

CHAPTER 1

*Before September 1939***Britain and the world**

The war of 1939 was a European war; it did not become a world war until 1941. Britain was a world power as well as a European power, which was a source of its strength as well of its weakness. It was also the reason for Germany's envy and for its frustration.

The European states had extended their influence in the world at large in substantial part because of their rivalry. By securing resources from outside Europe they could dominate other European rivals or secure independence from them. Rivalry with France, which had drawn Britain into India, culminated in the victories of Trafalgar and Waterloo. Britain enjoyed an unusually strong position among European powers by the mid nineteenth century. It was enhanced by its industrial pre-eminence. Indeed that prompted more moderate attitudes to territorial dominion than those of earlier European states with worldwide interests. Britain allowed the settler territories to govern themselves. It did not deprive other European powers of colonial opportunities. It tried to avoid creating further Indias.

Industrial pre-eminence did not last. The Industrial Revolution spread to other countries, in Europe and outside Europe. As a result Britain was faced with economic and political problems. Economically it faced the rivalry of other industrialising economies, sometimes more innovative, sometimes better resourced, often more protected. Britain met that rivalry in ways that were often thought inadequate. In some areas it met it head on with some success. Occasionally it resorted to a protected market, although it never indulged in full protectionism. It tended to turn to banking and investment and away from trade and manufacturing.

Politically Britain faced two major changes. First, it lost the security that the balance of power had offered on the continent of Europe since the defeat of France. With the unification and industrialisation of Germany, one state on the continent clearly became more powerful than any other. Furthermore, that dominance undermined the naval supremacy that Britain had established. Germany itself began to build a great navy, and it became all the more important that other navies of Europe should not threaten the British. Britain's own security was at stake.

Traditionally rivalry in Europe had prompted extension in the rest of the world. For Britain, however, to draw on resources in the rest of the world now in order to preserve the status quo in Europe was not easy, other than in economic and financial terms. First, its empire in the world rested in large part on economic links that were under challenge, rather than on political links. Second, other powers were emerging overseas, too. It would be necessary to seek their support. The emerging dominions would have to be won over; that was even more the case with independent powers like Japan and above all the US. Yet they, of course, had their own objectives, not necessarily consistent with those of the British.

What would be most damaging for Britain would be a challenge outside Europe and a challenge within Europe at the same time. In World War I that had been avoided, and indeed the resources of the world had been gathered into an alliance that finally secured an armistice with the Germans. While the Russians had been defeated, the French had not, and the Americans had been drawn in. While the Japanese were ambitious, they were yet allied to the British and thus restrained as well as encouraged by them. The position was very different by the opening of the war in Europe in 1939. But the role the rest of the world would play was important both to Britain and to Germany.

Hitler's ambition was, not unlike the Kaiser's, to replace Britain as the leading European power. A prolonged war was not to his advantage; it might overextend his resources and, as in World War I, draw in additional enemies. The British, by contrast, could only hope to outlast Hitler rather than defeat him. In the event he determined to attack Russia, while the mobilisation of American power prompted the Japanese to act. The British had differed among themselves about the way the resources of the world might best be made available. Was it better to preserve the status quo in the Far East? Was it better for the US not to become an active participant? In the event the US was directly involved. Britain was saved. But in the meantime it suffered great losses, and at the end of the war it emerged on the winning side rather than victorious.

The colonial structure of Southeast Asia had been created in the period of British primacy. It lasted until the Japanese incursion of

1941–42. This book examines Britain's attempts to preserve it during the struggle with Germany that began with the Nazi invasion of Poland at the end of August 1939. Essentially the strategies of the British were those they had adopted at the beginning of the century. Their main focus was on Europe. So far as it could be done they sought to maintain the status quo elsewhere. Their main means was diplomacy. Their military power was insufficient, which of course itself limited the effectiveness of their diplomacy. Through diplomacy they sought to contain the Japanese as well as to avoid provoking them.

Major changes since the beginning of the century had changed the context of diplomacy. They had also changed the relative power of the states concerned. They had not, however, dislodged the Southeast Asian status quo. The British were aware of their weakness, although cautious about displaying it. But it might be that success in preserving the status quo so far had produced an undue hope that it could still be sustained and contributed, along with the priority given to Europe, to the failure to provide adequately for its defence or to recognise fully the possibilities of disaster.

