

1 The primacy of geopolitics: the dynamics of British imperial policy, 1763–1963

[Reprinted from the *Festschrift* for Professor Roger Louis, *The statecraft of British imperialism: essays in honour of Wm. Roger Louis* (ed. R.D. King and R. Kilson, 1999), appearing first in the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 27 (1999). The formulation of my ideas on this subject particularly benefited from discussions with Professor Sir Christopher Bayly and Dr T.N. Harper. As yet, the most systematic attempt to apply the ‘interaction’ model suggested here has been Peter Henshaw’s account of the origins of the South Africa War: ‘Breakdown: into war, 1895–1899’, in our joint book *The lion and the springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 37–56.]

When in the early 1960s Roger Louis began writing on the history of the British empire, the dominant historiographical fashion was to invoke economic interpretations, even to subscribe to economic determinism. Hobson, Lenin, and the ‘export of surplus capital’ threw a long and intimidating shadow over the subject.¹ *Capitalism and slavery* by Eric Williams was a key text,² ‘Economic factors in the history of the empire’ by Richard Pares an essential article.³ Vincent Harlow’s monumental *The founding of the Second British Empire, 1763–1793* argued that a preference for ‘trade rather than dominion’ was the general characteristic from the late eighteenth century.⁴ Keith Hancock’s great work, the *Survey of British Commonwealth affairs*, was built around the organising concept of moving frontiers of migration, money, and markets.⁵ Symptomatically, the most seminal of all essays in the field, Gallagher and Robinson’s ‘The imperialism of free trade’, appeared in the *Economic History Review*.⁶ Moreover, neo-Marxists were about to launch a massive takeover of South African history.

Roger Louis’s initial studies were concerned with the partition of Central Africa.⁷ These immediately led him into a world of officials and statesmen with perceptions and preoccupations of an apparently quite different kind. He focused upon Sir Percy Anderson of the Foreign Office, a practitioner of Francophobia and *realpolitik*, who saw the

scramble for Africa ‘mainly as a problem of maintaining British power and prestige’. With A.J.P. Taylor as his research supervisor, Roger Louis thus quickly became convinced that British imperial policy only made sense within the context of international relations. The empire for him is above all about power politics and international prestige, strategy and inter-state perceptions, the Anglo-American relationship, diplomacy and defence.⁸ He continued to find its most revealing records in the Foreign Office political archives. In some ways he maintained a strong American tradition exemplified in such classic works as William Langer’s *The diplomacy of imperialism*⁹ and A.J. Marder’s studies of British sea-power.¹⁰ At all events he provided for a generation a necessary corrective and effective challenge to the prevailing fashions of British writing about the empire.

Why had post-war British historians become so dangerously addicted to an assumption that ‘economic imperialism’ would explain more or less everything? They admitted such obvious political exceptions as Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia, in pursuit of the ‘Great Game’. They were prepared to concede that Bismarck’s bid for colonies might be a move either in his European policy (*Primat der Aussenpolitik*) or in his domestic policy (*Primat der Innenpolitik*). They acknowledged the central role of army officers in driving forward the frontiers of the French and Russian empires. They had no difficulty in accepting that ‘prestige’ might have considerable explanatory power for French expansion. But as far as the British empire was concerned they insisted – perhaps arrogantly – that this was an altogether more complex phenomenon, demanding (supposedly) more sophisticated explanations, which an economic interpretation might yield. Certainly they operated against a background in which economic historians were gaining a powerful grip over all branches of history after the Second World War. A suspicious and sceptical generation was perhaps bound to look to material self-interest and entrepreneurial conspiracy for explanations in history. Concurrently, too, any alternative approach to empire through ‘geopolitics’ – more or less invented by a British historical geographer, Sir Halford Mackinder, in the years before the First World War – had been discredited by its association with Nazi and Fascist expansionist programmes in the 1930s, in which ‘geographical imperatives were used to legitimize imperialism’.¹¹

I

If we are now to assert or reassert the primacy of geopolitics in governmental decision-making about the empire, the underlying assumption will be that there is a fundamental flaw in all theories of economic

determinism. This flaw is that they are not grounded in any real understanding of how governments think. Decisions are taken not by trends or abstract phenomena, but by individuals in very small inner groups, such as a Cabinet sub-committee. Governments – elders, oligarchs, politicians, fighting services chiefs, and their various advisers – are by definition elites. All elites have their own particular ‘cosmologies’, ways of looking at the world and interpreting their responsibilities within a bureaucratic tradition. In Britain the relevant training of most government ministers for ruling the empire has always been minimal. They can mostly be made to grasp the basic principles of survival-politics but not the technicalities of economics. The British elite, drawn in part from the aristocracy for a long period of time, and mostly with an Oxbridge education overwhelmingly classical (or more recently historical) in its emphasis, was frequently disdainful of business interests. It served a form of government heavily committed to *laissez-faire*, which before 1945 at the earliest, had no machinery to hand for formulating national economic policy. In any case, government is mostly about response to immediate problems, in the face of which ministers must concentrate on the essentials. Apart from holding office, these are primarily concerned with protecting the ‘national interest’, which is most obviously interpreted to mean the security of the state against attack. Thus government seems to them to be about ‘high politics’, especially relations with other states, also pursuing their own national interests. The dynamics of this rarefied world are frequently driven by prestige. This will be a central concept for the argument of this chapter. What is prestige? Harold Nicolson defined it as ‘power based on reputation’, an amalgam of the two, something which has to be acquired by power but can only be retained by reputation; prestige is thus more durable than power alone. According to Dean Acheson, ‘prestige is the shadow cast by power’.¹² The estimate formed by rival states of another’s power may be crucial, and so all governments worry about prestige.

