

## **The diplomatic context: Britain and International Relations around 1904**

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Research conducted in the history of both geography and geopolitics has stressed the importance of re-situating key texts within their original context (Livingstone, 1992; Ó'Tuathail, 1996). Political Geographers such as Brian Blouet, Geroid O'Tuathail or Gerry Kearns, have demonstrated the interest of an exploration of Mackinder's thought, set in its precise historical setting (Blouet, 1987; Ó'Tuathail 1992; Kearns, 1985). More recently, Geoffrey Sloan has shown a way forward in analysing each of the 1904, 1919, and 1943 versions of Mackinder's heartland theory, "in the context of the unique periods of their formulation" (Sloan, 1999). This suggests the pertinence of further investigation into the actual diplomatic and strategic context of the historical moment when the *Geographical Pivot of History* was written, presented as a lecture and eventually published.

The history of international relations in the years before 1914, perhaps more than any other period, has been the subject of considerable scrutiny on account of the importance of the question of the origins of the Great War (Monbauer, 2002). Controversies about the issue of responsibility regarding the outbreak of the war have generated tremendous historical production. The impression of venturing onto well-trodden territory, when engaging in the study of any aspect of the period, can however be extremely deceptive. A major risk in this respect is to read too much into the major developments of the period, in the light of what is now known of the outbreak of the Great War in

1914. The benefit of hindsight is perhaps more than a mixed blessing, and it is essential to remain aware of the power of focus and its potential distorting effects.

In order to propose a meaningful analysis of a period which is usually described as either one of "geopolitical transition" by political geographers, or as one of "diplomatic revolution" by international historians, it seems essential to be fully aware of both past and current historiographical debates about the history of international relations during this period, and to fully engage with its key issues. This will involve studying particularly the period around 1904 within its own logic, rather than as part of some prelude to the First World War, as well as taking into account the major historiographical revision which has recently taken place in the history of British foreign policy (Neilson, 1995; Wilson, 2003), and which has stressed how central imperial issues were in the formulation of British foreign policy, right until 1914. The proposed snapshot of the diplomatic context of the *Geographical Pivot of History* will involve, firstly, an analysis of the context of international relations and the British geopolitical code at the beginning of the twentieth century; secondly, the examination of the main orientations of Edwardian foreign policy between 1902 and 1904; and finally, will look in some depth at the situation during the winter of 1903-1904.

### **I. International relations and the British Geopolitical Code in the Early Twentieth Century**

Following the Great War, the Old Diplomacy and the regime of alliance of the pre-1914 period have been stigmatised and widely held responsible for the outbreak of the war. A revealing illustration is to be found in a cliché such as that of "fateful alliance", widely applied to the Franco-Russian alliance (Kennan, 1984). Such an evocative formula, like so many others now so powerfully anchored, have distorted perceptions of the ways in which the international system operated during the first years of the century. It is therefore necessary, for instance, to stress how, in the 1890s, alliances were defensive in nature, and operated as "blocking coalitions"(Schroeder, 1986, 10). As such, they did

contribute decisively to maintaining a balance of power in Europe. This was arguably still the case around 1904. Presenting Europe as being divided between two antagonistic blocks can also be misleading. Not only, at that time, the "Triple and Dual Alliances stood - to modify an apt phrase of Mr. Winston Churchill - side by side, not face to face." (Schmitt, 1924, 451); but thinking about the international system in terms of multipolarity, rather than bipolarity, may give better insight into the way it actually operated. After all, not only was Britain remaining aloof from the two main European alliance systems, but greater fluidity and a more dynamic environment than usually acknowledged, were key features in international relations during the first years of the century. Furthermore, the alliances themselves were showing signs of relative fragility, and "The Triple Alliance undoubtedly passed through a period of ineffectiveness." (Schmitt, 1924, 452)

One of the most vivid images of the period before 1914 is undoubtedly that of the "struggle for mastery in Europe". However it does appear rather elusive for the period under study. As Paul Schroeder has noted, "for most of the period covered, up to 1890 or 1900 at least, there was no such struggle for mastery in the sense of a conscious drive to achieve preeminent position and dominant power." (Schroeder, 1986, 9) It could further be argued that this remained a reality as late as 1904. A careful analysis of the main potential clash points between the great powers in the early years of the twentieth century reveals the tuning down of intra-European rivalries: "the two danger-zones of Europe, Alsace-Lorraine and the Near East, were relatively quiet." (Schmitt, 1924, 451) From the mid-1890s, a climate of *détente* prevailed in Franco-German relations, whilst the 1897 agreement between Russia and the Habsburg Empire opened a period of relative quietude. A shift of tensions from within Europe to the wider world took place in the 1890s. Greater stability in Europe corresponded with the unleashing of imperial rivalry overseas, as European powers such as such as Britain, Russia and France, soon joined by Germany, and extra-European powers such as the United States and Japan, competed for world positions. The so-called New Imperialism and doctrines of

power politics and world policy were the order of the day, whilst the Far East was often taking centre stage in international relations.

