Over the next few years developments occurred in Europe, South Africa, the Middle East, and Africa itself which completely undermined the assumptions upon which the white entente was based. As a result, by the end of the decade, though much of its shell remained intact, it was to all intents and purposes hollow of content.

During the Suez crisis of November 1956 South Africa had adopted a policy of studied neutrality, and complained publicly that Britain's failure to take the Union into its confidence represented a 'major change' in Commonwealth consultation policy. More significantly, it had severely weakened Britain's position in the Middle East and with it destroyed any remaining likelihood that the South Africans would have the confidence to commit forces to the Northern Tier. Within five months of Suez, British defence policy was revolutionised by the dramatic increase in reliance on nuclear weapons announced in the Defence White Paper published on 4 April 1957, authored by Duncan Sandys, the unprecedentedly powerful Minister of Defence appointed to the cabinet formed in January by the new Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan. The new defence policy made conventional defence in the Middle East in general war all but irrelevant, and thus considerably reduced the need for South African forces anyway.

In Africa, meanwhile, de-colonisation began to gather pace (Ghana became independent in March 1957), and the result of this was that the practical obstacles and political drawbacks to military collaboration with South Africa were immediately magnified. They were magnified even further following the death of Strijdom on 25 August 1958 and the election to his
place by the National Party caucus of the architect of apartheid, Dr H. F. Verwoerd. The new South African leader kept on Eric Louw as Foreign Minister and – for a time – Erasmus at Defence. However, his colossal domestic authority and wholly uncompromising attitude towards racial policy set him on a collision course with Britain and the Commonwealth, and increasingly dessicated the bilateral Anglo-South African friendship which, despite the Union's best efforts to escape its embrace, was at the heart of South Africa's continental military position.

In short, by the end of the 1950s the usefulness of the South African entente to the colonial powers had greatly declined, while its difficulties and dangers had increased significantly. At the beginning of 1957, however, the Simonstown Agreements of July 1955, together with the Nairobi–Dakar procedures, still provided a framework for military collaboration between the white powers and an agenda for future discussions.

A 'SEA ROUTES CONFERENCE' OF SORTS: PARIS, MAY 1957

It will be recalled that in December 1956 the British and the South Africans had suggested to the other three powers that a meeting might be held to discuss technical questions bearing on the defence of the sea routes around southern Africa at senior naval officer level. In late January the French responded positively to this more modest proposal, supplied a draft agenda, and suggested that the powers might care to hold the meeting in Paris. The Belgians, too, were happy to go along, while emphasising that 'it would be premature to discuss any form of command organisation if the nature and the scope of the problem are not defined beforehand with precision, and if the naval threat to the area in question and the means of defending it are not clearly explained'. In mid-March the Portuguese also gave a cautious acceptance, though adding that defence of the sea routes 'ought to be considered in the general context of the defence of the African continent' and that their decision to attend this meeting should not be taken