British governments in the two centuries since the middle of the eighteenth century have tended to be temperamentally detached from non-governmental representations and from special interest groups of whatever kind, resistant to attempts to put pressure on them to advance individual enterprises which cannot be equated with ‘the national interest’. Ministers might accept a vague duty generally to ‘promote trade’ but would almost never allow themselves to be dictated to by particular lobbies.¹³ It has, however, all too often been argued that governments acted on behalf of interest groups, such as sugar-planters, merchants, businessmen, mining magnates, or ‘gentlemanly capitalists’, simply because government decisions happened to coincide with what

commercial or industrial leaders wanted. This emphatically does not mean, however, that they were genuinely influential, still less instrumental, in bringing those decisions about. It is no longer possible to maintain that William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, during the Seven Years War was a 'spokesman of City interests', or that Lord Palmerston as foreign secretary a hundred years later was acting primarily in the interests of merchants. Marie Peters has shown Chatham's priorities to have been firmly rooted in the political aspects of winning the war against the French: if he aimed at 'the total extirpation of French commerce from the seas', this was not primarily for economic reasons as such.¹⁴

Similarly, Palmerston's famous statement about its being 'the business of the government to open and secure roads for the merchant' has to be returned to its context. The reference was to Afghanistan and Turkestan, where Palmerston was pushing trade as a means of increasing British political influence against Russian penetration. As Ingram puts it, for Palmerston trade was an extension of diplomacy by other means, the cheapest method of injecting stability and security into the region.¹⁵ Governmental priorities were clearly articulated in discussions in 1852 over opening up Japan, when the foreign secretary, Lord Granville, declared that ministers did not accept the view that 'all considerations of a higher nature . . . be sacrificed to the pushing of our manufactures by any means into every possible corner of the globe'.¹⁶ The government can also be shown to have ignored trading interests even when traditional mercantile activities were directly concerned or adversely affected by a change of policy, as in Tunis in 1878 or Persia in 1907. (Britain gave way to France in Tunisia and in Persia influence was to be shared with Russia.) Public opinion was to be treated with suspicion at best, contempt at worst. Even when government appears to have been responding to popular pressure to act in a particular way, only a little research will usually expose the error. Thus in the case of the retention of Uganda in 1894, we now know that Rosebery's Cabinet, far from responding to missionary demands, had itself asked missionaries to whip up a campaign in its favour, in support of a decision already taken on strategic grounds (to protect the headwaters of the Nile).¹⁷ Similarly, it can now be agreed that in South Africa the neo-Marxists were wrong. The truth is that Milner and Chamberlain manipulated the mining magnates and not vice versa, and that they used public opinion to further their own ends, rather than being dictated to by it.¹⁸

It is not in dispute that the British empire took its origin in trade, or that in the eighteenth century colonies were valued for trade. But it was a politically 'mercantilist' trade in colonial raw materials, especially those strategic naval supplies which would make possible self-sufficiency in

time of war. In order to extract such materials from the periphery (or overseas world) it might be necessary to plant settlers or impose order on indigenous chaos by establishing formal rule. But then two imperatives followed ineluctably. What you held you had to defend against rivals. And what you defended you began to value for its own sake, irrespective of the original intention. The first point was well put by Mackinder in 1907:

It is only when a state desires to secure or is driven to avert a monopoly of trade in any region, that the imperial motive becomes effective . . . When order breaks down, or foreign interference is threatened in a land in which large British interests are at stake, Britain has often been compelled to add to her possessions by assuming authority among an alien and distant population.¹⁹

The second point was understood by Henry Dundas (as secretary of state) as early as 1790, when he defined ‘the great objective’ of the British in the East as ‘to preserve the empire . . . in comparison of which even trade is a subordinate or collateral consideration’.²⁰ Thus strategic imperatives, taking more territory to maintain imperial prestige or preempt the challenges of the foreigner, began to operate almost from the beginning of formal rule. Effective defence meant thinking strategically. The very nature of strategic planning created a snowballing process of expansion: to be safe in the valley the overlooking hill must be controlled, to be secure on the hill the next valley must be taken, and so on. As Prime Minister Lord Salisbury observed, ‘the constant study of maps is apt to disturb men’s reasoning powers’, and he more than once complained that his naval and military advisers would have liked to ‘annex the moon in order to prevent its being appropriated by the planet Mars’.²¹ Strategic geopolitics indeed had a distinct tendency to take on a life of its own. This happened spectacularly in the process of reinsuring the British presence in India, internally by gradually incorporating more Indian states until brought up sharp by the Mutiny-Rebellion of 1857, and externally until control of the Indian Ocean rim, from Cape Town to Rangoon, together with the Middle East routes to India, was virtually complete by 1922.

Considerations of strategic security were a particularly strong concern for Britain in the eighteenth century, confronting France as a hated and formidable rival imperial power. The two states were locked into an antagonism which was historical and total, a ‘Second Hundred Years’ War’. This was not just about trade competition but a duel between two different ways of life, not least that of a Protestant nation against a Catholic one, and ultimately a monarchical against a republican one as well. This rivalry coloured everything which happened in British

expansion before 1815, and it left a potent residue for the remainder of the nineteenth century.²² Expansion was seen in the context of ‘competing empires’; the pre-emption of rivals was an important motive for acquiring territory.

These strategic preoccupations were scarcely modified by the promotion of economic opportunity. At the end of the eighteenth century political nervousness made the British government more pessimistic than optimistic about overseas territories, more concerned with a defensive strategic survival than with a positive expansionist blueprint, except spasmodically. In any case, ignorance about economic possibilities was so deep-rooted that no master-plan for any imperial project could be effectively implemented. Geopolitical priorities alone can explain why strategically important Canada and Florida were retained in the peace treaty of 1763 – to round off imperial control of the continent against the French – while the captured rich sugar-island of Guadeloupe was handed back.