Analysing Britain's geopolitical codes proves to be a stimulating starting point. Political geographers define a geopolitical code as "a set of strategic assumptions that a government makes about other states in forming its foreign policy" (Taylor, 1993; Dijink, 1996). This usually incorporates "a definition of a state's interests, an identification of external threats to those interests, a planned response to such threats, and a justification of that response." Any definition of British interests, during the Edwardian period as during the Victorian period, must start with issues pertaining to trade. In an international economy based upon overseas trade, preserving the safety of sea routes was essential, all the more so as Britain was reliant on imports for its domestic consumption, and for ensuring access to foreign markets. Hence Britain's keenness regarding the "open door" policy in China, which was preserved. The security of the British Isles and of the Empire was also of great importance. This involved ensuring that Britain remained protected from the risk of invasion, a permanent source of concern, giving rise periodically to recurrent invasion scares. Another crucial issue was the integrity of imperial frontiers, a task of gigantic proportions, as Britain had "by far the greatest extent of territorial Frontier of any dominion in the globe": over 12,000 miles of frontiers in Africa, more than 3,000 miles of frontier with the United States in Canada and above all India's frontiers, "nearly 6,000 miles long with Persia, Russia, Afghanistan, Tibet, China, Siam, and France." (Curzon, 1907, 9) Finally, maintaining the balance of power in Europe could also appear as another vital British interest, and involved denying "continental hegemony to any state or coalition of states, because a hegemonic enemy, undistracted by the need to wage major conflict on land, would have been able to use all or most of western Europe as a base for developing a quantity and quality of seapower fatal to Britain's ability to command the narrow seas and hence to thwart invasion and protect its maritime commerce". (Gray, 1988, 15)

The identification of the main threat was not problematic, as Russia, engaged in global rivalry with Britain, was regarded as the traditional enemy. Russian expansionism was of increasing concern to the British government. In particular, the Russians were following an increasingly aggressive policy in the Far East. The Boxer rebellion of 1900 and the ensuing European intervention had been an opportunity for Russia to occupy Manchuria in Northern China, which it later refused to evacuate. The British also felt that the security of India was threatened by both Russia's advance into Central Asia, and her increasing influence in Persia. Of particular note was the construction of the railway line from Orenburg to Samarkand, which was to be completed in 1905. "This line doubled the potential supplies that could be transported into Western Turkestan from Russia in the event of a military expedition from that territorial base." (Siegel, 2001, 4) The growth of Russian naval assets in the Far East greatly concerned the Admiralty, which feared that "it would be unable to match a Franco-Russian naval combination in the Far East." (Bartlett, 1993, 96) The rivalry with Russia posed the problem of Imperial defence, which Prime Minister Arthur Balfour described in a speech to the Commons on 8 August 1902 as "one of the most difficult and one of the most complicated problems that any Government or any body of experts, can have." (Mackay, 1985, 115-6) This was however not the only threat that the Balfour administration could identify, for on account of the Franco-Russian Alliance, any conflict with Russia could potentially lead to a global struggle against both her and her French ally. Worse still was the risk that Britain would come to face a hostile coalition of continental powers made up of Russia, France and Germany.

