

The China Question: Great Power Rivalry and British Isolation, 1894-1905

Review Number:

646

Publish date:

Friday, 29 February, 2008

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ISBN:

9780199211098

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£68.00

Pages:

352pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

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The central thesis of T. G. Otte's meticulously researched new study of British foreign policy is that the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5 produced the 'China Question' and with it, the problem of Great Britain's 'international isolation'. Otte's assertion is that British alliances with Japan in the east and the later 1904 entente with France were triggered by great power politics in east Asia between 1895 and 1905. Hence, the China Question ought to be seen for what it was - the stimulus for the foreign policy elite to rethink Britain's place in the world. Under the impetus of a younger group of imperial-nationalists within the cabinet, elites concluded that Britain could no longer simply rely on its navy to protect its global interests. At the same time, the decision to enter alliances was not a substantive break with the Unionist foreign policy of 'isolation' exemplified throughout Lord Salisbury's years as foreign secretary and premier, but rather an extension of it through limited regional agreements.

The primary interpretative target of this nuanced approach to shifts in British foreign policy is the widely accepted view that British abandonment of 'splendid isolation' was essentially brought about by developments on the European continent. Methodologically, Otte questions the teleology that begins in 1914 and works its way backwards to establish the progression of causes that led to World War I. The diplomatic history that results from an excessive focus on Europe seldom notices that Britain was a global empire, and that decision-making in London had to take the empire, particularly British colonies in Asia and the British establishment in China, into account. The China Question was thus the difference that made the difference.

What is intriguing about this argument is not only the force with which Otte makes it, but his unapologetic

empiricism that maintains an intense focus on the foreign relations archive and the private papers of the British foreign policy elite. Just how successful Otte is in bringing the realities of global empire back into the discussion of British history, while simultaneously sustaining (to coin a phrase from China studies) a 'change within tradition' argument concerning British foreign policy-making through 1905, will be taken up in greater detail below. First, however, it might be helpful to situate the subject of this study as Otte presents it.

The global situation that brought about change in British foreign policy involved two main elements: changes in military and communications technologies that produced an arms race among European powers (a background element for Otte), and key shifts in political relations of power in Asia. Across Asia, power relations altered dramatically in the first part of the 19th century with the decline of well-established land-based empires - the Ottoman in the west, the Qing in the east - coupled with the rise of aggressive and expansive powers on the borders of these empires. Russia and Great Britain were at the forefront of European expansion into 'vacuums' on the edges of the older empires. By the end of the 1890s others were eyeing the potential gain to be had from carving up these 'decaying' and 'dying' nations, these 'sick men' of Asia. From the perspective of London, competition over the spoils of Ottoman-Qing disintegration could only upset the carefully honed 'balance of power' in Europe, the maintenance of which had been the central feature of British diplomacy since the Congress of Vienna. While Ottoman weakness led to bipolar competition between Britain and Russia in central Asia (the so-called 'Great Game'), Qing decline embroiled all of the major European powers and posed the possibility that China might be carved up like Africa.

At the same time, however, none of the powers (Britain was no exception) got far beyond imagining such a division. It was more common to think in terms of indirect relations - spheres of influence, as some would have it, or preponderance, as Lord Salisbury preferred - and a carefully balanced tit-for-tat between interested parties. Co-operative exploitation, through concessions and economic privileges rather than political annexation, was at least tacitly accepted as the order of the day. As moribund as the Qing might have seemed, Britain's foreign policy elite still saw it as a buffer - some, like Lord Rosebury, even a 'bulwark' (p. 36) - against Russian expansion in central and east Asia, and many argued that British and Chinese interests were the same in various parts of Asia.

The China Question opens with Japan's defeat of China in 1894-5, when British perceptions had dramatically shifted, and 'an infinitely larger Eastern question' loomed into view. Otte sees this as the result of a 'non-systemic power' (p. 5) forcing itself into the calculations of European ministries. In London, Lord Rosebury's government decided to remain neutral in the fray, opening up the possibility of alignment with Japan at some future date. Such a possibility became more plausible because of British convictions that Russia had territorial ambitions in North China and on the Korean peninsula.

While the loss to Japan exposed China's military weakness, it was only part of the issue. The Qing dynasty, already in debt to foreign powers because of past wars lost, appeared to be a fiscal basket case. In order to make ends meet, the Qing went down the slippery slope taken by other non-European powers such as Persia, the Ottoman empire and Egypt, and borrowed from European firms. Concerned about British prestige in Asia, the government made sure London lenders had a piece of this action.