Concern for trade was no more developed twenty years later. Shelburne’s dictum, ‘we prefer trade to dominion’, propounded bravely in respect of North America, where the dominion had been lost in 1783, was ripped out of context by Harlow and elevated by him into the ‘enunciation of the general principle on which the Second Empire was being established’. He argued that there was a diversion of interest and enterprise from the Western world to the potentialities of Asia, a ‘swing to the East’. For Harlow and those historians who followed him, all acquisitions were seen as parts of an economic design to open up world markets. In point of fact, however, the retention of Cape Town in 1806 was determined solely to make the route to India secure against the French.²³ The founding of Australia might well have been related to a plan to make convicts produce vital naval stores (timber and flax for shipbuilding), but this was much less important than the need to find somewhere to dump convicts after the loss of the American colonies, all other possibilities having been eliminated. But another strand was the pre-emption of a possible French move to establish themselves in Australia.²⁴ Harlow’s thesis is further unsustainable in that the North Atlantic world remained the principal centre of imperial concern and trade, despite the acquisition of India. Four-fifths of British investment in 1798 remained in the West Indies alone; the West Indies remained vital to British naval strength and to sustaining the war effort against Revolutionary France.²⁵

In the Asian sector itself, it is no more clear that trade for its own sake was driving everything forward. At least in part, Sir Stamford Raffles envisaged Singapore (which he founded in 1819) as ‘a fulcrum

whence we may extend our influence politically'. Commercially valuable Indonesian territories were handed back in the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824. The main outlines of the empire as it had emerged by that date essentially constituted a system of strategic bases in support of an Indian Raj.

The long-term problem of a large-scale territorial empire, which grew ever larger in the nineteenth century, was to keep the whole imperial structure safe and manageable without too much expense to the metropolis. By the end of the century the most favoured device was to promote the regional federation of provinces. After the successful establishment of the Canadian Confederation in 1867, the 'federal panacea' almost became an imperial obsession. Carnarvon tried to make it work in South Africa in the 1870s, where local economic concerns about control of African labour coincided with his grandiose strategies, but were opposed by Boers and Africans. Federations are quintessentially geopolitical constructions. To say that they were adopted for economic reasons is not saying very much. There are always economic arguments in favour of federations. Whether they are worth creating, or holding together, depends on political criteria, notably security against external threat. Canada's Confederation was fundamentally a means of preventing its absorption in an American empire, a counterpoise to the alarming expansion of the United States. As Lord Elgin (governor-general, 1847–54) realised, 'Let the Yankees get possession of British North America with the prestige of superior generalship – and who can say how soon they may dispute with you the Empire of India and of the Seas?'²⁶ Canadian shipbuilding timber, the Halifax naval base, and a sizeable merchant marine were strategic assets which the United States had to be denied. In some ways the new Canada represented a revamped imperial defence posture on the North American continent. As for Australia's coming together, a crucial motive concerned its geographical vulnerability to the 'yellow peril' and desire to consolidate a 'white Australia' on the basis of tougher immigration restrictions against Asians. Unless this purpose is given due weight, historians (such as Norris) are reduced to the tame explanation that Australian federation was no more than a 'businessman's merger'.²⁷ South African Union also had its economic rationale and racially motivated components, though the British government was more concerned with strengthening the region strategically against an anticipated German attack in the expected general war.

During the 1930s, the federal panacea was canvassed in connection with the problems of India and Palestine. It was actively resurgent if not actually triumphant after the Second World War. These proliferating

post-war federations were predicated upon the supposed political desirability and superior defensive capability of larger units.²⁸ The Central African Federation, the most problematic and artificial of them all, was essentially a geopolitical construct to contain the threat of South African expansion, reinforcing the Zambesi as the northern frontier of Afrikanerdom, with its repugnant doctrine of apartheid.²⁹ In Malaysia, federation was undertaken to improve the defence posture in South-East Asia and 'absorb' Chinese communism in Singapore.

II

At the 'high politics' level of imperial decision-making, strategic and geopolitical calculations were dominant. International rivalries and anxieties about prestige were central to the machinations of bureaucratic cosmologists. However, this is not to contend that in the totality of historical explanation economic considerations have no place. They do. But they operated at a different, and secondary, level from governments preoccupied with their global perspectives. At this 'private sector' level, the interests of individuals or pressure groups were decidedly limited, parochial, and selfish: investors, traders, and businessmen seeking profit, concessionaires and adventurers seeking fame and aggrandisement, army officers playing out the strategic games of 'military fiscalism',³⁰ missionaries seeking converts. The significance of such interests to historical explanation is that they created the situations which might force metropolitan statesmen to make decisions or which they could utilise for their own policies. Once interest groups were established overseas – whether settler communities, mining magnates, or army garrisons – they tended to demand government help in consolidating and protecting their interests. It was hard for them to make effective direct contact with ministers. Often their demands for running up the flag and imposing formal territorial rule were ignored or rebuffed. For example, the British government refused pressing offers to take over Sarawak (1860) and Katanga (1874, 1890), and offers of protectorates in Uruguay and Basutoland. At one time the annexation of Fiji was refused (1872), while Lord Derby snubbed the Australians by initially refusing to confirm Queensland's annexation of New Guinea (1883). Those cases which did result in formal imperial rule, however, did so because of convergence between private interests at the local level overseas and the dictates of geopolitics as perceived by rulers at the centre. This convergence was often mediated by a proconsul or 'man on the spot' who had a good relationship with his political bosses in London. If he did not have such a sympathetic relationship, his initiative might be repudiated, as Lord Glenelg

repudiated Sir Benjamin D'Urban's annexation of Queen Adelaide Province in South Africa in 1834–5. (See above, pp. 26–7.)