British planned responses to threats focused first and foremost on maintaining British worldwide naval supremacy and British command of the seas. Since 1889, the two-power standard had provided an excellent indicator of the adequacy of naval relative strength. The South African war of 1899-1902 had cruelly exposed the weaknesses of the British Army, and reform and modernisation were on the agenda. However, budgetary constraints, the weight of the military bureaucracy, together with the

importance of the British political tradition not to maintain a strong standing army in peacetime, were major impediments to the development of the British army to the necessary standards of preparation in the event of a possible Russian challenge on the frontiers of India. Diplomacy was indeed a key element of Britain's possible response to the perceived main threats. The policy of splendid isolation followed by Salisbury was based on the diplomatic paradigm of the *Free Hand* (Gooch, 1974, 181). This involved avoiding, as far as possible, becoming party to alliances in peacetime, in order to guarantee Britain's existing freedom from entanglements (Howard, 1967). The policies followed by Salisbury's successors at the Foreign Office, Liberal Unionist Lord Lansdowne and Liberal Sir Edward Grey, are conventionally described as marking the end of isolation (Monger, 1963). Nevertheless, besides the 1901 alliance with Japan, renewed in 1905 and 1911, and limited in scope to the Far East, British diplomacy between 1901 and 1914, did stick to the *Free Hand* paradigm. Lansdowne's foreign policy aimed at defusing, as much as possible, any risk of conflict for Britain. It involved an active diplomacy, focusing on improving bilateral relations with each of the powers perceived as posing a threat. Niall Ferguson, following in that Sir Michael Howard's earlier view, has gone as far as interpreting Edwardian foreign policy as, in essence, one of appeasement: it also involved dealing with key issues on a case to case basis, and attempting to bring about, whenever possible, a form of collective security at a regional level (Howard, 1972, 29-30; Ferguson, 1999)

## **2. Edwardian foreign policy, 1901-1904**

In order to get a fair picture of Britain's position in international affairs around 1904, it is useful to analyse the main dynamics of Edwardian foreign policy at work. A first important development in this respect was the significant improvement of relations with the United States, which had in 1898 asserted, in a very spectacular manner, its status as an imperial power in the Caribbean and the Pacific. This allowed for a transition from a relation of rivalry to one of friendship, and amounted to an informal Anglo-American rapprochement. The US was increasingly determined to strictly enforce a

very broad interpretation of the Monroe doctrine, first enunciated in 1823, which involved preventing any European interference on the American continent (Kennedy, 1981, 118.) London had for a long time been studiously ignoring such a doctrine, but this proved no longer possible, and following the Anglo-Germano-Italian blockade of Venezuela in 1903, the British came to recognise this (Herwig, 1976, 75). Britain also renounced formally in 1901, her right to claim a share in the construction of the Panama Isthmian Canal" and two years later the Alaskan boundary dispute was settled favourably for American claims. This evolution allowed a British strategical withdrawal from the Western Hemisphere.

In the Far East, upholding British interests alone and ensuring the maintaining of the "open door" policy deemed crucial in China, had become increasingly difficult due to Russian expansionism. Having initially explored the possibility of a diplomatic understanding with both Germany and Japan, Lansdowne finally came to sign an agreement with the latter alone. He did so under pressure and in order to preempt a Russo-Japanese rapprochement, which seemed imminent and which would have isolated Britain disastrously in the region. (Monger, 1963, 56) Ian Nish has demonstrated very clearly how "Britain entered into the alliance largely by reason of her eastern rather than her European interests." (Nish, 1966, 231) The Agreements between Great Britain and Japan of 30 January 1902, in substance a military alliance, by which which each power was bound to belligerence in a war between their ally and any two other powers, were strictly limited in scope to the Far East.

This Far Eastern commitment marked a striking departure from the usual British foreign policy praxis *not* to firmly commit in advance. Its positive effects for Britain were clear, preventing isolation in the region and contributing to alleviate the pressure on the Royal Navy's commitments. The alliance designed to bring about greater stability in the region, however, did not operate in such a way. It proved unable to prevent the rise of tension between Russia and Japan. It was soon feared that it could backfire, as the risk of the *casus foederis* arising, and of Britain being drawn in a war, was

becoming real. Not simply a local war but a global war, if a third power, most likely France, became involved against Japan in support of Russia.

If the period preceding the outbreak of the Great War has been marked by the rise of Anglo-German rivalry, it is essential to bear in mind that relations between the two powers were far from hostile in the period before 1905; much to the contrary. Britain had indeed welcomed the foundation of the German Empire in 1871, as Germany's "half-hegemony" in Europe established a balance of power. (Schroeder, 1986, 9) Furthermore, between 1898 and 1901, several attempts to bring about an alliance with Germany took place. However, they came to nothing. Fundamentally, Germany feared that such an alliance might result in a situation where it would have to face the Franco-Russians alone on the continent (McLean, 2001, 91); whilst Britain objected, as Monger put it, "as a parliamentary country, she could not to commit herself in advance." (Monger, 1963, 63)

