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## SOME FUNDAMENTALS OF BRITAIN'S FOREIGN POLICY

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**T**O describe Britain's foreign policy is specially difficult because of the nature of the British people, the most pragmatic in the world. They have always been suspicious of general theories. Their policy has been built on practical considerations, and, provided that the desired result can be obtained, they are indifferent to inconsistencies in the pattern of conduct. Their tradition is conservative. Britain is almost the only country which has not experienced a revolution or a civil war in the last 150 years. (This does not of course, apply to Ireland). Yet it has made political and social changes greater in many ways than countries which have used violent means for similar ends.

At the same time the foreign policy of Britain shows a continuity which few states have achieved. It is, of course, dictated by geography and the national characteristics derived from environment and inheritance. The British people are much influenced by the memory of their own history. In times of great danger, sometimes the result of their refusal to look far enough ahead, they instinctively combine together with a surprising confidence in the final result. They are the only state with an existence of 150 years whose capital has not been occupied by foreign troops during that period.

## COMMAND OF THE SEAS:

Their foreign policy has, of course, been mainly conditioned by the fact that they are an island—or rather a group of islands, for Ireland has always been a serious, though not a mortal, weakness. But insular position would not by itself have accounted for their history. Their islands had a multitude of harbours large and small, which enabled them to support an exceptionally large proportion of seafaring folk. They could, therefore, obtain the command of the seas over a long period of time; otherwise their insular position would have been a weakness, not the foundation of their power. In addition they were thus able to bring to their islands the raw materials of the world by the cheapest form of transport—the sea. Possessing themselves the main source of energy—coal—they built up a manufacturing and transport trade which in the 19th century surpassed that of all other countries. One of the results, almost unsought, was the creation of a vast Commonwealth comprising one fourth of the world's population.

To maintain their command of the sea and to find outlets for their trade has therefore always been the foundation of British foreign policy. But the rise of new maritime states in the 20th century meant that Britain could no longer command all the seas as she had done in the 19th century. She relinquished the control of the Caribbean Sea to the United States, of Far Eastern waters to Japan, and, before the threat of the German fleet, that of the Mediterranean to France. Henceforward the security of Britain and the Commonwealth could only be maintained by diplomacy as well as by sea power. At the same time Britain's share of the world's manufacturing and export trade decreased as the United States, Germany and Japan grew in industrial power.

World War I added the new problem of air power. At the close of it, Britain had the strongest air force in existence, but she had not the same natural advantages in this element as on the sea, nor the same tradition. Moreover in the period between the wars Britain was one of the foremost advocates of the reduction and limitation of armaments. The result was that she was not ready to cope with the sudden aggressive rise of Nazi Germany whose position was based on the creation of a dominant air fleet at a time when the possibilities of air power were much misunderstood. Nevertheless this danger was overcome and the advantages of her insular position and

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command of the sea were never better illustrated than in World War II. The Channel was still a sure protection. Hitler could no more conquer Britain than Napoleon, and was driven to expedients curiously parallel to his. Britain has now attained a position in strategic air power as well as in sea power second only to that of the United States. The new force, however, had great effect upon her policy. It makes the defence of Western Europe more necessary than ever before in her history. But, as will be seen, this change is less revolutionary than has sometimes been supposed.

### NEVER ISOLATIONIST:

Britain, it is true, abandoned at the close of the Middle Ages all ambition of territory on the continent of Europe. Hanover was a dynastic inheritance never regarded as their own by the people of Britain. Gibraltar was Britain's only possession on the Continent. But Britain never renounced her position as a European power. If the Continent fell under the domination of an aggressive power her own safety and well being were ultimately threatened. Consequently Britain was never isolationist in any real sense of the word. Five times, against Philip of Spain, Louis XIV, Napoleon and during the two world wars, she played a principal role in preventing the peoples of Europe from falling under the control of a dominant power. The Netherlands was her principal partner in this task on the first two occasions, and, as will be seen, the security of that area of Europe was always a primary object of Britain's policy.

In addition Britain had special rights and duties in Europe under treaties of long standing. The oldest are those with Portugal whose European and colonial possessions Britain has for centuries been bound to defend against aggression. In return she had until the last war the use of the fine harbour of Lisbon. But more important were two other treaties which protected two areas in which Britain had a special interest, the Low Countries and the Middle East.

At the close of the Napoleonic wars Britain tried to obtain a safe defence of the Low Countries by combining Belgium with the Netherlands. When the revolution of 1830 made this course no longer possible, Britain while still fully recognising the importance to her of the independence of the Netherlands itself was the principal creator of an independent Belgium whose

neutrality was guaranteed by the Great Powers. This device served its purpose well until 1914 when the violation of Belgian neutrality was the main reason why Britain entered the war as a united and determined nation.