Exertions of the imperial factor or the imposition of territorial rule have to be explained at two levels, the one making final politically determined decisions within a European framework of reference, and the other contributing to the creation of preparatory conditions in a non-European context, frequently requiring, but certainly not always obtaining, governmental control. Where local indigenous regimes were unable to maintain an adequate system of law and order for the successful operation of European economic or other activities, the government might step in. But it did so chiefly because it believed these chaotic conditions could lead to international conflicts or humanitarian abuses (as, for example, in New Zealand) which it was its function to avert or contain. Territory was thus acquired, or colonial wars broke out, when the two levels of interest interlocked. Individuals overseas could create the circumstances which made an acquisition possible or even probable, but they could never ensure or determine it.³¹

Existing models for a 'theory of imperialism' usually involve an interacting centre and periphery. The dynamic forces at the centre may include strategic as well as economic pressures. European states are regarded as being sucked into an overseas territory through troubles on an unstable frontier. Essentially a 'crisis in the periphery' would lead to territorial takeover, an enlargement of 'bridgeheads'. The dynamic interaction took place in a spatial location, the turbulent frontier.³² This theory may be expressed diagrammatically (Figure 1.1, p. 80).

My alternative model proposes that we should, so to speak, raise this periphery-oriented model from the horizontal to the vertical, and give more weight to the metropolitan dimension. We should envisage two different *levels* of activity (rather than two different *spheres*), two sets of interests interacting along the axis of a chain of command. Thus we generate a model in which metropolitan policies (at one level) were being handed down from the elite group at the centre or political apex, and (at another level) local pressures – set in motion by concessionaires, colonial adventurers, missionaries, settlers, revenue-seeking army officers, etc. – were being transmitted upwards from the base-line of the geographical periphery. Neither the metropolitan nor the local level of action was in itself unilaterally decisive. What clinched matters was an effective interaction between the inner and outer pinions of imperial political power. This interaction was mediated by or funnelled through an individual. In this model a key role thus exists for the 'man on the spot' – the pro-consuls, the ambassadors, the high commissioners, the governors, the viceroys, the commanders-in-chief. For it is they who could determine

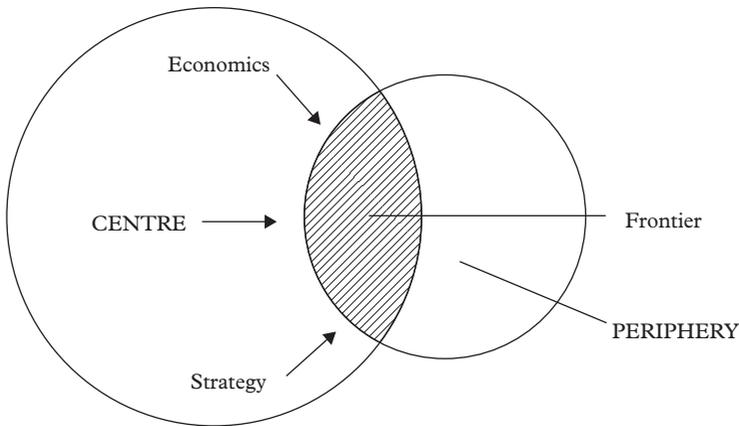


Figure 1.1 The 'turbulent frontier' model.

the extent to which imperial policies worked out at the centre, or local pressures erupting overseas, would be implemented or endorsed. They stood at the intermediate point of interlock in a chain of responsibility between decisions handed down and self-seeking initiatives mediated to the centre. It was General Sir William Butler who once illuminatingly defined the high commissioner in South Africa as 'a kind of pointsman on the railway of thought between two stations'. John Benyon, building upon my theory as first adumbrated in 1976, has glossed this by describing the high commissioner as an imperial agent who 'worked as a half-way relay station that could charge up, or scale down the impulses transmitted in either direction'. In an equally helpful alternative metaphor, Benyon speaks of an 'intermediate proconsulate', which, 'like a connecting-rod, joined the metropolis to periphery at the political level, within the reciprocating engine of empire'.³³

This model may be expressed diagrammatically for an individual case-study as in Figure 1.2. The principal advantage of this 'two-levels' approach is that, unlike the rather one-dimensional and impersonal 'horizontal' model of interaction between the forces of centre and periphery (with the point of interaction located in a place, the unstable frontier), the 'vertical' model is much more precise in assigning economic and geopolitical-strategic motives. Instead of saying 'both may be present', the two-levels model allocates economic motives primarily to the periphery-level, and political or strategic considerations primarily to the elite-level. The other advantage is that it also accommodates properly the role of masterful individuals, both decision-makers in the metropolis and proconsuls 'on the spot'. Instead of reducing everything in an overly

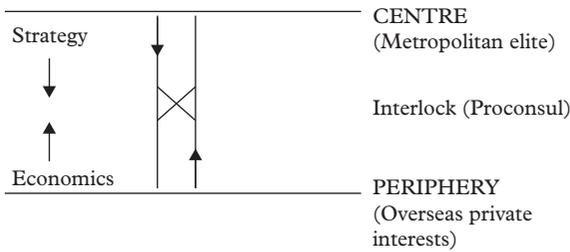


Figure 1.2 The 'interaction' model: for a case-study.

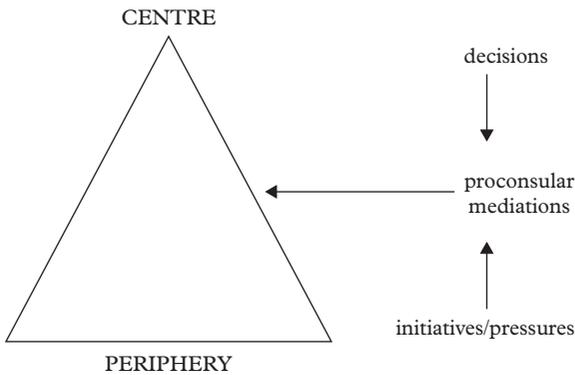


Figure 1.3 The 'interaction' model: for a general theory.

theoretical way to impersonal forces ('imperialism'), it unequivocally incorporates into the historical process the policies and decisions of particular men, whose actions can sometimes only be understood by reference to their personal ambition or psychological drives. In this way the model forces analysis to go beyond mere considerations of 'peripheral crisis' or 'turbulent frontier'. Accordingly, it has much greater explanatory power when applied to the German case of expansion, in which Bismarck had such a central role. His policies need no longer seem obscure or exceptional. Finally, the model does not require any monocausal emphasis on either metropolitan or peripheral dynamics, but allows for both. If it gives primacy to the former, it certainly does not make it exclusive. The integrated, comprehensive nature of the model (in its globally accumulated form) can be represented as in Figure 1.3.