The resulting competition for the opportunity to place the Qing regime in greater foreign indebtedness was followed in 1898-9 by a 'scramble' for new concessions, including railroad and territorial leases. Britain acquired the New Territories at Hong Kong and a naval outpost at Weihai on the tip of the Shandong peninsula. Otte doesn't think much of the Weihai acquisition, but he does grant that it was important for British prestige. At any rate, the real issue seems to have been the general sense that British policy was drifting, and that indecisiveness at the top accounted for Britain's global commercial decline (p. 119). Joseph Chamberlain, described here as a 'political hyena', pushed for an agreement with Germany over their interests in China. While nothing of substance materialised on that front, Britain was able to come to an understanding with Russia that broadly defined their respective railroad interests in northern and southern China. The key point emphasised by Otte, however, was that Chamberlain, with the connivance of Arthur Balfour, had secretly opened back-channel negotiations with the Germans, indicating a critical movement

away from a consensus foreign policy and the emergence of a growing body of anti-isolationist sentiment.

Matters might have continued like this indefinitely, with tension existing between advocates of greater and lesser diplomatic activity over east Asia issues, had peasants in North China not provided their own answer to the China Question. The Boxer Uprising indicated that a tipping point had been reached in the deterritorialising processes affecting much of eastern China. Once it was clear that the European powers would intervene militarily to protect their establishment in China, the British cabinet attempted to secure agreements that would protect Britain's own interests. One result was an understanding with Germany. As it turned out, the Anglo-German accord looked much like the Open Door structure usually attributed to American Secretary of State John Hay (absent from discussion here) whereby all would have free commercial access to China and no one would attempt to seize Chinese territory. Meanwhile, in August 1900, joint military forces from British India, the United States, Russia and Japan took Beijing, relieved the besieged legations, and set about stamping out the Boxer movement. Settlement talks began in late 1900 against the backdrop of the Russian occupation of Manchuria. Confrontation appeared inevitable until the Russians backed down and withdrew their forces.

There followed several months of negotiation in Beijing, while in London visions of an arrangement with one or another of the powers, or a rapprochement with the triple alliance of Germany, Russia and France, danced in ministerial heads. Salisbury cautioned colleagues against making 'novel and most onerous obligations', in order to meet a threat that really did not exist. Meanwhile, the financial strain of the Boer War and the China incursion placed certain constraints on making large-scale peace-time commitments. This led some to conclude that an agreement with Japan would at least shore up the eastern flank of the empire and discourage Russian adventurism in that region. Others, Balfour in particular, balked at this suggestion. He was afraid that an alliance with Japan would direct Russian energies back toward central Asia and favoured, instead, an agreement over vital interests with Germany, France and Russia.

Eventually an entente with Japan was reached, reflecting the competing and conflicting views of the Unionist cabinet. With Salisbury fretting that Britain might be drawn into a war in the east because of Japanese injudiciousness, the agreement of 1902 committed the parties to remain neutral if either went to war with a third party, and only to declare war if either was involved in a conflict with two or more other powers. The treaty acknowledged Japan's special interests in Korea, but did not commit Britain to defend them. Nor did Japan agree to protect Britain's Indian empire. And while there was much trepidation in the cabinet over scenarios that would involve Britain in an unwanted war, when Russo-Japanese hostilities broke out two years later the alliance restrained France and Germany. It also hastened an Anglo-French entente that settled a number of colonial disputes.

Contrary to several decades of interpretation by diplomatic historians on both sides of the Atlantic, the accords, Otte insists from his careful reading of the archive, were not a break with the policy of isolation. Rather, as understood by British statesmen, these agreements were 'defined as selective engagement in international politics on the basis of limited agreements that provided for geographically clearly defined cooperation, whilst maintaining the maximum amount of freedom of manoeuvre possible' (p. 337). Splendid isolation, in other words, did not come to an end in 1905; it was merely reworked in the hands of the new foreign secretary, Lord Lansdowne. At the same time, there is irony in all of this. Lansdowne's agreements with Japan and France had contributed to the transformation of the international environment. While isolation was re-affirmed in 1905, 'its apparent success helped to destroy its continued justification' (p. 337).

With this evocation of the ironies of history, the *China Question* abruptly ends. The Unionist cabinet had moved a jot, but not enough to justify labelling the agreements with Japan and France as signifying a break with over 100 years of traditional foreign relations. We arrive at this conclusion after 300 pages of minutely detailed and tightly argued text that operates at the level of the daily correspondence between the key actors in foreign-policy establishment. Throughout the book, other scholars are taken to task for failing to see the 'degree of internal coherence in foreign office thinking' (p. 287), as well as the consistency of purpose demonstrated by a succession of Unionist premiers and foreign secretaries, in spite of internal cabinet struggles and the challenge the younger generation posed to Lord Salisbury's version of British diplomacy as

'a moderating force' (p. 17).