The impact of World War I

By the 1890s Southeast Asia included territories that Britain directly ruled, like Burma, conquered in three stages from British India; Singapore and the Straits Settlements, acquired as a protection for the Straits of Melaka; and Labuan, an island colony acquired in the 1840s as part of a Borneo policy never fully taken up. There were, however, three Borneo territories – Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo – with which Britain had made protectorate agreements in 1888, and it had closer relations with several of the Malay states on the peninsula, which in 1895 had become the Federated Malay States.

Other colonial powers in island Southeast Asia existed partly on the sufferance of the British. The Netherlands were in the process of filling out their claims to a realm that extended from Sabong to Merauke. Internationally that had involved deals with the British, including the treaties of 1824 and 1871, as well as the policy of a commercial open door, marked, for example, by the tariff of 1872. Although without the same kind of specific treaty relationships, Spain in the Philippines recognised the primacy of the British in a somewhat similar way; it permitted them a major economic role, hoping thereby to diminish any political challenge. The French had established themselves in what they called Indo-China. To this the British had offered little opposition. Their concern had only been to limit French expansion. The main objective

was to preserve Siam as a buffer between the empires. To that the diplomacy of the Thais, under the absolute monarchy of the Chakri kings, and their determination to maintain independence, substantially contributed. They succeeded, although having to make territorial concessions and 'unequal' treaties. Southeast Asia in the period of British primacy was a patchwork of jurisdictions, colonial, pseudo-colonial and independent European and Asian. On its remote verge stood a remnant of the earliest European empire, Portuguese Timor.

The form British primacy thus took naturally reflected Britain's interests. The main concern of the British, in Southeast Asia and in general, was to preserve and enhance the economic opportunity their security and their prosperity gave them. Their political interests seconded those objectives. Territorial control was not the prime objective; the aim was to ensure conditions under which commerce might flourish. India was an exception to prove the rule. There Britain had established a unique dominion, and it had its own political and strategic imperatives, which had a profound impact on the fate of Burma. But elsewhere Britain's interests lay in preserving the security of the sea lanes through Southeast Asia on which its connection with China depended and on preserving open-door access to the economic opportunities the area itself supplied.

The situation began to change in the 1890s above all as a result of changes in the world at large. The emergence of other industrial powers challenged Britain's primacy. Its attempt to meet the economic challenge was perhaps more limited than it might have been. Its attempt to meet the political challenge by a more assertive imperial policy was also limited; its dependencies had acquired considerable independence, and they had no intention of throwing it away. Its main thrusts were naval and diplomatic. There were limits to British naval power; other industrial powers also expanded navally. Even greater emphasis was placed on Britain's diplomatic resource. In a sense that had always been its approach. Britain had perceived the world as one of nations, tied above all by economic relations. That perception disposed it to adjustment, and the major changes after the turn of the century were perceived as continuing that policy. Perhaps that was mistaken: some have argued that the changes should have been greater. Perhaps it was misleading: the changes were after all substantial.

Indeed no options were likely to be very palatable. Some, however, were more palatable than others. What concerned the British most was the rise of Germany. The core of British policy had been and was to remain its security in Europe. That could be undermined by the rise of a power with aspirations to what its Kaiser called a Napoleonic hegemony.

The governments of the late 1890s and the early years of the twentieth century in vain sought an understanding with the second Reich but reached none. They adopted what came to be another prime feature in British policy: a relationship with the US that at the very least avoided conflict and that made the most of what the powers had in common. They also sought to diminish conflict with other European powers, in particular with France, and with Russia. With Russia the task was more difficult than with France. Russia had long been perceived as a threat to Britain's interests in Asia, and in particular to its dominion in India, and one that Britain, with its emphasis on naval power, had not felt entirely confident it could meet. Faced with changes in many parts of the world, but having to concentrate its strength more and more on Europe, Britain found it additionally difficult with the new thrust in Russia's Asian policy associated with Witte and the building of the trans-Siberian railway. It hoped to meet the Russian threat by its alliance with Japan of 1902.

