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Was the German Battlefleet Programme the Main Reason for the End of Britain's "Splendid Isolation"?

Abstract

This historiographical essay challenges the common historical narrative that Britain left 'splendid isolation' as a result of perceived German aggression - particularly considering Germany's battlefleet programme. Investigating closer Anglo-American ties, the Anglo-Japanese agreement and the Entente Cordiale show that Britain started to abandon an isolationist policy due to its vast, global and often burdensome empire before the German battlefleet started to present itself as a problem. Rather than pinning Britain's alliances at the turn of the twentieth-century on one factor in Europe, this essay investigates the impact the Americas, Africa, Central Asia and the Far East had on Britain's changing international position.

Keywords

German battlefleet, splendid isolation, alliance system, Britain and France, Britain and Germany, Anglo-Japanese agreement, Entente Cordiale, Britain and Japan

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Professor Holger Afflerbach for his invaluable advice and inspiring teaching.

Was the German Battlefleet Programme the Main Reason for the End of Britain's "Splendid Isolation"?

Nathan Brewster

Introduction

"Splendid isolation" has been, and continues to be, a phrase of convenience rather than widely agreed and undisputed historical fact. There remains ambiguity over precisely what it entailed. Lord Salisbury, British Prime Minister 1895-1902, and Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs from 1895-1900, used the phrase ironically for those who believed splendid isolation was possible.¹ Historians have mainly argued that the criteria for splendid isolation was either the absence of a peacetime alliance,² or an absence from European involvement. Britain was in isolation in the 1890s and early 1900s, with a preference for *ad hoc*, vague agreements rather than concrete alliances, contrasting with Germany.³ Because of the historiographical debate over what splendid isolation entailed, there are debates over when it ended. It has been argued that splendid isolation ended only when Britain was obligated to become militarily involved in Europe, which would place the end of splendid isolation much later. This will not be explored here because it generally ignores two important points. Firstly, Britain was never fully obligated to go to war in Europe. Secondly, an involvement did not have to be militarily, it could be Britain becoming further diplomatically involved in Europe. Rather, this essay will explore splendid isolation as both: ending on 30 January 1902, with the signing of the Anglo-Japanese agreement and ending in 1905-06, with Britain becoming embroiled in European affairs during the Moroccan Crisis. The Anglo-Japanese agreement, despite being a regional pact, ended splendid isolation as it was a peacetime alliance with terms that theoretically obliged Britain to go to war under

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¹ David Steele, *Lord Salisbury: a political biography* (London: UCL Press, 1999), p. 320.

² John Young, *Britain and the world in the 20th century* (London: Arnold, 1997), p. 11.

³ M.R.D Foot, *British foreign policy since 1898*, (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1956), p. 30.

certain circumstances.⁴ Furthermore, this regional pact had global ramifications that impacted Britain's 'aloofness from Europe',⁵ therefore making void the two aforementioned criteria of splendid isolation. Conversely, other historians argue that splendid isolation did not end until Britain was explicitly engaged in European affairs and quarrels.⁶ In this case, the Moroccan Crisis can be seen as the ending of splendid isolation,⁷ as Britain explicitly sided with France against the mercurial Kaiser Wilhelm, thus becoming involved in Europe.⁸ This essay will focus on the impact of the German battlefleet and Paul Kennedy's notion of 'imperial overstretch' on the Anglo-Japanese agreement and the Moroccan Crisis, as these two events best represent the end of splendid isolation, depending which side of the historiographical debate one takes. Imperial overstretch occurs when the primary global power's expanded strategic commitments lead to an increase in military spending that overburdens their economic strength, which was a key facet in Britain's abandonment of splendid isolation.⁹

Tirpitz' Battlefleet

The German battlefleet was devised by the State Secretary of the Imperial Naval Office, Alfred von Tirpitz. The programme commenced with the Navy Law of 1898, which fixed the number of battleships to be built each year.¹⁰ Bills were regularly passed to increase the size and strength of the battlefleet with the Second Navy Law of 1900, and a *Novelle* in 1908 and 1912.¹¹ The battlefleet was built with an anti-British focus, shown with Tirpitz's discussion of

⁴ George Monger, *The End of Isolation. British Foreign Policy 1900-1907* (London: Nelson, 1963), p. 60.

⁵ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Fontana, 1989), p. 252 argues the Anglo-Japanese agreement had impacts on European relations as it made a third-party intervention unlikely from either France or Britain.