Let us now test the validity of this model by juxtaposing in rapid succession an analysis of the two most important episodes in the British imperial process: territorial acquisition in India from the late eighteenth century and territorial acquisition in Africa in the late nineteenth.

After the French defeat in 1763 there was a continuing British fear that France would use a European war to re-establish an empire in India. Not until 1815 did France finally accept that there was no longer any possibility of a French Indian empire. The existence of the Napoleonic Wars was a critical precondition for the major phase of British territorial expansion in India, providing Richard Wellesley (governor-general 1798–1805) with the excuse as well as the opportunity. In Ingram's conceptualisation, France was his 'necessary enemy'.³⁴ As Bayly reminds us, this was an empire 'forged in the context of war . . . and the ideological challenge of Republican France'.³⁵ Castlereagh was right: 'It has not been a matter of choice but of necessity that our existence in India should pass from that of traders to that of sovereigns. If we had not, the French would long since have taken the lead in India to our exclusion' (1804).³⁶ Tipu Sultan of Mysore was in diplomatic contact with the French between 1797 and 1799, and so Wellesley argued for the reduction of Tipu's power and resources before he could avail himself of the advantages of formal alliance. Otherwise Mysore would be 'a perpetual source of solicitude, expense, and hazard'. In accordance with Wellesley's plan, Tipu's power was smashed, and collectors of revenue were sent in.

Further north, the most powerful leader of the Mahratta Confederacy was Sindhia, who controlled the fugitive Mughal emperor and held sway over a large area of Hindustan, which Wellesley feared might afford facilities to the French, whose man on the spot was Perron. Wellesley's declared aim was to destroy the 'French state on the banks of the Jumna'. He urged that Sindhia's domains presented to vindictive Napoleon 'an instrument of destruction adapted to wound the heart of the British empire in India'. However, he also claimed that the international war against France would have induced him to attack Perron 'even independently of his contest with Sindhia'. In this sense, territorial expansion in India was his contribution to the general war effort.³⁷ Next, Oudh had to be tackled, because of its strategic importance as a buffer to protect the Bengal territories from Zaman Shah in Afghanistan. Though an economic dimension existed – exports in raw cotton, saltpetre, opium, and indigo were being rapidly developed – this was not (as P.J. Marshall has shown) influential upon Wellesley, whose concern was about its supposed 'misrule' and consequent strategic weakness.³⁸ On the west coast, Wellesley's political decisions suited the Bombay merchants very well, but this does not mean he was genuinely concerned with their trade in raw cotton and pepper for Canton. In fact the Bombay merchants, led by Miguel de Souza, seized their chance to persuade Wellesley to keep commercially valuable pieces of territory in the Treaty of Bassein (1802) by dressing up their supposed strategic significance. It was difficult for them

to transport indigenous products out of Gujarat and the Malabar coast because of the confused political conditions and Mahratta interference. The hugely increased demand for China tea after 1784 made Indian raw cotton and pepper, and ultimately opium, important as a payment. All these emerging interests enabled Wellesley to mobilise support in overcoming London's reluctance to agree to territorial extension.³⁹ This was paid for by raising Indian revenue. As Wellesley recognised early on, the establishment of a territorial revenue was 'that necessary foundation of European power in India'.⁴⁰ Wellesley was thus successful in pushing conquest much further forward than Dundas and his other London bosses would otherwise have been prepared to tolerate.

Once the Indian empire existed, the imperatives for its defence were subject to continual escalation. Almost all further extensions had a strategic objective. Despite some interest in teak, Burma began to be added from the mid-1820s mainly to protect the eastern flank of India.⁴¹ The last big acquisitions in India proper in the 1840s demonstrated the same pattern. In Sind and Punjab, economic expectations and commercial opportunities were in the background. The idea of pushing British goods into populous regions was important in creating the conditions for conquest and gaining support for it in Britain. But strategic requirements were the central cause of imperial advance: the need to stabilise turbulent frontiers was especially significant in the case of Punjab, which bordered on Afghanistan. In part the acquisition of Sind was an act of pre-emptive expansion against the French. Prestige entered in, because the British had been defeated in Afghanistan and needed a victory in order to halt the erosion of imperial confidence. Personal factors also played a part, with ambitious Lord Ellenborough as governor-general supporting General Sir Charles Napier, himself determined to redeem an otherwise lack-lustre career. Napier exaggerated the strategic importance of the Indus Valley.⁴²

Turning now to the partition of Africa: whether or not this was triggered off by an Egyptian crisis, the British occupation of 1882 has always been a test-case of imperial controversy. Did Britain move in to protect the bondholders or the route to India? The question of Gladstone's investments is not highly relevant, granted his relative sympathy for Egyptian protonationalists, together with his positively Palmerstonian geopolitical understanding that 'for India the Suez Canal is the connecting link between herself and the centre of power – the centre of the moral, social, and political power of the world'. The Canal, he said, was 'the great question of British interest'.⁴³ A broad spectrum of British interests existed in Egypt, but ministers were primarily concerned with the strategic security of the Canal, in the context of the local situation

developing chaotically from the 1870s, when excessive rates of interest led to Egyptian bankruptcy. The bondholders provided the context, but they did not determine the form of government action, which as Schölch first convincingly demonstrated, was the result of manipulation by its 'men on the spot', notably Sir Edward Malet, the consul-general (who exaggerated the dangers), and Admiral Sir Beauchamp Seymour (who exceeded his instructions).⁴⁴ Prestige mattered too. Failure to act after the riots in Cairo, Sir Charles Dilke believed, 'would destroy not only the prestige of this country, but also of Europe in the East'. Chaos in Egypt, unless brought under control, might also have led to a renewed French attempt to obtain a permanent footing.⁴⁵