After World War I it was seen that under the new conditions of air warfare this special protection of the mouth of the Scheldt was not sufficient and special commitments were undertaken to defend not only Belgium but France, summed up in the celebrated words of Mr. Baldwin, "our frontier is on the Rhine". This frontier France, Belgium and Britain failed to defend in 1940 with the result that Britain was subjected to devastating air bombardment, and in the later stages of the war to attack by pilotless aircraft and rockets. Moreover the occupation of Norway and the Netherlands made both submarine and air attack more difficult to resist.

#### TOOK THE LEAD:

From the close of World War II, therefore, Britain recognized that the defence of all Western Europe is of primary importance to her own security. By the Brussels Treaty of 1948, she took the lead in an attempt to create a combined Western force sufficiently strong to resist aggression from the East. This attempt of Western Europe to organize its own defence, assisted by the economic and material aid of the United States and Canada, was of primary importance, for it was certainly one factor which made possible the later developments of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

For it was soon seen that Western Europe, while ready to defend itself, was not yet strong enough by itself to resist successfully the threat of aggression from the East. It was indeed suggested that, if a sufficiently close combination of European states were made, Western Europe would be strong enough to take its place as the equal of Russia and the United States. This idea was expressed to some extent in the Council of Europe, to which the United Kingdom Government gave its adhesion. But Britain had always to remember that she was a world state with special obligations and connections in a world wide Commonwealth. It was impossible for her to participate in any organisation so constructed that she could not fulfil her paramount duties to her partners overseas.

Moreover for centuries Britain had realised that the balance of power in Europe depended in the last resource on the non-European world. She would not have been able to resist Na-

napoleon successfully had not her sea power enabled her to draw wealth from overseas which could be used to defend Europe and arm those who were ready to resist the dominance of French power. In the two world wars the necessity of aid from the Western hemisphere was even more apparent and it was always a primary object of Britain to make it effective. As Commonwealth countries grew in strength and the United States became the most powerful of all modern states, Britain realised that only by their aid could the balance of power in Europe be restored. As always, though admittedly in each case too tardily for her own interests and that of Europe, Britain brought in the new world to redress the balance of the old.

#### ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORT:

Thus, though it was Canada that took the initiative in suggesting the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, Britain supported it from the first with enthusiasm. Only a small minority of the extreme left wing felt any doubts about it. It fitted exactly into the pattern of British thinking shaped by the experience of 150 years. It recognises that the ocean unites and does not divide, that continents are not the best basis of international organisation. It enables Britain to play her full part in the defence of Western Europe without sacrificing her position as a world power.

This fact was the reason for her attitude towards the problem, which immediately arose, of the place of Western Germany in the new organisation for defence. For a considerable period Britain had opposed the rearming of Western Germany. She had especially wished to avoid differences with France concerning Germany such as those which had arisen during the period of the Weimar Republic.

But when the United States urged that German manpower and resources were a necessary part of the new system of defence, Britain accepted this point of view. Her own experience of Western Germany as an occupying power had in addition gradually led her towards the conclusion that the German people must by some means be drawn into the community of Western nations.

But at the same time Britain could not, for the reasons stated above, merge her own armies in the European Defence Force—the French expedient for avoiding the dangers of German rearmament, while obtaining the advantage of German

collaboration in the defence of Western Europe. But she has, like the United States, done everything possible by special guarantees to make the construction of a European Defence Force possible. Her own armed forces, including her strategic air power, will then be able to work in conjunction with European and United States defence forces. The resources of the Commonwealth will be brought more easily to assist Europe.

For similar reasons Britain has not found it possible to become a member of the European Coal and Steel Community established under the Schumann plan. She will thus not be able to take part as an equal member in the political organisation which has been devised to give a democratic basis to the defence and economic organisation. But she desires to be closely associated with these developments and to assist them to function. This position of an active associate is what at this stage enables her to make her best contribution to the defence and welfare of Western Europe.

#### THE MIDDLE EAST:

The second area in which Britain took special commitments was what is now called the Middle East. For 120 years she has played the foremost part in the resistance to Russian advance in that area, a policy only modified for the short periods when Germany became even more dangerous than Russia. The Treaty of 1841 which enabled Turkey to rely on her support in closing the Straits to war vessels was meant to protect the Eastern Mediterranean. For the protection of Turkey against Russia Britain fought her only European war between 1815 and 1914. Greece also was always a special interest, since it could be assisted and defended to some extent by her sea power. When the Ottoman Empire declined other means had to be found for the defence of the Middle East and the occupation of Egypt, though not planned for this purpose, gave Britain a base which protected the Suez Canal. When the Ottoman Empire was dissolved in World War I, Britain made special arrangements with the new Arab states whose freedom had been won by the armies of the Commonwealth and two of whom attained full sovereignty under her guidance. She also established the Jewish National Home in Palestine. She continued to protect the Arab states bordering on the Red Sea and maintained her special interest in Southern Persia in order to guard the route to India and India itself from attack.