⁶ See A.J.P Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 400 and Thomas Otte, *The China question: great power rivalry and British isolation, 1894-1905* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 306.

⁷ For discussions of the events and aftermath of the Moroccan Crisis, see A.J.P Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, pp. 427-441.

⁸ Thomas Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: the making of British foreign policy, 1865-1914* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 299.

⁹ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000*, pp. 523-533.

¹⁰ Jonathon Steinberg, *Yesterday's deterrent: Tirpitz and the birth of the German battle fleet* (Aldershot: Gregg revivals, 1992), p. 190.

¹¹ Michael Ephkenans, 'The Naval Race before 1914: Was a Peaceful Outcome Thinkable?', in Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (ed), *An Improbable War: The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914*, (Oxford: Berghahn, 2007), p. 133.

rivalling Britain in preliminary proposals to Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1897.¹² Tension with Tirpitz's naval programme was felt in Britain as early as 4 February 1898. The First Naval Lord Sir Frederick Richards argued battleship construction should not be reduced, in view of what was happening with powers outside France and Russia.¹³ However, those were merely rumblings. The impact on Britain's foreign policy, caused by the German battlefleet up to the signing of the Anglo-Japanese agreement, was negligible. In 1902, the Royal Navy considered France and Russia to be the navies that were most dangerous to British interests.¹⁴ However, the German battlefleet had a stronger impact on Britain by the time of the Moroccan Crisis of 1905-6. By 1905, Sir John Fisher, First Sea Lord, took up various counter-measures to the German fleet, including concentrating on European waters and maintaining numerical superiority.¹⁵ He even considered a preventative 'Copenhagen style' attack on the German fleet, supported by arch-Conservatives in the British parliament,¹⁶ but this was opposed by many more than the few who supported it. In 1905, Tirpitz and the German Admiralty also prepared for a naval war against Britain,¹⁷ however, this was unlikely and is better explained as general 'worst-case scenario' planning. Elite and public animosity between Germany and Britain¹⁸ accompanied public rows between German Chancellor Prince Bulow and Liberal Unionist Joseph Chamberlain;¹⁹ the latter previously being the chief instigator of an alliance with Germany until 1902.²⁰ However, while tensions between Britain and Germany, resulting from the German battlefleet, had palpably risen from 1902 to the Moroccan Crisis, this should not be overemphasised. The Moroccan Crisis started in March 1905, whereas Anglo-German naval rivalry did not exponentially grow until after the launch of the HMS Dreadnought around a year later, and even then, only became clear around 1908.²¹ Therefore, the German battlefleet had an incredibly negligible

¹² Steinberg, p. 201.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁴ F.R. Bridge and Roger Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European States System 1814-1914* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005), p. 270.

¹⁵ Volker Berghahn, *Germany and the approach of war in 1914* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 48.

¹⁶ Zara Steiner and Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 48.

¹⁷ Michael Epkenhans, p. 119.

¹⁸ Margaret MacMillan, *The War that ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (London: Profile Books, 2013), p.130.

¹⁹ Otte, *The Foreign Office mind*, p. 274.

²⁰ Zara Steiner, *The foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898-1914* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 500.

²¹ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p. 253.

impact on Britain's decision to ally with Japan in 1902. Similarly, it had a minor impact on Britain's decision to become involved in the Moroccan Crisis, as the age of Anglo-German Naval rivalry was later. Thus, another explanation must be given as to why Britain left splendid isolation and signed a defensive alliance with Japan, and why they became embroiled in European quarrels during the Moroccan Crisis siding with France over Germany.