In general, the partition of sub-Saharan Africa was the response of European 'high politics' to fears of a widespread, ever-increasing, and fundamental destabilisation of Africa. Externally, Leopold of the Belgians and Bismarck broke the international 'gentleman's agreement' to avoid territorial seizures. Internally, partition meant the imposition of control on the dangerously chaotic scenario brought about by the activities of gun-runners, slave-traders, ivory-hunters, greedy concessionaires, aggressive explorers, treaty-extorters, importunate missionaries, and Islamic fundamentalists. It was, as so often, the frontiers of fear which were being edged forward, especially the fear that local confrontations between frontiersmen could spark off a war between European powers.⁴⁶ Bismarck rebuked the explorer Wolf in 1888: 'Your map of Africa is very fine, but my map of Africa lies in Europe. Here lies Russia, and here . . . lies France, and we are in the middle. That is my map of Africa.'⁴⁷ Locating African disputes within the parameters of European politics was a conception which British statesmen shared. Diplomatic bargaining determined the finalisation of cartographical claims. All the participants were worried that their interests would be squeezed out in a situation of ruthless economic competition. Pre-emption was the name of the game. As Sir Percy Anderson encapsulated it: 'Protectorates are unwelcome burdens, but . . . are the inevitable outcome' of international competition.⁴⁸

The partition took place in an extraordinarily fevered atmosphere of geopolitical excitement and apprehension. The profile of geographers, explorers, and engineers was suddenly raised.⁴⁹ Engineers made striking pronouncements about the technical feasibility of railways (Trans-Sahara, Cape to Cairo, Berlin to Baghdad, Paris to New York); they pontificated about the ease with which dams could be constructed to regulate the Nile waters, or even flood the Sahara. The spreading network of submarine cables added yet another potent strategic imperative. This was especially true of the main cable east from Cape Town,

which reached Mauritius in 1879, making the retention of the east coast of southern Africa more significant than ever. The Germans had to be kept away from it. ‘In the main,’ concluded Robinson and Gallagher, ‘British Africa was a gigantic footnote to the Indian empire.’⁵⁰

The security of the Cape route to India also explains why Britain went to war with the Boers of the Transvaal and Orange Free State, another prominent case where the supposed primacy of economic interests has been strongly canvassed. Yet it is easy to be mesmerised by gold. The truth is that some sort of war might well have broken out in 1899 even if gold had never been discovered in the Transvaal in 1886. The historic long-term causes driving the two sides apart pre-dated the discovery of gold. The incompatibility of outlooks, of local requirements, and basic political aims had been apparent at least since the provocative British annexation of the Transvaal in 1877. No war, however, is inevitable, but the South African War could not be averted because of the way in which the ‘man on the spot’, High Commissioner Milner, was determined to ‘work up to a crisis’, being anxious to prevent the snapping of ‘the weakest link in the imperial chain’ of global communications. He was supported by Secretary of State Chamberlain, worried about prestige.⁵¹ Imperial federation was an ultimate goal. There were fears of German intervention. Control of the hinterland provided the focus for a regional geopolitical conflict. But the existence of economic interests at the local level – the archaic Transvaal as a ‘source of unrest, disturbance, and danger’ to the needs of mining magnates and hopes of *Uitlanders* – remain a necessary part of the overall explanation, even if the geopolitical concerns of strategy and prestige represent a primary level of causation.⁵²

The ‘two-levels’ model thus appears to make good sense of interpreting the dynamics of British expansion over a long period of time. Any convincing model, however, must also hold good for other expanding states too. That it does so for the empires of the continental states, France,⁵³ Germany,⁵⁴ Russia,⁵⁵ and Italy,⁵⁶ should be readily apparent, and there is no space for demonstration here. (See below, chapter 3.) The alignment of American expansion, as analysed by Phillip Darby and Roger Louis, also seems to present no particular difficulty.⁵⁷ More problematic, at least at first sight, is the case of Japan. Actually, the study of Japanese expansion has long been bedevilled by the attempt to harmonise it with the prevailing European theory of ‘economic imperialism’. This has proved difficult.⁵⁸ For one thing, Japan had an actual capital shortage when its expansion began in the late nineteenth century. Myers and Peattie, however, in 1984, put forward the argument that the Japanese empire was designed to create a strategic ringfence

in surrounding territories which were regarded as ineptly governed: a process which ultimately snowballed into over-extension and disaster. Japan fought its first wars against China and Russia essentially because of strategic worries about Korea, which according to General Meckel, Prussian adviser to the Meiji army, was a 'dagger thrust at the heart of Japan', potentially fatal in Russian hands. Myers and Peattie concluded: 'No colonial empire of modern times was as clearly shaped by strategic considerations . . . in large part undertaken to guarantee the nation's strategic frontiers against Western advance.' Thus economic considerations provided a context, and economic advantages – such as control of the oil of Indonesia – were sought as an adjunct to strategic requirements. Only Japanese aggression had created the need for new raw materials and for bolstering prestige against the Americans. Japanese expansion thus clearly confirms the theory of the primacy of geopolitics and the utility of the 'two-levels' paradigm.⁵⁹

