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978-0-521-11165-2 - The Policy of the Entente: Essays on the Determinants of British Foreign Policy, 1904-1914

Keith M. Wilson

Excerpt

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Introduction

Variations on the phrase ‘the policy of entente’ were applied without any great precision by British diplomatists in the years immediately before the Great War to describe the foreign policy of their country since the turn of the century. The questions of what that policy was, and of why it was what it was and not something else, are not made easier to answer by the fact that almost everyone involved in the making and executing of foreign policy had a view, not only of what the policy was, but of what it ought to be. Nevertheless, in its attempt to establish what were Britain’s priorities in her relations with the Great Powers of Europe, those are the questions which this work addresses.

The existing interpretation of British foreign policy before the outbreak of war in 1914 has been encouraged by the following works: G. W. Monger, *The End of Isolation* (London, 1963); Z. S. Steiner, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy 1898–1914* (Cambridge, 1969), and *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1977); K. Robbins, *Sir Edward Grey – a Biography* (London, 1971). F. H. Hinsley’s *The Foreign Policy of Sir Edward Grey*, a collection of essays from many individuals working separately, commissioned in the mid-1960s but appearing only in 1977, and P. M. Kennedy’s *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860–1914* (London, 1980) are the latest additions to this particular literature. This existing interpretation may be said to include the following elements: a large degree of continuity and the adherence by successive administrations to certain well-established traditions and well-defined principles of policy, in particular those of the balance of power and the free hand. On the whole, the impression given is that British foreign policy was as straightforward, honest and open as were supposed to be the ministers made responsible for it; that, if foreign policy was not actually made in the Foreign Office, by the officials there, and increasingly so after the implementation of the reforms of 1905, then it was at least the more or less exclusive preserve of the Foreign Secretary; that British foreign policy was to a large extent self-contained, and not a product of British domestic or

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internal politics – not related so closely to movements in British politics generally or to developments in British society at large as, according to E. Kehr, F. Fischer, A. J. Mayer, V. R. Berghahn, the foreign policy of Germany in particular was related to trends within the body politic; that the maintenance and development of the Anglo-French Agreement of April 1904 which Sir Edward Grey inherited from Lord Lansdowne, and the making of the Anglo-Russian Conventions of August 1907 with which he complemented it, represented a change of orientation, an adjustment of priorities, a shift both in values and of emphasis, from the British Empire to the European continent; that this change was inspired by an accurate appreciation of the threat posed by Germany to Europe and to England; that Britain went to war in 1914 primarily out of concern for Belgium and for France, and that the British Expeditionary Force went where it did go in 1914 because the military conversations between the British and French General Staffs left no alternative.

In the formation of foreign policy very little is what it appears to be, and there is too much material, and too many nuances in this material, of which the received view does not take account, too many contradictions which the orthodox accounts neither resolve nor explain, or in some cases even notice – such is the extent to which certain ingrained assumptions have come to dominate the reading of the primary sources. The essays in this volume seek the actual content and real determinants of British foreign policy from a number of different angles. Using the full range of sources, some of which have only recently become available, each essay deals separately with some aspect or interpretation either of the period of the entente as a whole or the British decision for war itself. The conclusions arrived at mutually reinforce and support one another.

The policy of the Entente emerges as one in the interpretation of which due weight has to be given to domestic political considerations and constraints, especially upon the independence and freedom of action of the Foreign Secretary; allowance has to be made for the deliberate manufacture of myths; and room has to be found for the appreciation that the sources reflect several layers of reality – not only in the sense that some participants in the policy-making process had a firmer grasp than others of what the policy was, but also in the sense that cynicism lay below expressions of devoutness, despair behind confidence and bombast. Taken together, these essays maintain that the major principles of British foreign policy were not compatible; that so great was the scale of dislocation between means and the ends professed that it amounted to a difference in kind; that the makers of British foreign policy were less interested in Europe than in their Empire; that they regarded themselves on the whole as being less threatened by Germany than by Russia; that the achievement

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and maintenance of good relations with Russia as an end in itself was the main objective of British policy throughout these years; and that the entente with France, originally conceived and regarded as a stepping-stone to better Anglo-Russian relations, remained essentially subsidiary to these, and the necessity to support France something of an embarrassment, all the more so because of the lack of the means with which to do so, something which the French kept pointing out. It is further maintained that those responsible for conducting and executing British foreign policy, unable to admit openly the weakness of Britain's world position, unwilling to draw the logical conclusions from the unbridgeability of the gap between commitments and assets, resentful at the decline in their relative power and the consequent necessity for Britain to embroil herself in European affairs, pretended both to themselves and to others that she was still the force in the world that they liked to think she once had been. In so far as it is shown that severe limitations were imposed upon the pursuit of 'pure policy' by what was at the same time politically acceptable and financially possible, it is suggested that the primacy of *Innenpolitik*, even in the case of Great Britain, cannot lightly be set aside.

