

THE SIMONSTOWN AGREEMENTS, 1955

by

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The orthodox interpretation of the Simonstown Agreements, concluded between Britain and South Africa on 30 June 1955, is that the balance of advantage lay with Britain.¹ According to this view, Britain certainly gave up the Royal Navy Base at Simonstown but on such terms that its "surrender" was merely nominal: not only would Britain and its allies retain the right to use the Base in peace-time, but also in war - even if South Africa were to remain neutral. In effect, Britain would continue to have the unqualified use of the Base without the burden of maintaining it. South Africa was also to purchase naval capability worth £18m from British shipyards in order to enhance its contribution to the defence to the Cape Route. The Union would not subject the "coloured workers" on the Base to the apartheid laws applying elsewhere in the Union. Finally, it would not, as it had sought, have British support for an African Defence Organisation (ADO) along SEATO lines. However, official British documents released over the last nine years reveal that this view needs substantial qualification. This paper will provide a summary of developments in Anglo-South African defence relations between 1949 and early 1955, and conclude with a detailed look at the final round of negotiations.

High-level post-war defence talks between Britain and South Africa began in July 1949 and, except for a long break between the end of 1951 and August 1954, continued intermittently until the Simonstown Agreements were concluded. One important Nationalist ambition in these negotiations was to obtain modern weapons, which were in short supply at this time. Another, of course, was to secure the return of the Royal Naval Base at Simonstown. But most interesting was their desire to gain formal membership of the recently created Western alliance, preferably via a "regional defence organisation" for Africa, composed of South Africa and the European colonial powers. In the absence of South African official documents, it is impossible to say with complete certainty what the National Party government's motives were for promoting this idea. Moreover, it seems that the importance attached to one or the other varied over the period. Nevertheless, on the basis of the British papers, it is evident that the following desires influenced South African policy: first, to commit the colonial powers to the racial status quo in Africa, in part by providing a vehicle for the northward advance of South African influence (firmly believed by the FO as well as by the Colonial Office); secondly, to block Indian "infiltration" of the eastern seaboard of the continent and, more especially, to dramatize an "Indian" as well as a "Soviet" threat for reasons of domestic politics; thirdly, to assist the Nationalist break with the British Commonwealth; and, fourthly, to provide reassurance to the white electorate that they would be safe from "native risings" in the event of South African forces being sent "overseas" in another general war.

As for Britain, it had one overriding goal in defence talks with the Union, to which it attached more and more importance as time wore on. This had nothing whatever to do with the "Cape Route". Instead, it was to secure a South African contribution to the defence of the Middle East, a region of vital interest to the United Kingdom. Preferably this would be obtained via the Union's membership of a "Middle East Defence Organization" (MEDO), but if necessary by some bilateral arrangement.

The Nationalists, however, with their traditional hostility to fighting the wars of the British Empire, were extremely chary of a military commitment to the Middle East, while the British were for most of the time implacably opposed to a

South African alliance via ADO. This scheme was believed by the Colonial Office to be a huge political liability as far as African opinion was concerned. It was regarded as strategically irrelevant by the Chiefs of Staff, who believed that the only threat to Africa, a Soviet one, lay in the Middle East, the "gateway to Africa". And it was, in any case, unanimously regarded in Whitehall as a practical impossibility since the American Congress would not entertain extension of the Western alliance to Africa, the French would see it as incompatible with their own schemes for the continent (though there was a change in this regard in early 1955), and the Portuguese would view it as a device for the extension of South African influence over their colonies. Production difficulties with, and competing demands for, British weapons, together with a growing antipathy in Britain to the Afrikanerization of the English-dominated South African army and air force, with its accompanying drop in efficiency and morale, also made London periodically unenthusiastic about selling modern weapons to South Africa. As for the return of Simonstown, this was a subject on which Britain had mixed feelings. The Admiralty, which was on the defensive within Whitehall during this period, was happy to see the costs of the Base shouldered by the Union, provided the South Africans could maintain it properly and would allow the Royal Navy continued access in peace and war. But the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) initially believed that the political costs of surrendering the Base would be very high: the domestic position of the Nationalists relative to the pro-British United Party would be strengthened.