III

Halford Mackinder first unveiled his famous thesis that the 'heartland' of Eurasia constituted a geographical pivot, a 'world island' if Africa was included, in 1904. Control of this land mass could lead to the creation of 'a world empire'. The sub-text was a geopolitical warning that sea-power alone might not be sufficient to save the British empire.⁶⁰ One of the members of Mackinder's audience at this lecture in 1904 was L.S. Amery, who became under-secretary of state for the colonies in 1919 and secretary of state from 1924 to 1929; he was also secretary of state for India, from 1940 to 1945. As Roger Louis has made plain, Amery has a fair claim to be 'the architect of the British geo-political system that endured until the crack-up at Suez in 1956'.⁶¹ This system was still mainly designed to uphold the Indian empire. In 1917 Amery envisaged the removal of the Germans from East Africa and from possible influence in the Middle East as giving a strategical security 'which will enable that Southern British World which runs from Cape Town through Cairo, Baghdad, and Calcutta to Sydney and Wellington to go about its peaceful business without constant fear of German aggression'.⁶² The keystone of this geopolitical arch would be in Palestine, with British influence established on the ruins of a defeated Ottoman empire and linked with the patronage of Zionism. If Germany emerged from the war able to dominate the Middle East, it would 'threaten our whole position in Egypt, India, and the Eastern Seas'. If left in Tanganyika and installed in Palestine, Germany might try to link up the two with a railway from Hamburg to Lake Nyasa, 'the greatest of all dangers which

can confront the British empire in the future'. (Mackinder himself was arguing that Germany had gained command of Tanganyika and Kiaochow in order to mobilise African and Chinese manpower, and would make them the termini of projected overland railway routes on the 'world island' land mass.) Although Amery became a committed Zionist, excited by the potentialities which Jewish energy, released in a National Home, might bring to the regeneration of the Middle East, he admitted in his memoirs that the origin of his interest was strategic. Doubting whether Britain could control Egypt much longer, he believed a plan to hold the area to the east of the Canal would provide 'a central pivot of support for our whole Middle Eastern policy as well as assuring the effective control of our sea and air communications with the East'.⁶³

The Palestine Mandate thus commended itself to the British government for essentially geopolitical reasons. To a large extent it was a pre-emptive measure against a possible German initiative to become the patron of Zionism, which was after all an Austrian idea. Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon argued – in language strongly reminiscent of Wellesley – that a teutonised Turkey, in possession of Syria and Palestine, 'would be an extreme and perpetual menace to the Empire'. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 was also an attempt to rally Jewish support for the faltering allied war effort.⁶⁴ The importance of Palestine to the empire developed in the 1920s, as it became not only the protective buffer of the Canal Zone, but the indispensable geopolitical link in the Iraq route to India and the outlet for oil, at Haifa. Sitting on the land bridge between Eurasia and Africa (or, as Mackinder saw it, at the 'physical and historical centre of the world'), it became known as the 'Clapham Junction of the British empire'. By 1939, however, it had become clear that Arab friendship was more valuable to Britain than Jewish, not least because of the ever-increasing importance of oil. By 1948 the Palestine Mandate was given up, basically on the ground that to antagonise the Arabs further would throw them into the arms of the Russians, and it was vital to forestall this. And the military experts had ceased to regard Palestine as a 'strategic reserve'.⁶⁵

The geopolitical problems of an over-extended empire explain all the policies of the 1920s and 1930s, from the Singapore Base to appeasement. If the former became a symbol of unrealistic defence commitments, the latter was a strategic necessity, since the empire could not realistically fight three enemies (Germany, Italy, and Japan) or in the Mediterranean and Far East simultaneously.⁶⁶ Extraordinary plans were made for a further paper repartition of Africa, in order to give German ambitions some satisfaction. This represented the apotheosis of

diplomatic bargaining with respect to the map of that continent.⁶⁷ It was also in this period that the Chiefs of Staff acquired enormous power over overseas policy, which persisted well into the 1950s.

As Britain moved into the post-war era, the gradual dismantling of the empire became the dominant theme. The central hinge of governmental debate about decolonisation was whether British prestige would be best served by holding on or getting out. Timing was the critical factor, and increasingly calculations about the feasibility of the continuation of imperial rule were made within the framework of the cold war. Long-term international friendships came to be seen as much more important than transient local control. In 1946 the viceroy of India, Wavell, concluded that 'on the whole Great Britain should not lose, but on the contrary, may gain in prestige and even in power, by handing over to Indians'. Most importantly, the Chiefs of Staff agreed. Even Amery had argued that 'in surrendering control from here we should not be sacrificing anything that mattered'. The Labour government's greatest anxiety in the whole process of transferring power in India was that it should not be done in a way which could be criticised as 'scuttle'.⁶⁸ Independence for India in 1947 was obviously a major turning point for the British empire, even if its geopolitical significance was insufficiently understood at the time. In Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke's assessment:

With the loss of India and Burma, the keystone of the arch of our Commonwealth Defence was lost, and our Imperial Defence crashed. Without the central strategic reserve of Indian troops ready to operate either east or west, we were left impotent and even the smallest of nations were at liberty to twist the lion's tail . . . but few realized what the strategic loss would amount to.⁶⁹

Attlee as prime minister tried hard to initiate the strategic reassessment which was required in the Middle East and North Africa, but was thwarted by the inertia of the traditional nostrums and by the intensification of Russian expansion.⁷⁰ But with India independent, it could be argued that many of the British political elite fundamentally lost interest in empire. This holds true for Churchill as well as Attlee, for Macmillan and Duncan Sandys as well as Enoch Powell.⁷¹ From 1947, the gradual end of empire was not seriously contested at the highest level of government. Not so much a failure of will, just a fit of absence of mind.

With the onset of the cold war, Mackinder's warnings and predictions came into their own. In a major state-paper of 1948, the foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, used the conceptual language of Mackinder: 'Physical control of the Eurasian landmass and eventual control of the whole World Island is what the Politburo is aiming at – no less a thing than that . . .'⁷² This had profound consequences for the continuation

of unwanted European rule. In Attlee's famous phrase, 'an attempt to maintain the old colonialism would, I'm sure, have immensely aided communism'.⁷³ The whole process of decolonisation is best interpreted within the geopolitical context of the cold war. The long-term aim with respect to future relations with Afro-Asian countries was to ensure their alignment with the West, thus containing communism within Mackinder's 'heartland'.⁷⁴ According to Macmillan, writing privately in 1962, the ideological struggle against communism 'really dominates everything'. Consequently, the new multi-racial Commonwealth must be made to work, because its worldwide dispersion made it a useful weapon in the global contest, 'while the Communist/Free World division really holds the front of the stage'.⁷⁵ Macmillan's view reflected that of the senior civil servants who compiled the 'Future Policy Study' in 1959–60, which emphasised the 'overriding importance of countering the threat from the communist world'; this would be the first, the ultimate objective of British policy in the 1960s.⁷⁶ Iain Macleod (secretary of state for the colonies, 1959–61) also based his policy in East Africa on the belief that 'the overriding consideration' was to make sure that its territories did not become sympathetic to the Sino-Soviet cause.⁷⁷ In general, he believed, it would be better to grant too much and too soon than too little and too late. This policy was not without its risks: reluctance to move forward with independence might turn African opinion towards the Soviet Union, but going too fast might equally well plunge large areas of Africa into chaos, ripe for communist exploitation. Sir Andrew Cohen, the Colonial Office expert, was worried by 1961 that 'killing communism' seemed to have become the chief objective of African policy, rather than the desirability of preparing stable and viable regimes for independence.⁷⁸