Within the context of imperial and colonial studies and the study of 19th-century Chinese history, Otte's work is an anachronism. There is, to begin with, an unreflexive use of the imperial archive throughout this work and a faith that attempts at historical reconstruction need look no further than the records left by great men.⁽¹⁾ While some commentators, notably Bickers and Tiedemann (the editors of a volume on the Boxer Uprising to which Otte and I made contributions), grant that it is important to consider the activities of those from the top of the hierarchy (presumably a reference to a more social history-oriented approach) there are questions to be addressed on how one goes about 'bringing the state back in'.⁽²⁾ In this case, the state returns in the form of a diplomatic history apparently little touched by much outside of itself.

That historical change is multi-causal is perhaps a truism, but the more important issue, I would suggest, has to do with the way in which complex polities are formed and reformed over time, and the effects such re-formations have on institutional structures and the ability of historical actors to act. At the point that Otte begins his story, Britain had already gone through a half-century of serious administrative reform, and while it might be the case that the Foreign Office remained unreformed, this was not the case for the War Office, the army, the India Establishment or the consular service in Asia. Moreover, as Otte acknowledges, there is little doubt that the imperial state of the late 19th century was not the same state of the middle of the century. Yet, precisely what had changed receives little attention here; Britain's elite react primarily to what is going on in European diplomatic circles, not to change within the state, the empire or British society.

Space prevents a lengthy treatment of this issue but it is perhaps worth enumerating a few of the more salient areas of change. First, there was what William McNeil identified as the emergence of military-industrial complexes across Europe that linked armies and navies, parliaments and government agencies to a technical elite in a wholly new set of relationships, which by the 1880s involved the continual preparation and planning for war.⁽³⁾ Planning, in turn, involved the imagining of probable scenarios. Given the nature of the British empire, such 'futurism' meant preparing not only for war on the continent of Europe but along all the supply lines and transport routes that linked Britain to its empire. I will have more to say about this speculative planning shortly, but it seems inconceivable that the effects of such thinking did not influence the decision-making of the cabinet.

The second major change in the second half of the 19th century involved the transformation in the production of knowledge and information stimulated by new communication technologies and reproduction media. The information glut resulting from such tools as the telegraph created a crisis in virtually all of the states of Europe; especially in Britain where the gentlemanly ideal, as opposed to the newer notion of a managerial technical elite, had hardly disappeared in spite of reforms. The state apparatuses, whether the unreformed Foreign Office or the continuously restructured War Office, all felt the pressure of having to process vast new quantities of data and to be on top of such information, to know what it meant and what the implications for policy were. Change on this order, I would suggest, requires attention not only to the personalities and ambitions of the elite, but to the relationship between parts of the apparatus and of the formal and informal networks that had a role in the process. It is perhaps worth adding that the Committee for Imperial Defence, created by Arthur Balfour in 1904 (and which gets only passing mention here), was one among many developments which demonstrated the extent to which information management (and this includes not only the flow, cataloguing and archiving of data, but increasingly its security) required a level of technical expertise hitherto absent at the elite level of policy-making.

Questions might also be raised concerning elite motives throughout the period. Why were Britain's leaders so concerned about a partition of China? Was it simply a matter of commercial interests in the Yangzi valley, or were other factors involved as well? Were British activities in central Asia simply tactical moves and those in the Far East strategic, as Otte claims? In either case, *The China Question* would have benefited from a broader consideration of British policies in China following the settlement of 1860, and of the relationship between India and China that had already produced the first and second China wars. To be fair, Otte recognises the importance of India in British thinking (we are told that India is the 'keystone' of the British empire) but the British establishment in India is literally bracketed out of the picture.

The effect is an odd one. The government of India and its proxy in London, the India Office, which had clear stakes in Chinese matters, are left about as much agency as the colonised populations of Africa and Asia. Yet the India-China opium regime was still operating, India paid part of the cost of the consular service in China, and Indian army military intelligence continued to update information on Qing defences in North China in case another seizure of Beijing became necessary. The result is that the strategic importance of North China for military and political planners in India is ignored. It ought to be considered in any effort to examine British stakes in China. The campaigns in 1858 and 1860 had demonstrated that a direct threat to, or occupation of, Beijing made the Qing extremely pliable; certainly this fact could not have been lost on other powers with interests in China. More importantly, British strategic thinkers were sure the lesson was not lost on the Russians. There was, in other words, a more than imaginary strategic link drawn after 1860 between the north-west frontier of India and North China. And, I would add, such linkage also helps to explain the lease of Weihai as something more than a symbolic gesture. Having a base from which to protect the sea lanes into the Bo Hai Gulf insured the rapid deployment of India army forces to the North China Plain and sent a message to Russia about Britain's strategic commitment to the north.