It was found impossible to reconcile the national aspirations

of the Arabs and the Jews, and Britain, which had founded the Jewish National Home in World War I and saved it, as well as Egypt, from conquest in World War II found the new state coming into existence by methods which she could not approve. At the same time the national resurgence in the Arab states made her position in Iraq and Egypt more difficult. New means have, therefore, been sought to organise the defence of the Middle East, in the interests of its own states and the whole free world as well as of the Commonwealth itself. These have not yet been worked out, but the issue is a vital one. Not only the defence of the Suez Canal but that of the whole Middle East and of Africa to which the Middle East is a bridge, as well as of India and Pakistan, depends on a large degree on a solution being found. Moreover Britain, and, indeed, the whole free world, is concerned in the great reserves of oil which are in this area.

#### NO SOLUTION YET:

There has been more controversy in Britain over this difficult problem than on any other part of her foreign policy and the final solution is still to seek. The inclusion of Greece and Turkey in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, following on the Truman Declaration, showed that the United States realised its importance and was prepared to share the responsibility. But the methods by which the states of the Middle East, like those of Western Europe, should combine together for defence and welfare with the backing of armed forces from Britain and, perhaps, from the Commonwealth and the United States as well, have not yet been discovered. Nevertheless, great progress has recently been made and there is hope that the common interest will prevail over the shortsighted nationalistic policies which have prevented agreements being made.

Britain still has also a great interest in South East Asia and the Far East. The grant of complete independence to the Indian sub-continent was promised during World War I, but the second meant that it had to be given before the unity of India could be preserved, with incalculable harm to the safety and welfare of all South East Asia. The stabilising force of the Indian army is no longer available outside the sub-continent. The great advantage, however, has been obtained that these new states, India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma, have most friendly relations with Britain and the first three are members of the Commonwealth. In Malaya also Britain has been able

to enlist the support of the vast majority of the inhabitants and is gradually overcoming the serious menace of the guerilla communist war. In the Colombo Plan the Commonwealth has followed, so far as its resources permit, the policy of aid to less fortunate peoples which the United States inaugurated in the famous Point Four of President Truman. Britain accepted during World War I the principle that all parts of the Commonwealth should, as soon as was practicable, be allowed the right to govern themselves and to choose their allegiance. World War II has necessarily hastened the pace of this progress towards self-determination, perhaps in some cases dangerously so, but on the whole the experiment has attained a success that has surpassed expectations.

All these manifestations of power depend ultimately, of course, on the economic potential of Britain herself. During World War II she was forced to sacrifice a major part of her overseas capital on which her solvency as a trading power depended. Since this sacrifice was made in the interests of the whole free world, as well as of Britain herself, she has been able to accept without loss of self-respect the assistance granted to her by the United States and Canada during the post-war period.

#### A MAJOR AIM:

But a major aim of Britain's foreign policy is to assist the creation of such a co-operative world that Britain can become solvent herself and continue her vital role in the protection of the free world. When she herself was the greatest industrial power she threw open her markets both at home and in the Commonwealth to the whole world and thus performed a service to the world which did as much to ensure the comparative stability of the 19th century as her dominant sea power. She is still the centre of the Sterling Area, an essential factor in world trade. Though she was forced to abandon free trade in the 1930's she has a greater interest, perhaps, than any other power in promoting the exchange of goods between nations, since she cannot live except by a large trade with the whole world from whence she draws a large portion of her food and raw materials. She has by long custom special provisions with the other members of the Commonwealth, but these have not been increased in this time of stress, though trade with them has become increasingly more important.

In Europe Britain has strongly supported through the Organ-



isation for European Economic Co-operation and its development, the European Payments Union which has contributed greatly to the revival of trade in Western Europe. Much of course depends upon the attitude of the United States. But for Britain the opening of the channels of trade with the Dollar Area as well as with the rest of the world must always remain a primary object of policy.

Britain, as one of its principal creators, is also concerned with the maintenance of the United Nations as the centre of world wide co-operation. The experience of the League of Nations has meant a more realistic approach than in the period between the wars. The attitude of the Soviet Union has prevented that co-operation of the Great Powers on which the Charter was founded. Britain is naturally also somewhat critical and sceptical of the enthusiasm shown for human rights and self-determination by many states who do not undertake any responsibilities towards the major problems of the world and often deny to their own peoples the very rights that they advocate so vehemently.

But all this is recognised as part of the process by which free communities learn to co-operate together. The Commonwealth has from the first welcomed and supported the lead given by the United States in the defence of Korea by the United Nations, though Britain has differed to some extent as to the attitude to be adopted towards Communist China. In the United Nations, therefore, Britain sees an indispensable instrument of co-operation, necessary to the performance of the heavy tasks which fall upon herself. Moreover, if a bridge is to be made between the Communist and the free world, it is in the United Nations that the means is most likely to be found.

For, finally, Britain, as the other nations of the free world, is determined to maintain the freedoms which she has enjoyed for a long period and which she considers indispensable if life is to be worth living. But she recognizes more than ever before that freedom and welfare are not things that can be enjoyed without caring for the freedom and welfare of others. Collective security depends upon collective freedom and collective welfare. Britain is, perhaps, more conscious than any other state in the world that her own security, freedom and welfare depend in last resort on those of others in every continent and of every race and colour.