

THE CONCEPT OF SPLENDID ISOLATION: A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH**Inna Pidbereznykh**

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Summary

The article deals with the concept of «splendid isolation», traditionally associated with British foreign policy in the late 19th century, refers to the period when Britain distanced itself from European alliances. This article examines the rationale and consequences of this policy through a contemporary lens, drawing on contemporary scholarship to reassess the motivations and outcomes of Britain's diplomatic posture in that era. Analyzing the concept of «splendid isolation», the study focuses on the political, economic and military factors that determined British strategy.

The focus of the study is also the analysis of criticism of this strategy and its consequences for Great Britain in the context of changes in the international balance of power at the beginning of the 20th century. The question arises as to whether «splendid isolation» was really an effective strategy for protecting national interests and maintaining the status of a world power.

The traditional view of British foreign policy in the late Victorian era emphasizes independence and avoidance of binding alliances. The article examines the changes in the international environment, especially the growing competition from France, Russia, Germany and the United States, and how they influenced the decisions of British politicians. The article also examines the transition from isolationist policies to strategic alliances at the beginning of the 20th century.

Key words: Victorian Britain, democratic values, foreign policy, international relations, European alliances, conservative ideas.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/6523>

1. Introduction

The concept of «splendid isolation» has long been discussed among historians. Initially, it was seen as a deliberate policy of non-intervention; however, recent studies have questioned this interpretation, suggesting that British foreign policy was more nuanced and reactive to international events than previously thought.

The late Victorian period, known as the Pax Britannica, was characterized by the absence of major wars and relative stability, which the country maintained through its diplomacy and military power. However, there are ongoing debates in academic circles regarding the accuracy of the description of British foreign policy during that time. Traditionally, it was believed that

Britain avoided binding alliances and acted based on its own national interests, which seemed to ensure its independence on the international stage.

The novelty of the problem lies in determining whether British foreign policy in the late Victorian era truly adhered to the principles of «splendid isolation» or whether this was a simplified notion that overlooked the complexity of international relations and the changing geopolitical circumstances.

The aim of the research is to present a contemporary reevaluation of the concept of «splendid isolation» in British foreign policy during the late Victorian period and to understand the diplomatic strategies of the country under study and their impact on international relations.

The research methodology is based on an interdisciplinary approach, which includes the analysis of historical sources and contemporary scholarly literature. The main research methods include:

Historical-comparative method: to study the evolution of the concept of «splendid isolation» in various periods of the late Victorian era and the early 20th century;

Critical analysis of scholarly literature: focusing on the review of existing research that allows comparing traditional views with modern interpretations;

The method of historicism is an important tool in studying British foreign policy during this period. Using this method allows us to examine in detail the evolution of British foreign policy within the context of historical events, economic conditions, and political circumstances that influenced its formation.

This approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of the concept of «splendid isolation» taking into account both internal and external factors that influenced the formation of British foreign policy during the late Victorian period.

2. Analysis of Major Research on the Topic

Research on British foreign policy in the late Victorian period has significantly changed over the past decades. Modern historians question the traditional understanding of «splendid isolation» proposing a more complex interpretation. Kenneth Bourne provided a comprehensive overview of Victorian foreign policy, giving insights into the strategic decisions that shaped Britain's international relations and explained that «splendid isolation» was more a consequence of circumstances than a deliberate strategy (*Kenneth, 1970*).

Andreas Rose focused primarily on the period when Britain, balancing between imperial obligations and continental affairs, shaped its diplomatic strategy on the eve of World War I (*Rose, 2017*). Rather than passive isolation, Britain actively engaged in international diplomacy, maintaining a balance of power in Europe and protecting its global interests. British foreign policy was adaptive and pragmatic, responding to changing geopolitical conditions. Thus, according to A. Rose, the concept of «splendid isolation» did not reflect the complexity and dynamics of British foreign policy at that time.