I have been asked to draw the attention of the reader to the fact that, in addition to some of the work of B. Williams, published in *Historical Journal* in 1966, and to some of the work of I. Klein, published in *Journal of British Studies* in 1971, and in addition to work more recently published, such as E. Ingram's article in *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* (1974), R. J. Crampton's *The Hollow Détente* (London, 1980), and S. Mahajan's article in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (1982), there is also available now some work in the German language which indicates that there are yet other historians who, whilst this book was in course of preparation and publication, have been moving towards a similar view of the place of 'the Russian factor' in the formulation of British foreign policy during the period under consideration; these include E. Holzle, *Die Selbstentmachtung Europas* (Gottingen, 1975) and K. Wormer, *Grossbritannien, Russland und Deutschland: Studien zur Britischen Weltreichpolitik am Vorabend des ersten Weltkriegs* (Munich, 1980). The latest article on this particular aspect by the present writer is to be found in *Review of International Studies* (July, 1984). David E. Kaiser's article 'Germany and the Origins of the First World War' in *Journal of Modern History* (October 1983) is the latest piece of work convincingly to demonstrate that, at the very least, the makers of British foreign policy seriously misread the *Weltpolitik* of both Prince B. von Bulow and T. von Bethmann-Hollweg.

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The Poverty of the Entente Policy

On 1 March 1893 Lord Rosebery addressed the members of the Colonial Institute in defence of policies of his which the leader of his party, Mr W. E. Gladstone, had described as ‘imbued with the spirit of territorial grab’:

It is said that our Empire is already large enough and does not need extension. That would be true enough if the world were elastic, but, unfortunately, it is not elastic, and we are engaged at the present moment, in the language of the mining camps, in ‘pegging out claims for the future’. We have to consider, not what we want now, but what we shall want in the future . . . we should, in my opinion, grossly fail in the task that has been laid upon us did we shrink from responsibilities and decline to take our share in a partition of the world which we have not forced on, but which has been forced upon us.¹

By the turn of the century the British Empire was the largest and most widespread of all the empires acquired by the European Powers. In addition to safeguarding the territories of which this Empire consisted, the British had also to protect a volume of sea-borne trade amounting to an annual value of 1200 million pounds sterling, and 9 million tons of shipping upon which the British people depended, amongst other things, for the security of their food supply. In the twentieth century Britain faced what Lord Selborne called the ‘terrific task’ of remaining the greatest naval Power when naval Powers were increasing year by year in numbers and in strength and of being at the same time a military Power strong enough to meet the greatest military Power in Asia.²

A note of warning had already been sounded, by Joseph Chamberlain, in May 1898, when he pointed out that Britain was envied by everyone, and had interests which at one time or another conflicted with the interests of everyone else. This sentiment, and the solution Chamberlain suggested, was not at that time widely shared or well received. Leading members of the Liberal opposition had no wish to go ‘touting for allies in the highways and byways of Europe’, as H. H. Asquith put it.³ The outbreak and early course of the Boer War, however, increased both the sentiment and the

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degree to which Chamberlain's solution was acceptable. The views expressed in October 1900 and April 1901 by Lord George Hamilton to Lord Curzon were representative of his ministerial colleagues. On the latter occasion he wrote:

I am gradually coming round to the opinion that we must alter our foreign policy, and throw our lot in, for good or bad, with some other Power . . . As we now stand, we are an object of envy and of greed to all the other Powers. Our interests are so vast and ramified that we touch, in some shape or other, the interests of almost every great country in every continent. Our interests being so extended makes it almost impossible for us to concentrate sufficiently, in any one direction, the pressure and power of the Empire so as to deter foreign nations from trying to encroach upon our interests in that particular quarter.⁴

