

Britain and the Continent — From Isolation to Integration

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Abstract

Britain, with its insularity in location and once being the world's greatest empire, carried the isolation policy for most of history, separating itself from the continental Europe in foreign affairs. For a long time, it has secured prosperity and prestige with special relationship with America and the good terms with members of the Commonwealth. However, wars, constant emergence of new economic rivals, member countries' withdrawals from the Commonwealth, the unreliable ally, and the weakening national power have all obliged Britain to find a new partner to lean upon. Britain began to strengthen its ties with the continental Europe by joining the European Economic Community (EEC). But the path to EEC was not smooth although Britain finally accomplished its goal.

Key words: Europe; Isolation policy; Special relationship; The Commonwealth

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INTRODUCTION

The Continent is used to refer to the mainland of Europe in the United Kingdom; however, "it is widespread practice in the media in the UK (and elsewhere) to use the word Europe to mean continental Europe; that is, 'Europe' excludes Britain, Iceland and Ireland." (Wikipedia, 2012) In order to highlight the difference between Britain and

Europe, the term *Continent* is used throughout this paper.

British former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, wrote in his book: "Since we are real Europeans (in old times, our ancestors sailed from the Continent to settle in Britain), we should not distance ourselves from the Continent. Instead, we should take vigorous part in European affairs for that is the only way to strengthen our national power" (Blair, 1998, p. 329). Britain's foreign policy is constructed to correspond to its national interests. In 1973, Britain joined the EEC, but "membership of the EEC was a partial surrender of British sovereignty, even if few were prepared to recognize it or admit it." (Speck, 1993, p. 1) This paper is going to make a review of how Britain adjusted its political stand towards the Continent according to its domestic economic circumstances, political benefits, and the world situation.

1. THE ISOLATION POLICY

Being the oldest capitalist country, Britain once acquired its peak of development. In the second half of the 16th century, Spain was the dominant empire in the world. To clear its way to the world power, Spain started an attack at England in 1588 with the Invincible Armada, a fleet of more than 130 ships. England defeated Spanish fleet with the tactic of fire-ships, and Armada experienced severe damage from the storm which was considered as the intervention of God. The victory thus helped England become the unchallenged master of the seas by the end of the 16th century. Britain from then on relied on its great power to develop its economy. It was the first country to accomplish the Industrial Revolution in the world, which made Britain become the workshop of the world and achieved a monopoly position in the international market. Waving the banner of trade, Britain continuously expanded its overseas colonies. It was too busy with control of the overseas colonies to spare any time to attend to European affairs. "The British Empire was the greatest

-- the biggest, at any rate -- ever known. It was reputed to cover a quarter of the world's land area, and a fifth of its population (Cannon, 1997, p.128)."

The isolation policy was aimed at maintaining equilibrium among European countries, that is, if equilibrium was well preserved, Britain would stay aloof from the Continent; if not, it would begin to interfere. "For most of the 19th century, Britain was diplomatically isolated (Cannon, 1997, p.883)." She had no allies to be responsible for "except in circumstances where her interests were affected"; conversely, "no other country owed favours to her" (Cannon, 1997, p.884). At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, British Minister of Foreign Affairs, Castlereagh, declared that Britain's obligation was to make effective intervention once balance of forces among European nations was broken; however, he emphasized that Britain would not shoulder any responsibility on substantive matters.

Not until the end of the Crimean War (1853-1856) did the isolation policy become the underlying principle of British Foreign policy towards the Continent. During the Crimean War, in order to safeguard its own interests, Britain had to ally with France and Turkey against Russia's expansion into the Balkans. After the Crimean War, Britain formally broke away from the Continent. From 1863 to the end of the 19th century, it had been implementing a foreign policy of "splendid isolation". The term was actually used by a Canadian politician to praise Britain's non-involvement in European affairs.

After other European nations had completed the Industrial Revolution, they hardly waited to throw themselves into grabbing overseas colonies; thus they clashed with Britain's interests abroad. Due to the isolation policy, Britain had to fight against the challenges from European big powers all by itself. In the 1910s when the First World War broke out, European equilibrium was broken when two antagonistic European military powers had formed -- the Central Powers and the Allied Powers. Britain was incapable of restoring the balance on its own, so it put aside the isolation policy temporarily and joined the Allies. During the Second World War, Britain, with regard to its immediate interests, joined the anti-fascist coalition to fight against fascism with some European countries. But as soon as Britain secured itself from two world wars, it distanced itself from the Continent as usual.

