown, there is a fundamental unity of ideal and principle which overrides all trivial differences of opinion. On the other hand, Britain's role in world affairs is very much weakened if they are divided by deep differences of opinion and controversies of interest. The many contrasts and even conflicts that emerged between the views of Britain and those of its dominions can be seen in the San-Francisco Conference April 25 to June 26, 1945, in which Australia, New Zealand and Canada opposed Britain on a wide range of subjects, notably trusteeship, which definitely dispelled the myth of an Anglo-Dominion bloc in the United Nations,

Another point to be considered is Britain's interest in peace and the avoidance of armament burdens. Since Britain by world-wide trade and is the centre of a world-wide community of democratic nations she is interested in disarmaments, because armaments are very often a challenge for war. The Commonwealth nations, independent but united by foreign policy to Britain in this matter, are also interested in disarmaments, and they

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are still backing England in the Three Power Conference on the suspension of nuclear weapons that are still being discussed today.

Thus, in many instances Britain is backed up by her Commonwealth countries and is therefore strengthened, while in many other instances the Commonwealth countries are in disagreement with Britain and her position is therefore weakened. In spite of the differences, the Commonwealth is in many ways exerting great influence in the world and is indeed a vivid example of the possibility of co-operation among nations, different in geography, religion, political views, nationality but united on one important point ---- the common good of the group. In spite of the fact that Britain's position at times may be weakened by her Commonwealth ties, on the whole her position in the world affairs is considerably stronger as the centre of a large and important Commonwealth of free nations.

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