From the point of view of the development of the policy of the Entente, the significance of the Anglo-German negotiations of 1901 was that they established that a German alliance would be no solution to the problems facing the British Empire. The British wished to reduce the burden of their responsibilities, not to increase it. They wished to remain a World Power, not to become a European one. Lord Salisbury pointed out that the liability of having to defend the German and Austrian frontiers against Russia was heavier than that of having to defend the British Isles against France.⁵ Sir F. Bertie, one of the officials at the Foreign Office, agreed that 'if once we bind ourselves by a formal defensive alliance and practically join the Triple Alliance we shall never be on decent terms with France our neighbour in Europe and in many parts of the world, or with Russia whose frontiers are coterminous with ours or nearly so over a large portion of Asia'.⁶ Lord Lansdowne listed as the second of five 'virtually insuperable' difficulties in the way of an Anglo-German alliance 'the certainty of alienating France and Russia'.⁷ Salisbury had never believed that the Germans would ever stand by Britain against Russia, because of their long undefended frontier with Russia in Europe. The Germans had already justified Salisbury's lack of faith in them by interpreting the Anglo-German Agreement of October 1900 in such a way as to absolve them of any duty to consider Manchuria as an integral part of China.⁸

Chamberlain in 1898, Lansdowne in 1902, and Lord Haldane in retrospect, all invoked the existence of groups of Powers as the explanation for the end of English isolation.⁹ Even in 1898, however, there was nothing new about these 'groups': they were a well-established feature of the international scene. The diplomatic remedies for the British condition that were taken were not due to the existence or formation of groups of Powers. They were due rather to something which Salisbury had included in an explanation to the Queen in 1886 of why it was the destiny of Her Majesty's servants in foreign affairs 'to be always making bricks without

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straw': 'Without money, without any strong land force, with an insecure tenure of power, and with an ineffective agency, they have to counterwork the efforts of three Empires, who labour under none of these disadvantages.'¹⁰ Shortage of money was the chronic complaint which, in the early years of the twentieth century, became so acute as no longer to be tolerable.

In 1897 Salisbury had had to take the War Office to task for making proposals for the conduct of the Nile campaign which were, 'like many documents from the same source, defective in taking little or no account of money'. He went on: 'Money is our only serious difficulty. If we have money, the . . . power of the Khalifa's army matters little, for we can always bring up British regiments in sufficient force to defeat him. But if we have no money we cannot use the British army at all.'¹¹ In September 1901 he made the following pessimistic prediction to Curzon, the Viceroy of India:

Our main interest in the East (after China) has been the movements of the Persian Question. In the main it is a question of money. In the last generation we did much what we liked in the East by force or threats – by squadrons and tall-talk – but the day of individual coercive action is almost passed by. For some years to come Eastern advance must largely depend on payment, and I fear that in that race England will seldom win.¹²

Selborne, who echoed this prediction in January 1903, had in December 1900 been led to consider a formal alliance with Germany as 'possibly the only alternative to an ever-increasing Navy and ever-increasing Navy estimates'.¹³ Considerations of economy were important in the making of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of February 1902; it was on the same grounds that Grey argued for its extension in time in May 1911.¹⁴ When Lord Cromer wrote to A. J. Balfour from Egypt in October 1903 suggesting that an understanding on all pending questions with France be regarded as 'possibly a stepping-stone to a general understanding with Russia', what he had further in mind was that the latter 'possibly, again, may prepare the ground for some reduction in our enormous military and naval expenditure'.¹⁵ In a paper of July 1906 the secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, Sir George Clarke, took it for granted that the primary justification of negotiations with Russia was the removal of the mutual suspicions 'which have already cost us a heavy expenditure of life and treasure'. Looking back from the threshold of the signature of the Anglo-Russian Conventions of August 1907, and recalling that it had been the policy of all his successive Chiefs, Sir Thomas Sanderson, who had been Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office from 1895 to 1906, accounted for this in the following terms: 'The reason is an obvious one – the process of working in constant antagonism is too expensive . . . we could not pursue

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a really successful policy of antagonism to Russia without efforts and sacrifices which the public and Parliament would not agree to.¹⁶ Sir C. Hardinge, Sanderson's successor, declared to the Ambassador to St Petersburg in January 1909: 'We cannot afford to sacrifice in any way our entente with Russia'; Grey declared in the last week of July 1914: 'We cannot possibly afford to see the position of France weakened.'¹⁷ These declarations have, in a real sense, to be taken literally.