Fundamentally, establishment of the isolation policy was attributed to Britain's geographical location. Lord Bolingbroke (1841) has made it clear that "Our nation inhabits an island, and is one of the principal nations of Europe; but to maintain this rank, we must take the advantages of this situation, which have been neglected by us for almost half a century: We must always remember, that we are not part of the continent, but we must never forget that we are neighbors to it" (p. 331). The English Channel and North Sea separated the British Isles from

the continent of Europe, and they were claimed to be the most important event in Britain's history during the formation of the earth's surface (Speck, 1993). In 1880, Britain attempted to build an undersea tunnel beneath the English Channel. Due to domestic pressure, the project was shelved. Later, the tunnel was merely constructed intermittently because British people were unconcerned about it. To them, completion of the tunnel meant that Britain would become an organic whole geographically with the Continent, which was incompatible with their insular awareness. Owing to the unfinished tunnel, German armies had to give up when they chased the Allied troops to Dunkirk during WWII.

2. RETURN TO THE CONTINENT

After the First World War, the empire "on which the sun never sets" began to decline and the descent was accelerated by the Second World War: the loss of export markets and the merchant shipping and overseas investments deprived the British of the income to pay for the imports of food and raw materials. "In 1938, Britain still produced some 22 per cent of the world's exports of manufactured goods. But this figure had slumped to some 11 per cent by the 1970s because of increased world competition and the rundown of traditional manufacturing industries." (Oakland, 1991, p. 137) All showed that "the war left a legacy of a more integrated but also a more isolated Britain, whose grandiose imperial role was already being swamped by wider transformations in the post-war world" (Morgan, 1988, p. 594).

Upon the end of WWII, Winston Churchill put forward "Three-circle Diplomacy" which talked about Britain's three roles: "the head of the British Commonwealth, a chief power in Europe, and the special partner of America" (Roberts & Roberts, 1991, p. 821). According to this policy, Britain would rely heavily on the internal circle -- British Empire and the Commonwealth, then on the middle circle -- special relationship with the U.S., finally on the external circle -- an integrated Europe to regain its lost power. The mere difference was that during different periods each "circle" had been attached a particular emphasis which was subject to the different situation each time. But all served the purpose that Britain would be situated in the center of these three concentric circles.

2.1 The Weakening Commonwealth

"The Commonwealth", said a former African president, "is the only worldwide association of peoples in which race, religion and nationality are transcended by a common sense of fellowship". (Musman, 1977, p. 225; 1982, p. 171) Development of the Commonwealth experienced two stages: the old Commonwealth and the new Commonwealth. In the old Commonwealth, "the only self-governing nations were Canada, Australia,

New Zealand and South Africa. They were known as 'dominions' " (Musman, 1977, p. 225). Many people in these countries were of the British descent, and regarded Britain as their mother country. The 1931 Statute of Westminster stated that the dominions were "autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations" (Britannica, 2012).

The old Commonwealth came to an end with the Second World War. And "the effects of two World Wars, economic problems and the growth of national self-determination around the world forced Britain to decolonize and establish different priorities." (Oakland, 1991, p. 94) In 1947, Pakistan was granted independence. India, the British colony practically for the longest period, became a republic in 1950. In 1961, South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth and became independent. After that, many former British colonies left the Commonwealth, and British colonial system gradually collapsed. "Since this period, the British Commonwealth has developed into the Commonwealth of Nations (i. e., the new Commonwealth), as almost all the remaining British colonies have become self-governing." (Oakland, 1991, p. 95) Thus, Britain lost vast majorities of its sources of raw materials. In addition, development of national industries in these newly independent countries cut Britain's exports of low technological products towards its former colonies. The statistics showed that in 1950, 46 percent of British exports went to the Commonwealth; by 1968 it was 28 percent (Roberts, 1991). Britain's economic connection with its Commonwealth became looser.