Yet Japan itself wanted change. What form of change was not clear. It was concerned at the opportunities given the Western powers by the disintegration of China and in particular by the strategic threat of Russia. Would it aid the Chinese or would it emulate the West? Industrialising on a slender resource basis, Japan was also deeply interested in foreign economic opportunities. Could it acquire them or would frustration also drive it to imperialism? Britain's fundamental concern in the Far East had been China where it had led the way in making the unequal treaties but wished to maintain territorial integrity and the open door. There, as elsewhere, Britain wished to uphold the status quo as far as possible. Britain's relationship with Japan was likely to be ambivalent. Could it contain and channel the energies of the Japanese? Could they expect sufficient support against other European powers? None had been forthcoming in 1895 when Japan acquired Taiwan and secured the independence of Korea but was compelled by the Triple Intervention of Russia, France and Germany to disgorge its gains in Manchuria.

Britain's relations with its own dependencies themselves took on more of a diplomatic character. If they had become politically more independent that had been within the worldwide framework of Britain's economic and naval power. That framework was weakening, and the dependencies were increasingly faced with new foreign policy questions, indeed, it might be said, with the need for a foreign policy. 'Australia, in spite of herself, is being forced into a foreign policy of her own because foreign interests and risks surround us on every side,' declared Alfred Deakin, one of the founders of the recently established Commonwealth. 'A Pacific policy we must have.'¹ For Australia the rise of Japan, and Britain's increasing concentration in home waters, raised a major issue. Should it contribute to the British fleet, or should it defend its own home

waters? 'A policy which disregards the Pacific, or leaves it to Japan', declared Frederic Eggleston, then in Australian municipal politics, in March 1914, 'cannot be regarded as a truly Imperial policy.'² A two-ocean dilemma now confronted the empire. New Zealand, more remote, smaller, concerned about markets worldwide, but above all in Britain, tended to favour the first option: one Empire, one Flag, one Fleet, in the phrase of its Prime Minister, Sir Joseph Ward.³

What happened in Southeast Asia was likely to be of increasing interest to these states. But before World War I the changes there were limited. The US acquired the Philippines in the course of its war of 1898 with Spain. Britain had been unable to prevent that acquisition. Its preference was for maintaining Spanish control, but American was better than German. Moreover, the US, by joining the imperialist powers in Southeast Asia, helped to preserve the nineteenth-century pattern. Change in the Philippines meant maintaining the status quo elsewhere. It was not so much that the Philippines revolution had been likely to spur on nationalism elsewhere, although US intervention certainly destroyed the first republic in Southeast Asia. More important, US intervention in the Philippines inhibited any intervention by the Japanese, already established in Taiwan. The ruling oligarchy of Japan was in any case cautious, chastened by the Triple Intervention. The aid given by Japanese extremists was limited.

The Britain–Japan alliance of 1902 tended the same way. In some sense it enlisted Japanese acceptance of the status quo at least for the time being. Indeed some Japanese then and since have seen it as a kind of alliance against nationalism: 'one of the main intentions of the Alliance was to contain the aspiration of Asian people for freedom'.⁴ That view might exaggerate the strength and perceived threat of nationalism. But it has some validity. The alliance not only limited Japan's threat as a power; it also emasculated pan-Asianism, another form of international challenge to the British imperial framework, by supporting the real-politikers among the Japanese policymakers.

The Japanese came to terms with the other colonial powers, too. In 1907 they made an agreement with the French, accepting their claims over Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, as did their allies the British who, pressed in Europe, had made the entente in 1904; the two governments

having a special interest in seeing wider and peaceful conditions secured especially in the regions of the Chinese empire adjoining the territories where they have rights of sovereignty, protection or occupation, undertake to assist each other in assuring peace and security in the regions in order to maintain their respective situation and the territorial rights of the two contracting parties on the Asian continent.⁵

In 1912 the Dutch gave Japan most-favoured-nation treatment in the Indies.