Nevertheless, Britain was so anxious for a South African military commitment to the Middle East and for good relations in general that it was prepared to go a very long way to meet the Union's ambitions. It would return Simonstown (with guarantees); it would re-equip South Africa's armed forces (availability of weapons permitting); and it would hold out to Pretoria the prospect of eventual full membership of the Western alliance by starting it out on the functional or "evolutionary" route to this goal, which, the Foreign Office informed the South Africans, was the way in which the Atlantic Pact itself had been created.²

By September 1950 the South Africans had been sufficiently encouraged by the British (and discouraged by unrewarding feelers in Washington about arms) that they gave the commitment on the Middle East which London was so anxious to obtain. In the event of war and on the assumption that the Union's armed forces could obtain the necessary equipment, South Africa undertook to contribute to the defence of Africa, "in the Middle East if required", one armoured division, one fighter group of nine squadrons, personnel for one air transport squadron, and such naval forces as could be spared from their primary task of protecting South African waters. Staff talks were also to take place. However, although this commitment was described as "firm and specific" in London and seems to have been known to the South African public, at least in general terms, it did not quite amount to an alliance. This is not mainly because its details have remained secret until now, although as far as we are aware they have, but because it was embodied only in agreed minutes even though a formal exchange of letters had been planned at the end of the negotiations in September 1950.⁴ Though the evidence is not entirely unambiguous on this, it seems almost certain that this exchange did not take place, probably because it would have expressed an intention to create legal rights and obligations and required its registration with the United Nations as a "Treaty"; in any event, it was not, in contrast to subsequent defence agreements with Britain, registered with the UN. Unquestionably, the South Africans had no intention of making this "commitment" as firm as all that!

In return for this inconspicuous and obviously reluctant South African commitment to the Middle East, Britain confirmed that the equipment necessary for an expeditionary force would be forthcoming, and promised to co-sponsor with the Union an exploratory, strictly ad referendum conference on defence facilities (mainly transport) in Africa in order to give the Nationalists some multilateral "cover" and thus ease any problems with their anti-British followers. This conference, the African Defence Facilities Conference, was subsequently held in Nairobi in August 1951, but provided the Union with only the most feeble beginning on its "evolutionary" road to full membership of the Western alliance: Britain was able to stand back and contentedly observe the rejection of South Africa's clumsy demands for some "continuing organization" by the French and the Portuguese.⁵ The Portuguese did not even ratify the Nairobi Report itself until early 1954!

In the period between the end of 1951 and the end of 1954 three developments outside South Africa caused the momentum which had begun to develop in the construction of Anglo-South African entente to be lost. The first of these was the return as Prime Minister of Britain in October 1951 of Winston Churchill, who firmly squashed all attempts to persuade him to abandon Simonstown - attempts made in March 1952 by the CRO, which had had a change of heart on this, and now wanted to give up Simonstown without an unqualified user guarantee for the RN⁶; by the Admiralty in 1953 as an economy measure during the first "Radical Review"⁷ ("it would be more reasonable to shut down Portsmouth", minuted Churchill ominously); and by a united front of CRO, Admiralty and Defence in August 1954, even though the South African Defence Minister, F C Erasmus, was now offering an unqualified user guarantee on the Base, for by this time it was a foregone conclusion that in the next war Britain and South Africa would be on the same side. (However, Churchill reluctantly agreed in September 1954 to the establishment of a Joint Working Party to study the practicalities of transfer.) The second development was the scaling down of Britain's own rearmament programme, which provided the South Africans with an excuse to slow down the modernization of their own forces, with the result that, against a background of squabbles over payment and delivery, they never equipped or raised the men for anything like the expeditionary force outlined in the commitment of September 1950. And the third was the failure of MEDO to get off the ground, which enabled the South Africans to claim in the course of 1954 that the commitment itself had lapsed anyway, even though in all of the British papers on the 1950 negotiations there is not even a single reference to MEDO, let alone any suggestion that the Union's commitment was conditional on its creation.