Thomas Otte, in his scientific exploration, focused on the role of great power rivalry in shaping British foreign policy (*Otte, 2007*). Otte argued that Britain's so-called isolation was a strategic response to specific geopolitical challenges, particularly in Asia, and emphasized that Britain avoided formal alliances but actively participated in international diplomacy to protect its interests.

T.G. Otte expands our understanding of British diplomacy and analyzes the functioning of the British Foreign Office before World War I, highlighting the importance of the diplomatic apparatus and professional training of diplomats. He argued that British foreign policy in the

late Victorian period was complex and responsive to international challenges, rather than a result of passive isolation (*Otte, 2005: 31-52*).

One of the key themes in Paul Kennedy's research is the policy of «splendid isolation» in 19th-century Britain. The scholar provides a deep analysis of the rise and fall of great powers from the 16th century to the end of the 20th century and meticulously examines this period, emphasizing that Britain, seeking to maintain its imperial dominance, consciously avoided involvement in continental conflicts. Such a strategy allowed the country to focus on strengthening its naval forces and trade routes, ensuring its economic stability and military superiority. However, Paul Kennedy noted that by the end of the 19th century, this policy was becoming increasingly less effective as growing competition from other great powers demanded more active participation from Britain in international affairs. In the end, «splendid isolation» proved to be a temporary and limited approach to foreign policy that could not provide long-term stability and power in a changing global order.

Avan Fata critically reexamines the concept of «splendid isolation» arguing that it oversimplifies the complexity of British foreign policy (*Fata, 2022: 2-14*). He suggests that Britain actively participated in international diplomacy, although in a way that prioritized its global interests over European connections.

Modern research shows that «splendid isolation» was more of a rhetorical construct than an actual policy. Britain actively participated in international diplomacy, formed informal alliances, and responded to geopolitical changes in an effort to maintain its global position. Thus, contemporary historians offer a more nuanced understanding of British foreign policy in the late Victorian period, emphasizing its adaptability and strategic flexibility.

3. Changing Views on British «Isolation»

«Splendid isolation» is a term often associated with the foreign policy of the United Kingdom at the end of the 19th century, particularly under the leadership of Lord Salisbury from 1885 to 1902. This policy is characterized by Britain's deliberate avoidance of permanent alliances with other European powers, seeking to maintain autonomy in international affairs while protecting its vast global empire.

By the late 19th century, Europe was marked by a complex network of alliances. After the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, British diplomats were forced to adapt to a different geopolitical environment. Although general narratives, tainted by the thematic focus on Anglo-German rivalry, emphasize the unification of Germany as a key event for British foreign policy, recent studies highlight that the fall of France meant much more for British diplomacy than Prussia's triumph.

In essence, France's quick defeat exacerbated three pre-existing trends in foreign affairs: Russia's incursion into Central Asia; the rise of the United States as a great power; and the consolidation of Prussia-Germany as a potential European hegemon.

Britain's historical reluctance to engage in continental conflicts dates back to earlier periods when the primary focus was on maintaining naval superiority and protecting its overseas colonies.

The geopolitical consequences of 1870–1871 may not have affected Britain on a practical level – in terms of territorial changes or military obligations but they clearly emphasized the limitations of the Foreign Office's scope of action; diplomatic initiatives in one region of the world inevitably had repercussions for Britain's position in another. In other words, the constraints and opportunities faced by late Victorian British diplomats were inextricably linked.

Central to British foreign policy was the maintenance of a powerful Royal Navy, which ensured control over sea lanes and the ability to protect global trade and imperial interests. Britain mainly focused on defending its empire, which required avoiding commitments that could potentially drag it into European conflicts and distract from its colonial priorities. Instead of forming formal alliances, the country sought to act as a balancer, using diplomatic influence to prevent any single power from becoming the dominant force in Europe.

Alan John Percival Taylor proposed the classic view of the period of «splendid isolation» as a deliberate and strategic policy reflecting Britain's confidence in its naval power and its desire to avoid entanglements that could jeopardize its global interests.