The Anglo-Japanese Agreement

Upon retiring in 1907, Thomas Sanderson, Permanent Undersecretary of the Foreign Office, described Britain as a 'huge giant sprawling over the globe, with gouty fingers and toes stretching in every direction'.²² He used this metaphor to refer to the perception of Britain abroad. Significantly, Britain was not the only 'giant', and was being pressed all over the globe by other Great Powers with strained resources, resulting in the term 'imperial overstretch'. Imperial overstretch would bring Britain to the Anglo-Japanese agreement and to their stance during the Moroccan Crisis, thus having an important role in the ending of splendid isolation. Strained resources were visible in Africa and the Americas, but it was fear of Russia in the Far East and Central Asia, that dictated foreign policy. Britain's imperial overstretch in the Americas is shown in their dealings with the USA. Britain had started cultivating a relationship with the USA as early as 1898. The Hay-Pauncefote treaty, 18 November 1901, demonstrated Britain's strained resources and how they needed to look for support. Ultimately, the treaty recognised British inferiority in American waters.²³ The USA was given the sole right to build a canal from the Atlantic to the Pacific and simultaneously, the Royal Navy left the Caribbean where Britain's interests were now governed by the USA.²⁴ In return, Britain received cordiality from the USA and vital resources were freed. While this cannot be deemed the end of splendid isolation, it is a good example of Britain recognising their 'imperial overstretch' and was a milestone towards the Anglo-Japanese agreement and the end of splendid isolation.

The Anglo-Japanese agreement was chiefly caused by imperial overstretch in the Far East and Central Asia, however, British activities and interest in Africa also played a role, because imperial overstretch was inextricably linked worldwide. The role Africa played in the Anglo-Japanese agreement was secondary to

²² Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind*, p. 312.

²³ David Reynolds, *Britannia overruled: British policy and world power in the twentieth century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 70.

²⁴ Young, p. 27.

the role Asia played, in that African activities- particularly the Boer War- served to remind Britain of the dangers that Russia posed to their Asian interests. The European condemnation of the Boer War of 1899-1902 came as a great shock to Britain's leaders and demonstrated Britain's isolation.²⁵ The real significance of the Boer War, in the signing of the Anglo-Japanese agreement, was the impact it had on Britain's inability to act forcefully in Asia, at a time when the rest of the world was seemingly focused in this region, which only intensified the feeling of isolation.²⁶ Fundamentally, the Boer War highlighted Britain's imperial overstretch as they were unable to exhort all their efforts against the bigger threat by Russia in Asia. Russia took the lead in East Asia, which caused discomfort for British policy-makers and the Foreign Office.²⁷ Despite the exhausting efforts on the Boer War, Asia dominated British foreign policy in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Taylor convincingly argues 'China had overtaken Turkey as the sick man and between 1897 and 1905 the future of China determined the relations between the Great Powers',²⁸ which evidently would impact Britain's stance on isolation. The Foreign Office had been reorganised with a Far Eastern Department in 1899,²⁹ shortly after Russia's seizure of Port Arthur and Germany's seizure of Kiaochow.³⁰ Britain wanted an open door trade policy of China, which made sense for their economic interests, with two-thirds of Chinese foreign trade being carried out with Britain.³¹ This did not marry with Russia's aims to take more land for the Russian Empire, with encroachments already made in Manchuria.³² Despite a far superior navy, Britain's army was 'puny' and could never have taken on Russia in the Far East if it came to war.³³ Furthermore, Russia was threatening Britain's 'crown jewel' India, through railways to Afghanistan's frontier,³⁴ and the loan crisis of Persia in 1900.³⁵ The threat to India through Russian attention on these two buffer states, led to elite fears in Britain that they should increase their Indian garrison by 100,000

²⁵ Philip Towle, *From Ally to Enemy Anglo Japanese Military relations 1900-45* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2006), p. 1.

²⁶ Young, p. 22.

²⁷ Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind*, p. 236.

²⁸ Taylor, p. 391.

²⁹ Ian Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance: The diplomacy of two island empires 1894-1907* (London: Athlone Press, 1966), p. 61.

³⁰ Monger, p. 6.

³¹ M.R.D Foot, p. 19.

³² Monger, p. 18.

³³ Young, p. 11.

³⁴ Towle, p. 1.

³⁵ For more in-depth discussion of the loan crisis of Persia and how this impacted Anglo-Russian relations see Monger, *The end of isolation*, pp. 50-58.

troops.³⁶ The contrasting ambitions of Russia and Britain in Asia, coupled with this military weakness of Britain, was a major factor in signing the Anglo-Japanese agreement. Britain hoped Japan would defend their interests in China because certain terms of the treaty alluded to a 'defence of interests in China or Korea'.³⁷ Britain tried to extend the terms to cover Persia, but the Japanese would not agree. However, the renewal of the agreement in 1905 covered Persia, which highlights the importance of this buffer state to Britain.³⁸ Therefore, if one takes the historiographical side, that splendid isolation ended with Britain's alliance with Japan, imperial overstretch played a significant role. Britain turned to Japan due to engagements in the Far East, Central Asia and Africa around the same time, while retaining *ad hoc* treaties to deal with the Americas.