The momentum for an alliance with Germany quickly passed, but maintaining good working relations with Berlin remained nevertheless a priority for London. Prime Minister Arthur Balfour remained convinced of the identity of interests between the two powers. (Kennedy, 1980, 255) The unpredictability of the Kaiser, who had acquired a justified reputation as a tactless trimmer, naturally inspired a degree of caution. As ruling out the possibility of collaboration with Germany would have significantly limited Britain's freedom of action, this was clearly not on. (Kennedy, 1980, 256) Much to the contrary, not only did the two powers undertake, together with Italy, a joint naval blockade of Venezuela in 1902, but furthermore the following year, they actively explored the possibility of jointly financing the extension of the Baghdad railway project; a smart way, in Lansdowne's view, to prevent further Russian penetration in the Middle East. (Morris, 1984, 55) The British government was however, in each instance, forced to back track because of the rush of popular Germanophobia such ventures caused. (Kennedy, 1980, 256)

It has sometimes been suggested that the threat posed by the German fleet became, as early as 1902, a key factor in British policy making, but it is difficult to follow this interpretation. Germany's aim was, indeed, to become the second naval power in the world. (Sondhaus, 2001, 181) However, the superiority of the Royal Navy over the German navy, which was still in its infancy, remained overwealming, not only in 1902-4, but for many years after 1905. (Lambert, 1999, 8) Significantly, when First Lord of the Admiralty Selborne expressed, in 1902, some concern about the on-going development of the German navy, Balfour did remain "somewhat sceptical". (Kennedy, 1980, 255) It seems important to stress that Germany was only perceived as realistically posing a threat as part of an anti-British coalition. As a counter to this, in 1902 the Admiralty pressed for the two-power standard, plus an extra six battleships over and above the straight parity with France and Russia". (Bartlett, 1993, 99)

Britain's policy towards the two partners of the Franco-Russian alliance was extremely crucial in this period. Russia remained Britain's traditional enemy and the problem of the defence of India remained a very sensitive issue in London. In late 1901, Lansdowne had explored the possibility of an understanding with Russia, before settling under pressure for the alliance with Japan. The Balfour cabinet remained nevertheless extremely keen, and at times even desperate, to reach an understanding with Russia on outstanding Asian issues. (Kennedy, 1980, 255) In the summer of 1903, the expansionist party seemed to gain increasing influence over the Tsar. A Viceroyalty of the Far East was created on 13 August 1903, and Witte, the finance minister, resigned within a fortnight. As the tension between Russia and Japan was increasing in the Far East, London again sought an agreement with Russia, but to no avail. (Neilson, 1995)

It is very tempting to see in Lansdowne's handling of relations with the Franco-Russian alliance, an urge to follow a policy of reinsurance, designed to avoid the dangers inherent to the Far Eastern commitment. A parallel could be made with the policy of Bismarck who, after signing a defensive

alliance treaty with Austria-Hungary in 1879, brought about the League of the Three Emperors in 1881, and after it lapsed concluded the Reinsurance treaty of 1887. (Woodward, 1935, 68) Lansdowne came to think that an improvement of relations with France could lead to have positive effects on Anglo-Russian relations. He revealingly observed in September 1903 that "A good understanding with France would not improbably be the precursor of a better understanding with Russia, and I need not insist upon the improvement which would result in our international position" (Monger, 1963, 133.) It is however generally accepted that from the start of his period as French Foreign Secretary, Theophile Delcassé's grand design was to bring about a coalition between France, Britain and Russia (Andrew, 1968, 228). A difficulty for the French was to conciliate a possible restoration of the Entente cordiale with her alliance with Russia.

Between 1902 and 1904, Franco-British relations evolved, as Edward Grey aptly put it in a speech to the Commons on 1 June 1904, from a "glacial epoch" to a "genial epoch". (Grey, 1931, 21-2) French and British interests seemed to converge. Financial ties in particular contributed significantly to the two powers coming closer together, as the City remained dependant on French capital. (Saul, 1997, 666) From a strategic perspective, the Anglo-Japanese alliance had seriously undermined the security of French Indochina, but whilst the overall balance of naval power with France had indoubtedly evolved in Britain's favour, it remained that the French naval policy of concentration in the Mediterranean had crucially modified the equilibrium in the Mediterranean. The rapprochement of 1903 was marked by an exchange of visits by King Edward VII and President Loubet in May and July 1903, and steps were soon taken to open negotiations on the main outstanding colonial dispute between the two imperial powers. (Andrew, 1968)

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To complete this analysis of Britain's international position at the time when *The Geographical Pivot of History* was conceived by Halford Mackinder, in the winter of 1903-1904, it seems useful to consider the two key elements of this context: the on-going rethinking of British defence policy and the implications of the developing Far Eastern crisis for British diplomacy.