In World War I itself, unlike World War II, there was no substantial conflict in Asia. But the war had dramatic effects both as to the framework within which empires were sustained and within the empires themselves. In the prewar period the British had already withdrawn some of their naval forces from East Asia, relying on their ally Japan to maintain the status quo. But the Japanese wished to change the status quo in their own interest; although restrained by their alliance partner, they were also encouraged. The absorption of Europe in the war gave them new opportunities in East Asia. They exerted pressure on China, particularly with the twenty-one demands of 1915. They were able to take over German colonies, including the Caroline and Marshall Islands, and German concessions in China, and although that was far from welcome to the Chinese or the Allies, it was accepted, even by the Americans when they entered the war in 1917. The Japanese also prospered economically, becoming for the first time a creditor rather than a debtor nation. It was not certain that these opportunities would satisfy them. The appetite might grow with feeding.

The war had its effect on India, too. The British, as ever, were concerned about subversion, and indeed the Germans were alive to the possibilities of Sikh extremism. At the same time the British found it necessary to involve India increasingly in the war. The spread of the war into Turkey involved Indian interests, and Indian labour was needed even in Europe. The involvement urged the British into new undertakings towards Indians. Towards the end they committed themselves to the goal of self-government along the lines of the settler dominions, the war precipitating a formulation so far only implicit. The policy for India, Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, declared, was 'the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire'.⁶ That concession also had to be extended to Burma.

The collapse of the tsarist regime during the war left the way open for the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. That event had a message for the workers of the world, which indeed the Comintern was to take up. Its initial aspiration was for revolution in Europe amid the postwar chaos. Failing to achieve that, it looked to revolution elsewhere as a means of undermining capitalism. In particular it looked to the colonies and the underdeveloped countries, and its opposition was directed above all against the British, the predominant colonial power and the power that benefited most from the unequal treaties against which Chinese nationalists were now struggling. A traditional threat to the British-

sponsored political system had come from imperial Russia; now it had a new ideological dimension. Moreover, that dimension crossed the frontiers in a way the old threat had not and reduced the isolation of opposition movements in the colonial and underdeveloped territories.

In a sense, however, the Bolsheviks had a rival. The US entered the war in 1917, making it a world war but also enhancing its ideological character. American power and ideals were now sure to play a larger part in the shaping of the world, and Wilsonian policies, with their emphasis on self-determination and nationality, were indeed to some extent competing with Bolshevik ideology. Both opposed the old colonial system and gave the redemption of China a special emphasis. The fact that the Americans in the Philippines lagged a little behind their own pretensions – despite the promises of the Jones Act and the ‘Filipinization’ policies of Governor F.B. Harrison – did not undermine the impact of their ideas in general. The fact that they did not join the League of Nations, which they had sponsored, did not destroy the impact of its agencies in colonial territories.

Yet the impact on Southeast Asia of all the wartime changes was limited. Britain’s opponents had not effectively brought the war to Southeast Asia. Its Japanese ally restrained itself, concentrating on China, on economic opportunity and, at the war’s end, on Siberia. The Indian troops in Singapore mutinied in 1915, which was disconcerting, and the lack of British forces in the area was shown up. Pan-Asians among the Japanese made rather more than the British liked of the assistance they afforded their ally. ‘What is the significance to be attached to the fact that the flag of the Rising Sun was set up in the centre of Singapore?’⁷ An alliance with the Japanese, although designed to maintain the status quo, always offered some threat to it. Now Japan seemed to be supporting the British almost too clearly, which showed that they needed support and not merely in respect of a threat from another power but within their own territory. Some Japanese would indeed have preferred a direct break with the British alliance. But no such break ensued, and the alliance continued till 1921–22.

Victory did not bring change either. The possessions of the defeated Germans in the Pacific were distributed, but they had acquired none in Southeast Asia. The Paris treaty offered no new opportunities, therefore, although it put Australia into New Guinea and Japan into the Pacific islands. The Washington international conference of 1921–22 provided an Asian counterpart to the Paris conference. Its decisions involved major changes, but the territorial framework even so appeared to be relatively secure. The Anglo-Japanese alliance itself was displaced, but the alliance had always had somewhat equivocal implications for Southeast Asia. While it had been displaced more because of American and

Canadian pressure than because of that of Britain's Asian or Australasian allies or dominions, its abandonment did not appear to be a source of concern. The pledges of the four-power, five- and nine-power treaties increased the sense of security. They supported the territorial status quo, diminished the prospect of naval rivalry and upheld the integrity of China and the open door. While the Netherlands was not directly involved in this security system, the powers, by identic notes, pledged to sustain the status quo in respect of Netherlands India too.