2.2 Exacerbation of Anglo-American Relationship

The Anglo-American relationship is like a double-bladed sword. America, on one hand, provided help to her closet ally, Britain; on the other hand, it tended to sacrifice her ally's interests when her own was under threat. The U.S. made enormous profits from two world wars and its national force increased rapidly whereas Britain and other European countries were severely weakened by wars. The U.S. seized the chance to extend its influence when Europe urgently needed help to revive its economy. In 1947, the U.S. Secretary of State, George Marshall, put forward the Marshall Plan to offer American money, supplies, and machinery to any war-stricken European country that wished to participate in with the aim of preventing the spread of Soviet communism. Britain received the largest portion of the monetary help from the U.S. among the European beneficiaries; "between 1948 and 1951, the British received some \$2 billion in Marshall Plan aid" (Viault, 1992, p. 417). Western Europe's dependency on the U.S. in economy directly

led to its political and diplomatic attachment. The U.S. formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with Western Europe and North America. The treaty stated that its member countries would take mutual defense if there was an attack from an external country. But Western Europe gradually got tired of the control from the U.S. In the 1950s and the 1960s when Western Europe surpassed the U.S. in economic status and competed with the U.S. on the world political stage, it grew more independent of the U.S. Britain, however, still cherished its special relationship with the U.S. and followed the U.S. closely in significant international issues.

As the saying goes, there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests. Britain's gradual decline compelled itself to retreat from the traditional sphere of influence -- the Middle East; in the meanwhile, the U.S. was eager to fill the vacancy. Inevitably, it came into conflict with Britain. The U.S. imposed the economic, political, and military pressure over Britain; as a result, Britain was forced to withdraw from the Middle East. Additionally, the U.S. considered British preferential tariff system as the barrier against the entry of its merchandise into Britain's market, so it always attempted to destroy it. In April 1948, at Havana International Commercial Conference, the U.S. proposed the International Trade Charter which was intended to eliminate the preferential system. Though it was killed by the British Parliament, it stirred aversion from British people to America's interference with British affairs. The 1956 Suez Crisis during which the U.S. along with the Soviet Union and the UN forced Britain to withdraw served as "the watershed of Anglo-American special relationship" (Ashton, 2005, p. 693). The event revealed that "the special relationship survived but much weakened, much tattered" (Roberts, 1991, p. 823) and "Britain was finished as a major power" (Speck, 1993, p. 85).

On account of America's control of the fissionable materials of the warhead, Britain was a dependent nuclear power on America. In 1957, the U.S. succeeded in experimenting on a hydrogen bomb but refused to share the confidential documents with Britain. In 1962, America cancelled the missile that it had promised to give Britain. In this way, "with the pound weak and the need for American aid constant, a special relationship of equals became an illusion" (Roberts, 1991, p. 823).

In October 1964, British Prime Minister Wilson withstood the pressure from the U.S. and refused to dispatch troops to Vietnam, which led to another slump in the Anglo-American relationship. During the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, America did not inform Britain of the level of military readiness and the nuclear threat at the first moment. British Prime Minister Heath only got the news from the media report, and said "I have found considerable alarm as to what use the Americans would have been able to make of their forces here without in any way consulting

us or considering the British interests” (<http://www.rense.com/general47/outrag.htm>, 2012). So even Britain itself had realized it was impossible to rely totally on America to restore its prestige. As a result, Britain had to turn to the external circle — the Continent. Roberts (1991) has best summarized Britain’s foreign relations during that period: “a decline in the special relationship with America, the fading of the Commonwealth dream, and revived trade with a buoyant Europe” (p. 825).

2.3 Entry into EEC

The European Economic Community (EEC), formed in the 1950s, was also known as the Common Market, later as the European Community, then as the European Union. EEC “required a supranational high authority and Britain with its attachment to sovereignty, its economic and psychological links with the Commonwealth, a special relationship with the USA could not have joined (EEC)” (Cannon, 1997, p. 357).

But after two world wars, Britain lost a great many markets abroad and suffered from the “British disease” domestically. British disease means “low worker productivity, struggling nationalized industries, high unemployment, high inflation, low levels of investment” (Nothdurft, 1991, p. 59). In fact, these symptoms were common in the capitalist world, but they were more predominant and more severe in Britain because outdated equipment and technology left behind from the Industrial Revolution failed to keep abreast of the changed situation. British ruling class believed that Common Market would provide a new outlet for British industrial products and ameliorate Britain’s technology through cooperation with the member nations. At the same time, Britain hoped to re-attract American investment (after the founding of the Common Market, the U.S. had diverted its investment from Britain towards the Common Market members). The then Macmillan’s government decided to turn to Europe, and the decision “did draw on a reserve of support for making active commitments in Europe” (Wilkes, 1997, p. 7). In August 1961, Macmillan government submitted its application to join the Common Market.