Following the Boer war a major reevaluation of defence policy was undertaken. A painstaking assessment of the Army performance was conducted by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the South African war, or Elgin Commission, which highlighted the need to reorganise the War Office. (Kennedy, 1981, 63) Such a reorganisation was however extremely slow, on account of the complexity of the task, the weight of bureaucracy and the political sensitivity of the issues involved. The War Office Reconstruction Committee, chaired by Lord Esher, which was appointed in September 1903 by Balfour, was in January 1904 finalising the first of the three installments of its report which led to a thorough reorganisation of the War Office. (Dunlop, 1938, 168-9) At the same time War Secretary Arnold-Forster was in early February 1904 revealing to his colleagues in the cabinet a scheme to reform the Army (Williams, 1991, 45). With the acute budgetary crisis faced by the British government and the prospect of a large deficit in the coming year, it was vital considerably reduce defence spending (Mackay, 1985, 160-1) The Committee of Imperial Defence, set up in October 1903 by Prime Minister Balfour, had undertaken a systematic analysis of imperial defence requirements. An investigation into the invasion issue was conducted, and in November 1903 the committee deemed the possibility of a large-scale invasion of the British Isles most unlikely. This assessment was of great importance, as it subsequently informed the study of imperial defence requirements and a triumph for the blue-water school. (Bond, 1972, 198; Gooch, 1974, 177) The clear consensus was that the Empire was most vulnerable in India, "our only possible place of contact with a great European Army", as Arnold-Foster put it in his speech on the Army Estimates on 7 March 1904 (Dunlop, 1938, 172), and the main strategic problem remained the question of the

defense of the North West frontier. (Bond, 1972, 198) Prime Minister Arthur Balfour summarized very effectively, in a letter to Edouard VII on 14 December 1903, what military policy should be: "The object to be aimed at may be roughly summarised as follows: we want an army which shall give us sufficient force for at least any immediate need of Indian defence; and, in conjunction with the auxiliary forces, for Home defence; which shall be capable of expansion in time of national emergency ... and shall throw a smaller burden on the tax payer. This last is of peculiar importance, not merely because of the present condition of our finances, but because the demands of the navy are so great and so inevitable that the total cost of imperial defence threatens to become prohibitive." (Williams, 1991, 44)

The developpement of the russo-japanese crisis in the Far East placed Britain in a rather embarrassing situation. What had been Balfour's worst fear in December 1901 at a time when the possibility of an agreement with Japan was debated among the cabinet, namely that "we may find ourselves fighting for our own existence in every part of the globe because France has joined forces with her ally over some obscure Russo-Japanese quarrel in Corea", was becoming a distinct possibility. (Monger, 1963, 62) The main shortcoming of the Anglo-Japanese agreement was not only its binding nature, but also the fact that it amounted not simply to a defensive alliance but also to an offensive alliance. Accordingly, the Japanese Imperial Cabinet was left with great freedom of judgement to decide whether Russia was leading a policy of provocation. It does not seem simply incident that between 1904 and 1914, successive British administrations, Tory and Liberal alike, stayed clear from entering any new alliance in peace time, much to the French despair. The development of the crisis led the British government to take diplomatic precautionary steps to avoid been drawn into the conflict, which involved active diplomatic collaboration with France. The convergence of views on this matter became quickly apparent as French foreign secretary Theophile Delcassé shared similar concerns. Both realised how easily their respective existing alliances with

Russia and Japan could lead them to become involved in the coming conflict. A Franco-British attempt at mediation between the two parties came to none as the Japanese attacked Port Arthur on 8 February 1904. After the outbreak of war, the two powers promptly engaged in close diplomatic collaboration to attempt to localise the conflict, by remaining strictly neutral. The conflict gave momentum to the Franco-British discussions and both parties became convinced of the pertinence of promptly reaching a timely settlement of their imperial disputes, on 8 April, two months day for day after the beginning of the Russo-Japanese war. This would be the starting point for the Franco-British Entente cordiale. (Keiger, 2001, 164-168)

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