In order to retain that command of the sea so vital to Britain, and in order at the same time to guard in arms against all comers every portion of the British Empire's land frontier, it would have been necessary to raise vast sums of money. This had even less appeal for a Liberal administration pledged to economise and to retrench, and whose programme of domestic reforms depended upon the savings to be made, than it had for their predecessors in office. At the beginning of 1909, facing the prospect of raising £38 million for the Navy Estimates alone, the Chancellor of the Exchequer D. Lloyd George reminded Asquith of 'the emphatic pledges given by all of us before and at the last general election to reduce the gigantic expenditure on armaments built up by the recklessness of our predecessors':

Scores of your most loyal supporters in the House of Commons take these pledges seriously and even a £3 million increase will chill their zeal for the Government and an assumed increase of £5–6 million for the next year will stagger them. There are millions of earnest Liberals in the country who are beginning rather to lose confidence in the Government for reasons we are not altogether responsible for. When the £38 million navy estimates are announced the disaffection of these good Liberals will break into open sedition and the usefulness of this Parliament will be at an end.¹⁸

Grey took the line that whilst he too had advocated retrenchment before the election, he had 'always excepted the Navy from my promises, and in any case promises must always be subordinate to national safety'.¹⁹ Since Grey, Asquith, Sir R. McKenna and the Board of Admiralty were all prepared to resign over the matter, it was this line which prevailed.

It must be emphasised that this particular cabinet crisis was produced merely by the necessity of finding the money for the quite local purpose of the defence of the British Isles. A commensurately greater crisis would have been created by the necessity of finding the altogether larger sums of money to secure overall naval supremacy and to retain command of the sea as a whole. Command of the sea, moreover, would still have left the defence of the Empire to be provided for. Naval supremacy was no defence to India. The seas might still be regarded, with more than a pinch of salt, as all one, but this was increasingly irrelevant in an age when the develop-

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ment of railway communications rendered the greatest possession of the British Empire vulnerable to overland attack by a Great Power.²⁰

Even as it was, in 1909 the Admiralty lowered still further the sights adjusted by Selborne in 1901. It decided that British needs would be met if the strength of the British Navy was maintained in a ratio of 16 to 10 with the German Navy.²¹ The adoption of this 60% standard, which was not made public until 1912, effectively meant that the Admiralty had given up the struggle to retain command of the sea. They had retreated from the position they had taken up early in 1906, when they had said that the Board of Admiralty could not base its plans on the shifting sands of any temporary and unofficial international relationship, and when, on the grounds that ententes may vanish, that only battleships were substantial, they had declared that the existence of the entente with France was no reason to reduce the Navy estimates.²² From 1909 'naval supremacy' meant only 'supremacy over Germany'. Britain's freedom of action was therefore still further reduced. Grey later observed in the House of Commons that it was at least as true that foreign policy depended upon armaments as that armaments depended upon policy:

If you are going to have an absolute standard superior to all the other European navies put together, it is clear that your foreign policy is comparatively simple. Supposing you find yourself at any given moment in such an unfortunate diplomatic situation that the whole of Europe is combined against you at once, you are still going to be able to defend yourself then. If you are not in that position, and if you are not going to have that kind of standard, your Foreign Secretary must adjust your foreign policy so that you will not at any given moment have combined against you navies which you are unequal to meet.²³

Grey did maintain, in one moment of bravado, what Hardinge had been apt to maintain: that so long as Britain retained her sea power she could not be coerced even by a state which achieved European dominance;²⁴ but whilst the Navy might have been able to secure the British Isles, that was the only part of the British Empire that it would have been able to secure. Well might Grey have discouraged M. Briand in 1910 from spending on the French Navy money that could be spent on the French Army.²⁵ He had no wish to be a party to schemes for naval building which, if implemented, would have still further reduced Britain's 'naval supremacy' and increased her dependence on her 'friends'.

No doubt the sums of money, however vast, that would have been necessary in order to avoid diplomatic solutions and continue in isolation, could have been raised. Even if certain major components of the Empire, such as India, proved reluctant, as they had done in the past, to bear the charge for an Imperial war, even when the defence of Afghanistan was in question,²⁶

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Great Britain was a wealthy country. Income tax, before 1914, did not exceed one shilling in the pound.