The process of Britain’s joining the EEC didn’t proceed smoothly. Its first attempt was vetoed by the French President Charles de Gaulle who was critical of Britain’s special relationship with the U.S. Britain made persistent attempts and showed its strong determination to be a member of EEC; however, the requests were denied by de Gaulle each time on account of Britain’s discrepancy from European countries in culture, language, and economic system. But Britain didn’t give up and made a series of continuous efforts to facilitate its integration of its economy with that of Western Europe: introducing the metric system of weights and measures, replacing Fahrenheit with the Celsius temperature scale, reforming the system of coinage, adopting a new system of one hundred pence in a pound, and establishing a value-added

tax (VAT) following the practice of the other members of the Common Market (Viault, 1992, p. 446). The right timing finally came in 1969 when de Gaulle resigned from French presidency.

In May 1971, Prime Minister Heath met in Paris with France’s new president Georges Pompidu who agreed not to veto Britain’s application. On January 1, 1973, Great Britain became a member of the Common Market, along with Ireland and Denmark. By that year, Britain’s relationship with America went down because Britain refused to send troops during the Vietnam War and two members of the Commonwealth, India and Pakistan, fought vehemently with each other; in this way, “the three equal circles had become one large circle, Europe, flanked by two smaller circles” (Roberts, 1991, p. 827).

Attitudes towards the Continent still remained controversial in Britain with division between pro-Europeans and Euro-sceptics even after Britain had joined EEC. In 1974, Wilson was in office again. Many left-wing laborites continued to oppose British participation in what they viewed as a capitalist economic endeavor while many unions feared that their traditional privileges would be undermined by Britain’s association with countries that were less supportive of unions. In an effort to avoid open conflict with his own party over the issue, Wilson called for a national referendum, a unique occurrence in British history. In the referendum held on 5th June 1975, 65% of the votes went to the approval of British entry into the EEC (Cannon, 1997). By then, Britain had finished the primary adjustment of its diplomatic policy towards the Continent.

But some of British policies were sometimes incompatible with those of the EEC, as a result of which friction occurred from time to time. Britain always complained about large agricultural subsidies in EEC. Moreover, the decision made by EEC to raise prices of agricultural products turned out to be a heavy blow to Britain which relied heavily on imported food.

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher was in power. She resumed the “special relationship” with the U.S.. At her first meeting with Reagan in 1981, Thatcher said that “your problems will be our problems and when you look for friends we shall be there” (Blake, 2010). Thatcher government behaved contradictorily towards European integration: on one hand, it played a crucial part in pushing the unification forward; on the other, it opposed to attributing every aspect of cooperation among western European countries to European integration. She resisted further European integration; in particular, she opposed to both the European Community’s plan to create a common European currency, which would deprive Great Britain of the control of its own currency and the proposals for a future European political union. But she had already “made it absolutely clear from the start that British meant to stay in the European Community” (Musman, 1982, p. 173).

CONCLUSION

Churchill's "Three-circle Diplomacy" has well illustrated the three important partners in British history: the Commonwealth, America and mainland Europe. The former colonies in the Commonwealth made great contributions to the well-being of the British Empire. However, the liberation movements ensuing two world wars brought many Commonwealth members to independence; therefore, Britain could not rely on its income sources like before. America has been its closest ally, but they are not as close as they used to be, so Britain had to find a new outlet. After the Second World War, Western Europe sprang into a vibrant economic zone. Britain gave up its time-honored isolation policy, joined the Common Market, and returned to the Continent.

In retrospect, Britain has established its foreign policy on practicalism, that is, it did not take action on the basis of fixed principles but performed in a way unique to each issue. Once a problem has been settled satisfactorily, that solution tends to be used again in similar circumstances and become a precedent to guide future actions. As Oakland (1991) has noted, "Britain's overseas relations and its defense and foreign policies reflect both its traditional position as a major trading nation and its concern to maintain stable economic and political conditions through international cooperation" (p. 105).

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