If the effect of these developments on the Anglo-South African entente between early 1952 and late 1954 was to push it towards a state of irritable limbo, there was one development which had a revivifying effect. This was the French-inspired Conference on West African Defence Facilities held at Dakar in March 1954, which the FO initially tried to strangle at birth but eventually felt obliged to concede to the Quai d'Orsay as quid pro quo for its support of Nairobi and as a gesture of Anglo-French colonial solidarity. (Thus had Britain, by agreeing for political reasons to one strategically useless "defence facilities" conference, landed itself with another.) On the insistence of the CRO (whose case was frankly political) and the Chiefs of Staff (whose case was strategic but incoherent), South Africa was invited to attend, though its locus standi was doubtful to the point of being a complete mystery, and for this reason (amongst others) its exclusion from Dakar was the original inclination of the FO and the enduring desire of the Colonial Office.

Dakar was significant for the surreptitious integration of South Africa into the Western alliance because it rescued the agreements "in principle" which had been achieved at Nairobi (mainly on transit and communications arrangements in East Africa in war) and led to the setting up at the end of 1954 of working parties to follow up both conferences. An Anglo-French group was established for Dakar in Paris and an Anglo-South African group for Nairobi in Pretoria. Because of Foreign Office fears of the effect on Portugal and Belgium of the emergence of a "Big Three in African Defence", these remained completely secret.⁹ In early 1955 the French suggested - whether with or without Union prompting is not clear - that the South Africans should join the Paris Working Party while they should join the one in Pretoria.¹⁰ This was stonewalled by the FO but it was clear that the South Africans were still taking its suggested "evolutionary" approach to ADO very seriously - and so, it seemed now, were the French. This came to a head, together with other things, when Erasmus returned to London for defence talks in the middle of 1955.

London was aware that the return of Simonstown was going to be the focus of these negotiations for the South Africans. Finding himself in a weakened position in the new Cabinet of J G Strijdom, Erasmus badly needed the fillip to his prestige which this would provide.¹¹ As a result, much of the discussion in London preparatory to the negotiations centred on whether or not handing over the Simonstown Base should be "linked" to a fresh Union commitment to the defence of the Middle East. Such a commitment, said the Chiefs of Staff, was now of more importance than ever in view of the shortage of land and air forces to hold the anticipated Russian advance along the line of the Zagros Mountains, and would need to provide for "a contribution by South Africa to arrive within at most a few days

of D-day", in contrast to the leisurely programme written into the 1950 agreement. The South Africans would also need to undertake a major re-equipment and training programme, which should include peace-time exercises in the Middle East itself.¹²

The Admiralty, however, was strongly opposed to the linkage proposal, holding that Britain was never likely to get better terms from the South Africans on Simonstown than were presently on offer, and that this was more important than any forces which the Union might provide for the Middle East. Moreover, if linked to the Middle East commitment, the crystallizing agreement on the Base was likely to be lost, since it was considered highly unlikely that Erasmus could make this commitment firm enough, timely enough, or substantial enough to satisfy the Chiefs of Staff. Nevertheless, outside the Admiralty there was strong support for the linkage proposal, and at the Chiefs of Staff Committee on 3 June it was agreed that this should initially be put to the South Africans but that if they refused to go along it should be abandoned and a separate agreement made on Simonstown. However, in this event Erasmus would also forfeit the small degree of unostentatious progress in the direction of ADO which Britain was now prepared to contemplate, the more especially since it was seen as a means of blocking a rival suggestion of Eric Louw's for a white man's Pan-African Conference to provide a counter-blast to Bandung.¹³

At the meeting of the Cabinet Defence Committee on 10 June, chaired by Eden, the Admiralty's tactical compromise was diluted somewhat by the Prime Minister but held basically intact. Thus, said the Prime Minister, "... our first aim should be to obtain a satisfactory agreement on the future of the naval base at Simonstown ... Our second aim should be to obtain some assurance of South African participation in the defence of the Middle East, though this should not at this stage be pressed to the point of jeopardising our chances of obtaining a satisfactory agreement on Simonstown. On the third subject", he concluded, "we should decline to enter into an African Defence Organization but should explore the possibility of holding further conferences on communications and logistics in Africa, in continuation of those already held ..."