The changes were, however, perhaps more important, at least potentially, than the continuity. The treaties were made in the Washington spirit, but it was only that spirit that would preserve them; they contained pledges, but there were no sanctions behind them. The Japanese had accepted the treaties, despite the blow that the loss of the old British alliance seemed now to represent – 'A strong and healthy evergreen tree, which had symbolised peace in the orient for over twenty years, had been felled', as Ito Masanori, a journalist who covered the Washington conference, put it⁸ – and despite the limits on their naval building under the five-power treaty. The system indeed provided security for Japan in East Asia. No other state could modernise its naval fortifications in the area, and the ratios in capital ships were such that, given the worldwide commitments of the UK and the US, they could not challenge Japan in East Asian waters. But Japanese interests in China were less secure. While the Washington powers envisaged a gradual accommodation between Chinese nationalism and outside interests, and thus the gradual dissolution of the unequal treaties, it was unlikely that such a process would satisfy an impatient Chinese nationalism, fuelled initially by a communist alliance and later sustained despite or because of a break in that alliance. In times of prosperity the Japanese might be content with the opportunities they still had in China. But if they determined to take more forceful steps to protect their interests, international treaties would provide few real obstacles in their way. The war had made the US the leading Western power. Whether it would use its power to uphold the settlement was quite uncertain. Indeed Charles E. Hughes, the Secretary of State, had made it clear that its interests would not require the US to intervene in China.

If the US were unwilling, the British would be unable. Their wealth had been greatly depleted by the war. Their navy, it was now quite clear, could only be a one-ocean navy. They could place it in the East only if there were no crisis in Europe. For the purpose they had to build a base in Singapore, which the Washington treaties permitted, but the cost would be substantial. The fact that it was built, coupled with the substantial development in Britain's economic involvement on the Malay Peninsula, which made it a dollar-earner when dollars were needed, both

focused Britain's interest on the area and added to the conviction that it would be defended. But that could not happen if no naval forces were available or if those forces that were were not defended from the growing threat of air power. The concept that Singapore was a 'fortress', with intrinsic strength, was misleading. The two-ocean dilemma was recognised rather than resolved.

The 1920s saw change within China itself. The Kuomintang (KMT) and Chinese Communist Party allied in order to reunify China and undo the unequal treaties, and enjoyed success in the south and centre. Entrenched in the nineteenth-century system of unequal treaties in those regions, the British had borne the brunt of their attack. But they came to believe that they should try to accommodate Chinese nationalism and, working with the new élite as with the old, put their interests on a more collaborative basis. This was the purport of British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain's policy of 1926, and it was in keeping with the general thrust of British policy in East Asia as elsewhere since the war, if not indeed since the beginning of the twentieth century. The essentials could be retained by adjustment within a more or less stable international system.

The Chinese with the Japanese were to find adjustment less easy. While the focus of the nationalists and their communist allies was on central China the Japanese did not feel threatened, and the policy of 'China Friendship' associated with the Foreign Minister, Shidehara, could be sustained. But when the Northern March reached the north the Japanese became more anxious over the protection of their rights and interests. Nor was the break between KMT and CCP that emerged with their very success likely to reduce Japanese anxiety. The KMT, anxious to show that the break would not mean that they would neglect China's status, sought the end of unequal treaties as demonstratively as ever, if not more so. The focus was Manchuria, and there the tension was apparent from 1928. Extremists in the Kwantung army of the Japanese had assassinated the Manchurian warlord, and his son hoisted the KMT flag. But it was the onset of the depression that made the next incident decisive. This time Japanese troops secured control of Manchuria, and the government at home lost control.

Japanese expansion in the 1930s

The realism of the Meiji phase had been modified by the internationalism of Shidehara. In turn it had given way to a more aggressive approach inconsistent with the Washington spirit and with the kind of adjustments the British envisaged. Moreover it increasingly invoked a Japanese nationalism that took up and reshaped early pan-Asian ideals