Today, most researchers dispute this view, suggesting that Britain was not as isolated as the term implies. They point to the numerous diplomatic efforts and informal agreements in which Britain engaged to protect its interests without entering into formal alliances. Economic motives played a significant role in shaping British foreign policy. The protection of trade routes and colonial possessions was the driving force behind the emphasis on naval supremacy and the avoidance of European conflicts that could disrupt these priorities. Thomas Otte argued that Britain's focus on non-European affairs contributed to the perception of isolation, but in reality, it was a strategic repositioning.

Avan Fata critically reevaluates «splendid isolation» arguing that it oversimplifies British foreign policy and considers «splendid isolation» to be a flexible and context-dependent strategy (Fata, 2022: 2-14). The researcher suggests that Britain maintained a network of informal alliances and participated in multilateral diplomacy to protect its interests.

If we describe Britain's position in the late Victorian decades as «isolation» it misleads us by several important aspects. As a European state with global reach that surpassed any other state of this period, British diplomacy inherently assumed imperial preeminence, which was inseparable from the geopolitical atmosphere on the continent. As the empire's holdings expanded and consequently required more attention, the Foreign Office recognized the need to closely monitor the situation closer to home. Ensuring access to the Turkish Straits and later to the Suez Canal was an integral part of efforts to ensure that Britain's global position was not threatened by any aggressive plans of other Great Powers. As T.G. Otte noted, «active involvement in European affairs not only helped maintain stability and peace in Europe but also protected vital British interests on the continent and its periphery» (Otte, 2015: 203-227). The degree of detachment from Europe, the complex web of overlapping and often competing interests that each of the great powers had in relation to Britain, did not allow isolation (in the full sense) to become a viable reality.

The above highlights several key elements of British foreign policy in the late Victorian period. First, the British more than any other great power had a global rather than a continental worldview. Although its global reach and economic advantages elevated Britain's status as a prominent great power, ensuring the security of imperial territories was to become a constant burden for both the diplomatic corps and military strategy. Unlike the rest of the states, Britain did not have a large standing army, and the strengthening of defense in one part of the empire occurred at the cost of its weakening in others. As Lord Rosebery, Foreign Secretary during Gladstone's time (1886–1886, 1892–1894), said: «Our trade is so universal and so penetrating that hardly any question can arise in any part of the world without involving British interests. This reasoning, instead of expanding, rather limits the field of our actions. Because if we did not strictly limit the principle of intervention, we would always participate in about forty wars at the same time» (Otte, 2005: 31-52).

4. Conclusions

An examination of the concept of «splendid isolation» in late Victorian British foreign policy shows that the term does not fully capture the complexity of British diplomacy at the time. An analysis of historical sources and modern scientific works indicates that Britain did not follow a rigid policy of non-intervention, but rather showed flexibility and responded to geopolitical challenges, particularly in Asia and other regions of the world. British foreign policy was much more nuanced than previously thought, and focused on preserving national interests and ensuring the security of a global empire.

The absence of formal alliances and emphasis on autonomy in international affairs did not mean isolation from world events. Great Britain continued to be actively involved in international diplomacy through informal arrangements and strategic manoeuvres, which allowed it to protect its interests without direct involvement in continental conflicts.

Maintaining a powerful Royal Navy and securing control of the sea lanes were key elements of Britain's strategy to protect global trade routes and imperial possessions. This emphasized the importance of economic motives in the formation of foreign policy and their influence on decision-making aimed at avoiding European conflicts that could jeopardize these priorities.

Contemporary studies by Kenneth Bourne, Martin Roberts, Thomas Otte, and Avan Fath offer a critical revision of the concept of «splendid isolation» and emphasize the need to view this period from a broader perspective. The scholarly intelligence presented shows that Britain not only maintained a network of informal alliances, but also actively participated in multilateral diplomacy to secure its interests.

Thus, a reassessment of the concept of «splendid isolation» allows us to understand that British foreign policy in the late Victorian period was more complex and dependent on global circumstances than previously thought.

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