Key files bearing on the June negotiations are being withheld, so it is not possible to be certain of the sequence of events. Nor is it entirely clear if Simonstown was explicitly and forcefully linked to a South African Middle East commitment. What is certain is that a formula on "Middle East Defence" was devised in the first few days of the negotiations by the British side, in which the Union would make such a commitment in return for the joint sponsoring of "further conferences on logistics and communications designed to forward and develop the planning already begun at the Nairobi and Dakar Conferences ... (which) ... might lead to the establishment of some permanent secretariat or Joint Planning Staff whose purpose would be to make plans to ensure the technical adequacy and efficiency of the routes from the Union to the North".¹⁴ And what seems almost certain is that this offer was made against the background of an implicit linkage to Simonstown.¹⁵ However, as feared by the Admiralty, Erasmus was prepared to offer vague assurances, together with consultations between Chiefs of Staff, but not to give the sort of firm and specific commitment which the Chiefs of Staff wanted. Such a commitment, said Erasmus, must be conditional on the creation of a Middle East Defence Organisation, or at the very least upon the holding of a conference to discuss Middle East defence, which would be attended by all interested powers but especially the United States.¹⁶ As a result, the British formula was discarded.

On 23 June Selwyn Lloyd, Britain's new Minister of Defence, told the Cabinet that the choice was between either "concluding an agreement on Simonstown and on naval co-operation, together with a promise of military staff talks on the Middle East", which was his personal preference, or, "in default of a firm South African promise to co-operate in the defence of the Middle East", breaking off "the whole of the discussions". Anthony Eden immediately endorsed his Defence Minister's line, observing in its support that he "would not put too high a value on a South African undertaking to contribute towards the defence of the Middle East. In the event", he continued, "the decision whether or not South African troops should be sent to the Middle East in war would be taken by the Union Government of the day in the light of the circumstances then prevailing. Secret staff talks, to which

Mr Erasmus might be persuaded to assent", he concluded, "would give us almost as much assurance of eventual South African support in this area as any formal commitment by the present Government of the Union." Indeed, the Prime Minister appeared more exercised by the inadequate safeguards offered by Erasmus for the future recruitment of "coloured workers" into the Simonstown Dockyard. As a result, the Cabinet decided that the British side should "press strongly" for further safeguards for them and that, subject to satisfaction on this point, "it should continue to be a primary objective in these discussions to obtain a satisfactory agreement on the transfer of the naval base at Simonstown and on naval cooperation generally, and that attainment of that objective should not be prejudiced by insistence on a firm South African promise of co-operation in the defence of the Middle East".

