



## For the best and for the Empire (1815-1914)

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**France became a strategic island when the threats disappeared at its borders. At the same time, it has never been so economically open to a world that tends to replace the bipolar confrontation with a new "grand game" between many rivals. Placed in a similar situation at the beginning of the 19th century<sup>the</sup> United Kingdom managed to reign over a quarter of the world's population in just a few decades. At a time when France is questioning its national strategy, it is perhaps worth examining the reasons for the British success at the heart of the first globalisation.**

### **Britannia, rule the waves**

The British Empire was not built on a coherent project but on a state of mind which considered that the best protection was still economic power and that its sources had to be found far away. This empire was therefore conceived from the outset as a network and reasoned in terms of flows, whether commercial or financial, and sources of wealth. Within this conceptual framework, the military tool was above all a tool for the projection of force and power whose primary mission was to defend and promote British interests in the "weak world" between the different powers. Eventually, this expeditionary force could be used to deal with a return of a major threat against national soil, which would not be on the agenda until the beginning of the 20th century.

In this context, the Royal Navy, "the most powerful long-range weapon the world has ever known" (Times, 25 June 1897) , both a primary instrument and a product of expansion, played a key role. By polarizing the kingdom's rather limited means,[1] the Navy first enabled France to strip away its claim to world domination. Subsequently, the main thrust of the British effort during the 19th<sup>century</sup> was to preserve this naval supremacy while remaining within a military budget of 3% of GDP. Relying on the superiority of its naval engineering [3], the Navy therefore endeavoured to remain at the cutting edge of technology (steam, propeller, iron and then steel construction, armour, cannon with The Navy then, as wealth came, to have an overwhelming numerical superiority until it

surpassed in volume its two immediate rivals (two standard powers). In 1897, during the Diamond Jubilee parade, Queen Victoria saw 165 ships, including 24 first-class battleships (out of 38) and 54 cruisers, march past her. The ships were then able to cross the Atlantic in ten days as opposed to a month at sailing time, which reduced the need for support points and, combined with other innovations such as telegraphy or submarine cables, allowed for rapid intervention.

### **The "Imperial Constable"**

The Army is perfectly integrated into this global strategy by maintaining the network of 33 support points (and coal depots) along the strategic axes and serving as the "Imperial Constable" during the 72 campaigns of the Victorian era. However, the human resources needed for all these tasks remain moderate. In 1898, the United Kingdom controlled a quarter of the world with 140,000 soldiers deployed (including 75,000 in India) and 100,000 in metropolitan France.

This economy of forces is explained first of all by the fact that the British emigration territories ensured their own security, before taking their autonomy in the form of Dominions, and that in many other parts of the Empire, particularly in the Indies, the British power took care to rely on local authorities. It is also explained by a particular vision of the organization of the land forces. While the scale of investment required a "nationalisation" of the Navy, in the sense of close state control, the Army still retained the spirit of the private regiments of lace warfare. These troops, driven by a strong esprit de corps, were the perfect instruments to engage in expeditions without being forced to disguise their principles. In the same spirit, there was also no reluctance to call upon "private military companies", particularly in Africa. Zimbabwe as it stands today was thus conquered from 1885 onwards by the mercenaries of the British South African Company. Much reliance was also placed on hybrid corps formed with local troops but commanded by the British. This organisational flexibility thus saved His Majesty's soldiers, who, moreover, died relatively little in colonial expeditions because of the superiority of their technology (such as the Maxim machine gun) but also because of their discipline.

### **War as a continuation of the economy by other means**

From the reign of Elizabeth II, English imperialism sought a return on its investment in its distant expeditions [4]. The first exploitation of the colonies, particularly in the Americas, made it possible to release the capital necessary for the "take-off" of the industrial revolution at the end of the 17th century. At that time, a radical change in economic outlook took place, turning the United Kingdom away from mercantilism (the colonies were seen as captive markets and sources of raw materials to be exploited) in favour of free trade (leading role in competition, comparative advantages). The United Kingdom gradually lifted all its barriers to trade and financial exchanges and tried to convert the rest of the world to this liberal ideology paving the way for the first globalisation[5].

5] In this new context, British imperialism did not seek to systematically conquer territories but rather to develop economic, physical or financial flows for its own benefit, fully assuming the use of force to do so. The height of this imperial liberalism was undoubtedly reached with the two Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860[6]), when the war forced a new imperialist state to take control of its territory.6] The war forced a sovereign state, the Chinese Empire, to open up completely to free trade and thus to accept imports of opium from India and low-cost manufactured goods from England. China, which has never forgotten this humiliation, saw its handicrafts and peasantry ruined by foreign competition

and inflation while several million subjects became opium addicts.