Some Foreign Office figures were prepared to spend their way at least out of the potential trouble represented by the German Navy. The solution they offered to this problem was that of naval building. One of the Senior Clerks, E. A. Crowe, expressed the view in a memorandum of 1 January 1907 that 'nothing is more likely to produce in Germany the impression of the practical hopelessness of a never-ending succession of costly naval programmes than the conviction, based on ocular demonstration, that for every German ship England will inevitably lay down two, so maintaining the present relative British preponderance'.²⁷ The opinion of Sir F. Cartwright in Munich was that every shilling spent on maintaining the efficacy of the British Fleet was a shilling spent in the direction of the maintenance of the peace of Europe.²⁸ G. S. Spicer, one of the Junior Clerks, thought in 1908 that there was 'just a chance that were the German Government really and fully, once and for all, to realise that Great Britain meant to maintain at all costs her naval supremacy they might accept the fact and cease their challenge'; Captain P. W. Dumas, then Naval Attaché at Berlin, called for the specification of a real Two-Power Standard as often as possible and for Britain's adherence to it.²⁹ Sir E. Goschen, the Ambassador in Berlin from 1908, wrote to Hardinge in 1909:

the more determined we show ourselves to maintain our absolute supremacy at sea the more civil and anxious to come to terms the Germans will be . . . as I have often said, the best and only understanding we can have with them is to make them understand that we mean business and intend, whatever it may cost us, to maintain our maritime supremacy.³⁰

Hardinge needed no encouragement. He always maintained that the best way of stopping, or of modifying, the German naval programme was through a declaration of intent to outdo it. He attributed an apparent slackening of the German programme in the winter of 1908 entirely to 'the firm declarations made by Mr Asquith of his adherence to the Two-Power Standard'. In 1910, he said that had the Government agreed to build by loan three years earlier, when he had urged strongly on Grey and the Cabinet that they should obtain authority for a loan of £100 million to be used as required, 'we might have dealt a very serious blow to the German naval programme, and possibly have knocked it out altogether'.³¹

There is no evidence that it occurred to these people, who were giving this advice at a time when they knew that Russia was quite unprepared for war, that if the German naval programme was terminated the German Government would have more money to concentrate on the German Army. There is no more evidence of this than there is that it occurred to the same individuals that closing abruptly the German option of expansion

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overseas, dashing prematurely her hopes in that area, might concentrate her mind and energies upon the continent of Europe and create a genuine German problem there both for Britain and for Europe. Yet this could well have been the result of the adoption of their arguments of 1911 against the acquisition by Germany of territory in Africa, as it could have been of the acceptance of their argument for an end to all negotiations with Germany because of the ambivalence their continuance implied – an argument that derived from fear that the British political pendulum would swing too far and stick in the German direction, and which betrayed the fact that its holders had less confidence in and less understanding of the internal political dynamics than had Grey himself.

Though Grey was determined to maintain naval supremacy over Germany in the North Sea, he was not prepared to go any further towards the solution of naval building. The scale of Hardinge's recommendations had no appeal for him. As recently as March 1904 he had recalled the example of Lord Goschen's Naval Defence Act of 1889: 'instead of discouraging the building of other Powers, this great effort on our part had increased the rivalry.'³² Though by no means a free agent, though under pressure during the Agadir crisis and in the subsequent negotiations with Germany to act in the sense of the Cabinet as a whole, Grey also had no time for the idea of excluding Germany from Africa and other extra-European territories. He told Bertie in July 1911 that 'as to British interests it really doesn't matter to us who owns tropical territory that we do not want for ourselves'.³³ He forestalled the protest Crowe wanted Bertie to make against proposals that would bring Germany onto the Sudan frontier by stating bluntly: 'I do not think it matters very much whether we have Germany or France as a neighbour in Africa.'³⁴ He ignored in January 1912 Bertie's projection of Germany supplanting Belgium and Portugal in Africa and creating an empire across the black continent that would break at right-angles the all-red route from the Cape to Cairo.³⁵ But though he thus kept open and alive in the German mind the possibilities of expansion overseas, there is no evidence that it occurred to Grey any more than to his advisers that he was helping to spare Europe the strain she might otherwise have to endure.³⁶ The negotiations with Germany over the future of the Portuguese colonies were intended by him less to distract her from Europe than to distract those of his colleagues who wished to replace the policy of the Entente with a German policy from raising again the question of a political formula.

There is some evidence to account for why it was that, from the turn of the century, successive administrations should have been as reluctant as they were to contemplate large-scale expenditure on the defence of the British