In this way political considerations were paramount in decolonisation. Economic considerations were in the nature of *nihil obstat*. Just as economic interests had once facilitated the acquisition of territory, so now they operated in reverse. Territories could be given up when nothing essential seemed likely to be irretrievably lost by transfers of political power – a conclusion reached for India by the 1940s and Africa by the 1960s.⁷⁹ Business firms exercised no influence on decolonisation, as is clear from studies made of such widely differing territories as Malaya, Egypt, Rhodesia, and the Congo.⁸⁰ The mainspring came from the international context. To 'Joe' Saville Garner, a civil servant who was well placed to know (as permanent under-secretary of the Commonwealth Relations Office), the reason why the pace of independence was speeded up was primarily because 'other people's empires were crumbling all around': Germany, Italy, Holland, and Japan had all ceased to be

imperial powers after the war, and from 1958 to 1960 there were major advances to self-rule in French West Africa and the Belgian Congo.⁸¹ From the end of 1960 there was pressure from the United Nations (Resolution 1514) to promote the early independence of all colonial territories. Macleod warned the Cabinet in January 1961: 'we must recognize that pressures from the United Nations, now that Belgium and France are dropping out as colonial powers, will increasingly concentrate on us'.⁸² Britain had no wish to be pilloried as an international pariah. It was widely understood in any case that colonial territories could not be insulated from developments in neighbouring countries: if not a 'domino theory' of decolonisation, at least a recognition of the salience of 'chain reactions'. Insulating ring fences were impossible, as the governor of Nigeria, Sir John Macpherson, reluctantly realised in 1952; they had had to give Nigeria a constitution 'in advance of its true capacity', because of what was happening in the Gold Coast, the Sudan, and Libya.⁸³ Similarly, just as the Gold Coast became the pacemaker in the first phase of decolonisation, in West Africa, so Tanganyika became the pioneer in the next and crucial phase, in East Africa. As its governor, Sir Richard Turnbull, recognised, 'it could not be expected that Tanganyika would remain immune from the trend of events' in the neighbouring Congo, Ruanda-Urundi, and Nyasaland.⁸⁴ Charismatic proconsuls painting frightening scenarios had a vital role to play in converting reluctant ministers to nationalist political advancement in Africa.

Britain did not want to be found in the last colonial ditch with the Portuguese, the 'wily, oily Portuguese' as Churchill once called them. Britain did not take the initiative in the decolonisation of Africa, any more than Britain had spearheaded the partition. Great power rivalry led Britain into the nineteenth-century scramble for Africa, and great power rivalry – in the shape of the cold war and a competition for international respectability and support – induced the twentieth-century scramble to get out of Africa. Britain's policy was essentially reactive, that is to say, it was one of following other powers into empire-building in Africa (in order not to be excluded), and into decolonisation (so as not to be ostracised).

Geopolitical considerations were decisive in withdrawal from empire, and they remained so until the end of the cold war. It may or may not be possible to make sense of the Falklands War of 1982, a war which never should have taken place, between two countries that had long been friends. But the familiar dictates of prestige and strategy may be tellingly invoked. From the end of the 1970s the Soviet Union was establishing close relations with Argentina, and this made a vital difference. The strategic importance of the Falklands grew with the mobility of nuclear submarines capable of entering the Atlantic through Drake's Passage

(south of Cape Horn) from the Pacific. The Russians might thus maximise the unity of what Mackinder had called ‘the world’s ocean’, and there were almost no other islands from which submarine movements in the area could be monitored. Thus the cold war expansion of Soviet naval power gave a new geostrategic significance to the Falklands and its dependencies. These, ironically, had seemed to the Foreign Office in 1952 to be the one overseas commitment which might possibly be offloaded.⁸⁵

The end of the cold war had many ramifications, unfreezing all manner of constraints from Ulster to Hong Kong. The ‘new’ South Africa was a principal beneficiary, since fears of communism could no longer underpin apartheid. At least potentially, a solution to the problem of Northern Ireland could be put on the agenda: there was profound significance in the phrase of the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 that the British government no longer had any strategic interest in the retention of Ulster within the United Kingdom. The removal of strategic constraints elsewhere in the empire has frequently led to rapid imperial withdrawals. However, strategic re-evaluations of themselves do not automatically solve everything. It has been a major premise of this chapter that effective action has to arise out of a conjunction of local and metropolitan interests, and such conjunction in Northern Ireland was particularly hard to achieve.

Metropolitan decision-making equally does not operate in a global vacuum. Empires compete. A broad geopolitical basis to imperial policy-making is thus unavoidable. Rulers of empires have to study maps. It is not difficult to construct plausible geopolitical rationales and strategic arguments. They can be made to justify almost any policy. By their arcane nature they have often become dangerously overvalued by the governing elite. They are specialist judgments which are difficult to remove and, notoriously, the planners are always fighting the last war over again. As Roger Louis has so pertinently observed: ‘strategic calculations with emotional origins can become absolute. When they carry over into a different era, they can become irrational.’⁸⁶ This is an insight which no historian of empire can afford to neglect.

Notes

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