CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TRUMAN, ATTLEE, AND THE KOREAN WAR CRISIS

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Some years after his retirement as chief of the imperial general staff, Viscount Slim of Burma set down his thoughts about allies. As he put it:

Allies are the most aggravating of people. They are so difficult to understand, so unreasonable; they approach quite straightforward problems from such extraordinary angles. Even when one agrees with them on common objectives their methods towards attaining them are so queer, so very queer. They even introduce considerations of their own petty national politics and hangovers from their past history, none of which have the faintest bearing on the matter at immediate issue. Their most annoying characteristic... is the astonishing way in which they seem quite incapable of recognizing how sound, how wise, how experienced are our views; how fair, indeed how generous, how big-hearted we are. They may even at times credit us with the same petty jealousies, narrow nationalistic outlook and selfish maneuverings that obviously sway them.

But from this litany of complaints, Slim drew a quintessential truth: “There is only one thing more awkward than having allies, and that is not to have them.”¹

Slim’s words were based on his World War II experiences, but what he wrote applied with equal force to Anglo-American relations during the Korean War of 1950–1953. During the first six months of that conflict, the United States and Britain, two powers whose national interests and professed ideals coincided, found it increasingly difficult to agree on common actions. By early December 1950, relations between London and Washington plunged to their lowest point between the termination of Lend Lease in 1945 and the Suez crisis of 1956. Prime Minister Clement Attlee suddenly flew to Washington, bringing Slim and other senior advisors with him, in an effort to resolve differences with Britain’s most important ally. Yet five days of talk with President Harry S. Truman and his top aides yielded little more than an agreement to disagree on the very issues that occasioned the summit meeting.

¹ Unpublished memoirs, Viscount Slim of Burma papers, Churchill College, Cambridge.
What were those issues? What longer range concerns and immediate circumstances prompted Attlee’s visit to Washington? How did he and the president deal with disagreements within their alliance relationship? Why, indeed, did their talks end in imperfect accord? This essay will address these very particular questions. But in probing for answers to them it will, hopefully, bring into sharper focus the broader forces that shaped the Anglo-American relationship in East Asia.

The Structure of Accord and Discord

When war came to Korea on June 25, 1950, the United States and Britain appeared to be united in solid international partnership. Collaborators in World War II, their friendship had metamorphosed into an alliance of containment. Washington and London shared the conviction that the Soviet enemy must be checked from Oslo in the west to Tokyo in the east. The North Atlantic Treaty, signed in April 1949, gave substance to that belief and symbolized shared priorities. London and Washington saw Europe as the central arena of international politics, the place where the Soviet threat had been greatest in the past, and the most probable site of any future war. Strategists in both capitals also agreed that East Asia ranked a distant third, behind the Middle East as well as Europe, on the list of regions for probable conflict.

Britons and Americans professed common aims in the far Pacific. Both sought to accommodate Asian nationalism, assuring wherever possible a peaceful transition from colonial rule to self-government. Each wanted to check the spread of communism, a development that loomed as increasingly likely after Mao Tse-tung established his government in Peking in October 1949. Both nations hoped to succeed primarily through political and economic, rather than military, moves. Each for its own reasons

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