Following this Cabinet, the negotiations were resumed, and by 25 June the British side felt that it had got as much out of the South Africans as possible. The main developments were that the South Africans had met the British on the coloured workers, and the two sides had split the difference between them concerning the date of transfer of Simonstown. The Union had also agreed to take part in staff talks relating to its participation in the defence of the Middle East, which, said a memorandum covering the draft agreements, "goes a good deal further than anything which Mr Erasmus has previously been prepared to accept" (this was untrue). In the light of these South African concessions, the Defence Minister, the Commonwealth Secretary, and the First Lord of the Admiralty invited the Cabinet to endorse the draft agreements which they had produced. Formally, these provided for the transfer of Simonstown to Union sovereignty in return for an unqualified user guarantee for the Royal Navy (and, in war, for allied navies as well), the promise of an increased Union contribution to the defence of the Cape route by a South African Navy substantially enlarged through £18m worth of purchases from British shipyards, and South African agreement to place this navy under the command of the Royal Navy C-in-C South Atlantic in war (though this was now only implicit, as was subsequently pointed out in Cabinet on 28 June). The draft agreements also announced that Britain would "contribute forces for the defence of Africa, including Southern Africa, and the Middle East", and its acceptance in principle of the need for a limited African Defence Organization and an undertaking to help the Union establish it, together with a spiritually related provision whereby other governments might be invited to join the new Anglo-South African naval command structure. In return, they also provided for South Africa's commitment in principle to the "defence of Southern Africa, Africa and the Middle East gateways to Africa", and staff talks to give this substance. These drafts were to take the form of exchanges of correspondence between Selwyn Lloyd and Erasmus and, while the first three would be published, the fourth, on staff talks, would, on the insistence of Erasmus, remain secret.

The FO's African department took great exception to the drafts on regional defence and staff talks, and with good reason. Following powerful indictments from Caryl Ramsden and T E Bromley (Head of Department), on 27 June Evelyn Shuckburgh (Superintending Assistant Under-Secretary) minuted:

I adhere to the view which I expressed to Lord Reading on June 23 - namely that Documents C and D (Middle East/African defence, and staff talks on the Middle East) are of practically no value to us and contain dangerous commitments for us. The only thing we get out of the transaction is the agreement of the S.Africans to have staff talks with us on 'matters relating to S. Africa's participation' in M.E. Defence, without commitment. In return we undertake to sponsor a conference which we do not want which will complicate our relations with the French, Portuguese etc, and we declare our intention to contribute forces to the defence of Southern Africa and Africa although I can't believe we have any such intention. We also implicitly commit ourselves to tell the South Africans

all about our M.E. defence plans at any stage from now on, although they are in no way committed to help us over them.

I do not think the game is worth the candle, and I would prefer to let Mr Erasmus go home and meditate for another 6 or 12 months on the problem of stopping Russian armies any where south or west of the Zagros Mountains.

This was capped with a full endorsement from the Permanent Under Secretary himself, Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick.¹⁷

When the drafts came before the full Cabinet on 28 June, the naval agreements provoked no serious debate but Lord Reading attempted to take issue with the other two. Unfortunately for the FO, he hardly gave a full account of its view, choosing to dwell only on the argument that it might be possible to extract a "firm promise" of South African help in the Middle East if and when the United States had made "a definite military commitment" to the region. Against this was presented the view that "postponement might jeopardise the prospect of making effective progress through Staff conversations". The opinion of the Chiefs of Staff (now echoing Eden) "that these conversations might offer an opportunity for a more practical approach to this problem" was also reported, and the possibility was thrown in "that closer contact between the military staffs might pave the way for a further effort to overcome the political difficulties which now stood in the way of a firm South African promise to co-operate in the defence of the Middle East". On these arguments, which in the light of the known strategic as well as political prejudices of Erasmus and his service chiefs were optimistic, to say the least, Reading was defeated and, with only insignificant amendments, the Cabinet authorised a settlement with Erasmus on the basis of the four draft agreement.

The real deal between Britain and South Africa over Simonstown was, of course, quite different from that presented to the public. In the first place, the promise of unqualified user privileges at the Base about which the British government made so much was not a major South African concession, because both sides had come to accept that in the Cold War co-belligerency was implicit in their relationship. In the second place, neither was South Africa's naval expansion programme a major concession by the Union, though less because it was needed in Pretoria's own interest than because few people in Westminster, fewer still in Whitehall, and none at all in Portsmouth seriously believed that the South Africans had either the will or the personnel to carry it all though - as subsequently proved to be the case.