A further point worth considering is the shift in British thinking about China itself. In the decades between 1860 and 1890, British policy appeared to have two primary goals. The first was to make China, through a process of tutelage, the effective bulwark against Russian expansion imagined by Rosebury. The Qing leadership would be instructed by the British on how to identify and protect its interests in a world wholly transformed by European expansion into Asia. This pedagogical project was, however, not a disinterested curriculum; rather it was concerned with convincing the Qing leadership of the common interests of the two empires. The second objective was to maintain a concert of Western powers in China, all of whom would keep time to the British concert master. Britain's leaders hoped that other powers would recognise that it was British leadership and willingness to use force that had opened China, and that Britain had been willing to do this for the benefit of all. Such co-operation and beneficence was reflected not only in the treaties with the Qing that the British pioneered, but in the international make-up of the Qing Imperial Maritime Customs (IMC). Led by an Englishman, Sir Robert Hart, positions in IMC had been open to nationals from all of the contracting parties in China.

The ecumenical approach to exploiting China began to change, however, in the middle of the 1880s when France broke with the consensus and took unilateral action. Within a few years the various powers were competing for unilateral economic concessions in China. At the very least, this shift pointed to the general failure of British policy in China, and accounts for efforts on the part of elements of the British establishment to seek allies, such as the United States, for an open commercial door and support for the territorial integrity of China. It is here that British bilateral relations, especially those with Japan, take on significance. And while Otte may be right about a continuity in thinking regarding continental Europe (although his position seems hair-splitting), the agreement with Japan signals a new approach to dealing with multi-centered competition for advantage in east Asia, and by implication, British interests throughout Asia. What is intriguing, therefore, is not the movement in the cabinet to a new position, but the length of time it took to arrive there.

At the same time, however, Otte's intense focus on foreign policy does have one advantage: it exposes in stark clarity levels of elite anxiety probably best represented in the tendency to spin out, especially in private correspondence, a series of scenarios organised around the calculation of forces and counter forces, actions

and reactions of other continental powers to British actions. Two issues come to mind. First, how common was this kind of calculus in the second half of the 19th century among the elite? We know it is there in the popular fiction of invasion fantasies and in the fears surrounding the empire which returned to haunt the imperial centre, but we know far less about how such anxieties affected the rulers of empire. One way of interpreting Otte's sources is to conclude that the anxieties and fantasies were clearly there. Whether generated from an external threat, from a secret knowledge of the weaknesses of Britain, or from overactive imaginations, the calculations seem to have taken on a life of their own. They are a kind of excess in a world primarily concerned with secrecy and containment.

It is also worth considering the extent to which the intensity and pervasiveness of this sort of speculation was itself a function of a world created through diplomatic practice. To put this another way, might not Otte's argument, which I have characterised as 'change within tradition', be an effect of the sources he has selected. In this case, the preponderance of formal elements within the historical record serves not only to occlude the presence of a host of other actors alluded to above in the decision-making process, but also to discipline or contain changes evident at many levels of a rapidly altering imperial order. One does not have to entertain a deconstructivist reading of the imperial archive to note that the language of diplomacy sat uneasily beside the emerging techno-military world of the late 19th century, or that the very event that might serve as a sign of the growing disjunction between the world of diplomacy and that of the techno-elite - the 1899 Hague Conventions concerning land warfare - is apparently absent from the sources as Otte presents them.

My own sense is that Otte is correct about the China Question and right to draw attention to it as a key for understanding change in British foreign policy. There seems little doubt that Britain's role as a 'linchpin' for European multilateralism in China came to an end with, if not before, the Sino-Japanese War. But by keeping his focus squarely on European diplomacy and Britain's 'splendid isolation', the study misses an opportunity to reach an audience beyond those exclusively concerned with British diplomatic history. Perhaps Otte is satisfied to speak to that audience, but it seems a bit questionable to do so while wishing to remind others that Britain was a global empire by 1894. Surely the very notion of isolation makes more sense as an ideological position than as something having to do with the realities of power in an age of intense and unprecedented globalisation.

Notes

1. On imperial archives, see, for example, J. L. Hevia, 'The archive state and the fear of pollution: from the opium wars to Fu-Manchu', *Cultural Studies*, 12 (1998), 234-64 and A. Stoler, 'Colonial archives and the arts of governance: on the content of the form,' in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. C. Hamilton *et al*. (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), pp. 83-100. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Boxers, China and the World*, ed. R. Bickers and R.G. Tiedemann (New York: Rowen and Littlefield, 2007). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. W. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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