The Moroccan Crisis

Imperial overstretch also played a significant role in Britain's decision to side with France in the Moroccan Crisis. In the short-term, imperial overstretch had almost no impact on Britain's decision to oppose the Kaiser. Britain had already started to become suspicious of Germany, not just because of their battlefleet, but also because of the ambitious Kaiser's general ambition of *Weltpolitik*.³⁹ Furthermore, Britain's good faith was on trial with France.⁴⁰ To retain this, Britain had to at least support France in a diplomatic sense against Germany. However, considering the longer-term build-up to the Moroccan Crisis, imperial overstretch clearly was a factor. Britain had historically been concerned with Morocco due to its proximity to Gibraltar, one of the 'five keys' to the world.⁴¹ More importantly, Britain's 'trial of faith' with France was only on the line because of the *Entente Cordiale* between the two nations on 8 April 1904, despite no binding pledge.⁴² Principally, Britain joined the entente due to imperial overstretch. The *Entente Cordiale* established British legitimacy in Egypt while Britain accepted French dominance in Morocco. Regarding Africa, Kennedy described it as 'yet another challenger to the British world position

³⁶ Christopher Clarke, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to war in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 139.

³⁷ Monger, p. 63.

³⁸ Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind*, p. 297.

³⁹ Paul Kennedy, 'Reflections on Wilhelm II's place in the making of German foreign policy', in: John C.G. Röhl/Nicolaus Sombart (Eds.): *Kaiser Wilhelm II. New Interpretations* (London, 1982), p.160.

⁴⁰ Taylor, p. 417

⁴¹ Epkenhans, p.116, as described by First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher.

⁴² Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (Amherst, 1988), p. 427.

satisfied'.⁴³ However, the key factor in Britain joining the *Entente Cordiale* and subsequently the Moroccan Crisis, was again the Far East, with the Russo-Japanese War 1904-5. In similar terms to the Anglo-Japanese agreement, France had an agreement with Russia, that if Russia was attacked by two or more powers they would aid the Russians.⁴⁴ Britain had the same agreement with Japan.⁴⁵ Therefore, both France and Britain had a considerable interest in not being a third party to the war, as this would mean the other was obliged to join. From both perspectives, the Entente was as much eliminating the threat of war than it was about making allies.⁴⁶ Thus, imperial overstretch forced Britain into the alliance with Japan. This alliance, as well as appeasing colonial disputes in Africa, was behind the *Entente Cordiale*. The agreements with France over Morocco then dictated Britain's policy in the Moroccan Crisis, whereby they offered France support. Subsequently, Britain's involvement in European quarrels stemmed from imperial overstretch, primarily in the Far East but also in Africa.

Conclusion

To conclude, the German battlefleet had little impact on Britain ending splendid isolation by signing the Anglo-Japanese Agreement and was barely a concern to the British Foreign Office and policymakers. Anglo-German antagonism was not the major determinant of British foreign policy.⁴⁷ Instead, the alliance was due to Britain's global interests in the Far East and Central Asia, and to a lesser extent in Africa and the Americas, becoming too much a burden to defend alone. By the time of the Moroccan Crisis, the German battlefleet had registered slightly more on Britain's foreign policy. Therefore, the German battlefleet may have played some factor in Britain's opposition to Germany, but this impact would have been negligible at most. Britain opposing the Kaiser was mainly due to their entente with France, which from the British side was yet another example of attempting to administer their imperial affairs. This essay has focused mainly on imperial overstretch and focused on the German battlefleet only as a secondary factor. This is because, no matter which side of the historiographical debate one takes (whether splendid isolation ended in 1902 or 1905-6), the main reason for the end of splendid isolation was imperial overstretch, not the German battlefleet programme. This challenges the traditional

⁴³ Paul Kennedy, *The realities behind diplomacy: background influences on British external policy, 1865-1980* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), p. 122.

⁴⁴ Monger, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 62.

⁴⁶ Young, p. 29.

⁴⁷ Clarke, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 141.

historiographical debates on the build-up to the First World War, which often prioritise Anglo-German antagonism as the major determinant of Great Power politics and subsequently the break-out of war. Instead this essay suggests Anglo-German antagonism was secondary to other factors, at least in the medium-term build-up to the First World War.

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