In reality, Simonstown was returned to the South Africans because the Admiralty knew that it was in practice worth little in the absence of Union goodwill and because it wanted to spend its limited resources on more important things. It was also returned because the symbolic cost to the Empire and to the relative political strength of English-speakers in the Union which the sacrifice of sovereignty over the Base would entail, and which in the end Churchill alone had not been prepared to incur, was now believed to be less important. Outweighing it was the wish to avoid, for the sake of Britain's other interests in the Union, "putting a needless strain on friendship (with South Africa) in the future", as The Times, a lone voice in questioning the official and public justification for the Simonstown Agreements, pointed out.¹⁸ This also explains why the entente between Britain and South African was strengthened more in the direction favoured by Pretoria than that favoured by London. These other interests - as earlier documented in Economic Power and Anglo-South African Diplomacy¹⁹ - included Britain's economic stake in the Union, especially in gold and uranium, and it is clear from the record that the two Commonwealth Secretaries who did most to shape the parameters of the Simonstown Agreements - Patrick Gordon Walker and Lord Swinton - were sensitive to this point. The broader picture also included the future of British-controlled Bechuanaland, Basutoland, and Swaziland: Swinton feared that his refusal to surrender them would lead to a deterioration in relations with Pretoria. And it had also lately come to include a desire to prevent South African opposition to the inclusion of independent black states in the Commonwealth.

It is now apparent, however, Eden's sour grapes and Admiralty reservations notwithstanding, that the British interest "in" South Africa which had carried London furthest towards a settlement with Pretoria over Simonstown was its continuing hope for the creation of an effective fighting force in the Union firmly committed to the defence of the Middle East. It is also now apparent that the failure to make much ground with this had, despite the superficial cleverness of Eden's argument in Cabinet, been the great disappointment to Britain of these negotiations, though it had not been a great surprise. This, as well as the slenderness of South Africa's formal concessions (perhaps its biggest was excepting "coloured workers" from apartheid laws at the Naval Base), gives lie to the orthodox view, cleverly inspired by the British government, that even in its formal terms the Simonstown Agreements were very favourable to Britain.

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Notes

All documents referred to are held in the Public Record Office, Kew.

- 1 See, for example, James Barber, South Africa's Foreign Policy, 1945-1970 (OUP: London, 1970), p 89, and W C B Tunstall, The Commonwealth and Regional Defence (Athlone Press: London, 1959), p 51.
- 2 Denning (FO) to Syers (CRO), 14 April 1949, DO 35/2752.
- 3 Talks on Defence between the Union of South Africa and the United Kingdom, September 1950. Summary of Conclusions. n.d. DEFE 7/176.
- 4 Liesching to Baring, 10 October 1950, DEFE 7/176.
- 5 Lockhart to Allen, 30 August 1951, FO 371/90065.
- 6 Royal Naval Base at Simonstown, December 1951, DO 35/2369; and Cab Defence Committee, D (52) 1st Meeting, 12 March 1952, ADM 116/5979.
- 7 Quoted in First Sea Lord and CNS to First Lord, 22 December 1953, ADM 116/6050.
- 8 Note of Discussions with the South African Minister of Defence on Friday, 10 September 1954, DO 35/5479.
- 9 African Defence Facilities, Note on Discussions in Paris, Thursday, 30 September 1954; and Hayman to Paris Embassy, 9 October 1954, FO 371/108147.
- 10 Wilford to Hillier-Fry, 24 February 1955, FO 371/113479.
- 11 Liesching to Home, 9 June 1955, ADM 116/6049.
- 12 Chiefs of Staff Committee, 3 June 1955, DEFE 4/77.
- 13 CRO to Liesching, 26 April 1955, DO 35/7139.
- 14 Middle East Defence: Formula proposed by United Kingdom (covered by Note of F Wood, MoD), 17 June 1955, FO 371/113482.
- 15 Points to be raised at Private Meeting with Mr Erasmus, n.d. FO 371/113483.
- 16 Minute of Ramsden, 20 June 1955, FO 371/113482.
- 17 FO 371/113482.
- 18 5 July 1955.
- 19 Geoff Berridge (Macmillan: London, 1981).