But if economic power is the primary objective of the use of force, it is also one of its driving forces. First, because after the war against the Netherlands (1652-1674), the British government adopted the sophisticated financial system of the Dutch and always had access to low-cost credit from institutions that "played" on England's victory [7]. 7] This system made it possible to finance campaigns but with the obligation that they be profitable, which imposed a certain limitation in the use of force (to reduce costs while not damaging the "target" territory too much). In this spirit, the use of "cash donations" as a tool for "violence control" ("the cavalry of St. George" [8]) was perfectly accepted because of its excellent cost-effectiveness compared to military expeditions.

This imperial and free-trade vision gave rise to a generation of "entrepreneurs" mixing Protestant and humanist proselytism (Livingstone), economic ventures (Cecil Rhodes) and adventures with characters like the explorer Richard Francis Burton (explorer speaking 29 languages, first European to enter Mecca) or "Gordon Pasha" (general in the service of the Emperor of China to quell the Taiping revolt, who died in 1885 defending Khartoum against the Mahdist revolt). Behind these few illustrious names, the "little adventurers", soldiers, colonial administrators, industrialists, etc... were innumerable, constituting the "atoms" ensuring the cohesion and strength of the Empire.

## **The flaws of the Empire**

However, this power has ended up creating fragilities. In the name of free trade, the United Kingdom has become dependent on its food flows in particular, making a race war a possible option to bring it down. The use of naval protection has increased accordingly; however, in an open world like the one at the end of the 19th century, <sup>any</sup> instrument of projection that is too powerful is a threat to the flows of rival powers. As Mahan pointed out in 1902: "Britain cannot help but control German waters by simply possessing the means essential to its own existence as a state of first magnitude". This threat convinced the Germans to create a deep-sea fleet as well, thus setting off an arms race which, with the Boer War (1899-1901)[9], put the British budget under severe strain. It also contributed, along with the psychological impossibility of moving to a conscript army, to the inability to move beyond the "miserable little army" that the Germans were laughing at, and whose weakness prompted the Germans to attack Belgium and France in August 1914.

## **Lessons**

The Empire is not the fruit of a "hyperpower" imposing itself on the world but of the entrepreneurial spirit of His Majesty's subjects. British politicians, industrialists and military men reasoned in global terms and saw the emerging globalization as an opportunity for adventure and profit. Like the French, but unlike the Americans, especially nowadays, these men were also interested in their conquests, even if it meant mythifying them. Naval gazing and imperialism do not go hand in hand.

Like today, they used the military tool with a concern for limiting losses (while accepting them without hesitation) and damage but also, and this is a major difference, without any complex for the defense of pure economic or political interests. In their form and culture, the imperial armed forces were perfectly correlated with the United Kingdom's financial and technological capabilities and objectives. In this respect, a budgetary effort of 3% of GDP seems to be an historic threshold below which a serious military tool cannot be sustained for long due to the lack of an industrial base.

In the light of this British experience, it is clear that the current "French problem" is mainly a psychological one. With an open economy dependent on a multitude of flows, an environment where the vital threat had disappeared but which remained full of challenges, the United Kingdom of 1815 set out to take on the world. In the same situation, we appear to be blocked by our complexes and our repentances to the point of envisaging a withdrawal into our internal security in contradiction with the defence of our own interests which we no longer dare to mention.

1) At the beginning of the 17th century, England's GDP and population were only half and one third of those of France respectively.

2) More than 104,000 English sailors died at sea from 1793 to 1815, 6,500 of them due to the enemy.

3) The British merchant navy also represented one third of the world tonnage.

4) "With money, you don't necessarily make good troops, but with good troops, you make money" Machiavelli.

5) Even if it meant suppressing the Compagnie des Indes, a pure instrument of closed and mercantilist exploitation, whose predatory nature had provoked the revolt of his private army, the Cipayes, in 1857.

6) The Second Opium War saw the intervention of France with 8,000 soldiers.

7) Dutch banks lent money to England while it was at war with the Netherlands.

8) Because of the effigy inscribed on the English coins.

9) This conflict, which forced the maintenance of an expeditionary force of 200,000 men several thousand miles away and the use of particularly harsh methods against the population, marked a turning point in the public's view of the Empire.

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