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**Reassessing The Anglo-German Naval Arms  
Race**

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## Reassessing the Anglo-German Naval Arms Race

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*Abstract: Recent reinterpretations of British foreign and strategic policy prior to the First World War have indicated a British preoccupation with Russia, not Germany as is conventionally believed. The author compares the primary diplomatic record of the era against these new theories, holding that while long-term planning necessarily considered more distant threats, contemporary British decision-making centred upon countering an immediate German threat. Thus, standard accounts of the Anglo-German arms race continue to provide a more convincing explanation of British pre-war policy.*

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## Introduction

“The enormous growth of armaments in Europe, the sense of insecurity and fear caused by them – it was these that made war inevitable.”<sup>1</sup> With these words, Sir Edward Grey, Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Liberal government in the decade prior to the First World War, summed up the opinion of many observers after this unprecedented conflagration. In order to account for the occurrence of a war that no one apparently wanted, statesmen and scholars studied the underlying causes of European tensions prior to 1914. Among these causes, the existence of an arms race came to find a central explanatory role for Anglo-German tensions and British entry into the war. Echoing the reflections of the senior British statesman, the arms race account became a conventional explanatory device for understanding British participation in hostilities.

But after many decades of development of the arms race model as a partial explanation for outbreak of the Great War, a new channel of historic writing has reinterpreted this theory. Undercutting presumptions that Anglo-German tensions played a predominant role in British foreign policy, two groups of international historians have focused on Anglo-Russian relations as a driving force in the island nation’s international relations. However, these new histories raise questions not only of British motives, but also of foreign policy-planning horizons. These Russian-centred narratives presume an exceptional degree of foresight on the part of British statesmen, not necessarily reflected in the record.

More importantly, by extending the planning horizon to a preoccupation with a Russian threat not expected to materialize for more than a decade, these studies deemphasize the immediate, popular crisis posed by the rise of Germany and its navy. By addressing arguments supporting and opposing the arms race narrative, a fuller understanding can be gained of governmental decision-making processes. What becomes clearer from this debate is that while long-term concerns provide the backdrop of foreign policy decisions, the immediate situations facing statesmen form the final basis for their actions.

## Conventional Interpretations of Anglo-German Naval Arms Race

If any single nation entered the First World War in 1914 as a result of an arms race, it was Great Britain. Through competing interests in the Balkans, Austria Hungary and Russia embarked upon war. France had war thrust upon her by German invasion, although her alliance with Russia would have embroiled her eventually. Germany’s case was more ambiguous, with schools of interpretation reaching radically differing

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Edward Grey, *Twenty-Five Years, 1892-1916* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925), 92.

accounts of that nation's decision to wage war.<sup>2</sup> However, Great Britain had no direct stakes in what was essentially a Balkan conflict, nor any alliance obligations requiring its contribution to the conflagration. According to traditional interpretations, the British entered the war to maintain the balance of power against German aggression; an aggression manifested by that latter nation's naval arms race with Britain. While the violation of Belgian neutrality provided a rationale, the roots of British participation lay elsewhere. An arms race was more likely to have contributed to Great Britain's decision for war than that of any other power.

According to the generally accepted elements of the Anglo-German arms race thesis,<sup>3</sup> the British government and public became increasingly suspicious of German intentions following the publication of the German navy law in 1898. The *Reichsflotte* theory, advocated by German Admiral Tirpitz in this law, required Germany to build a navy large enough to inflict serious injury upon its British counterpart.<sup>4</sup> This in turn would so weaken Great Britain in its struggle against its natural enemies, France and Russia, that it could not defend itself from an attack by the dual alliance. To complete the scenario, Great Britain, realizing the danger posed by the German threat, would naturally gravitate towards an alliance with Germany.

However, many scholars believe Great Britain was not cowed by the German challenge, and took active steps to neutralize the threat.<sup>5</sup> Great Britain chose to resolve lesser diplomatic concerns, allowing the concentration of naval resources in the North Sea. A fortuitous alliance

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<sup>2</sup> Fritz Fisher, *World Power or Decline: The Controversy over Germany's Aims in the First World War*, trans. Robert Kimber and Rita Kimber (New York: W W Norton, 1974), J C G Rohl, "Admiral Von Muller and the Approach of War, 1911-1914," *Historical Journal* 12, no. 4 (1969): 651-73.

<sup>3</sup> James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, ed. Harry Hearder, 3rd Edition ed., *Origins of Modern Wars* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1985), 62-67, Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 81-231, Paul M Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), Paul M Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870-1945* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 129-60.

<sup>4</sup> Gary E Weir, *Building the Kaiser's Navy: The Imperial Navy Office and German Industry in the Von Tirpitz Era, 1890-1919* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 20. "For Germany the most dangerous enemy at the present time is England. It is also the enemy against which we must urgently require a certain measure of naval force as a political power factor." The Tirpitz Memorandum of June 1897, in Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent: Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet* (London: Macdonald, 1965), 209.

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870-1945*, 214-15, Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1983; reprint, 2nd Edition), 136-37, Arthur J Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, 3rd Edition ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), vol I, 5-6.

with Japan in 1902 allowed battleships in the China Squadron to return home, as did informal arrangements with the United States in the western hemisphere. Significantly, Great Britain reconciled with long-time rival France, signing an entente in 1904, and completed its diplomatic agenda with an entente with Russia in 1907. Facing the primary threat to its existence from the growing German navy, Great Britain had accomplished the seemingly impossible feat of coming to terms with all its other significant rivals.

Great Britain increased the pace of the naval arms race through the 1906 completion of the *Dreadnought*. While this new weapon gave the British a lead over Germany, this development fuelled the naval challenge by making older battleships obsolete. With the launching of the revolutionary new warship, Great Britain's numerical lead in battleships declined from twenty-seven to one.<sup>6</sup> Faced with the real prospect of overtaking its established rival in dreadnought-type battleships, Germany accelerated its naval construction. The resulting naval arms race reached a crescendo in the half-decade between 1908 and 1912, years punctuated by invasion and naval scares in the British Isles. Even after Germany shifted funds from its navy to its army in 1912, lingering suspicions contributed to poor Anglo-German relations. Ultimately, when faced with a German attack of its Entente partners in August of 1914, Great Britain intervened.

## **Reinterpretations of British Foreign and Naval Policy**

The first histories on the naval arms race, often written by participants to justify wartime decisions, displayed clear biases. Winston Churchill's *The World Crisis* and Alfred von Tirpitz's *My Memoirs* epitomize these early works.<sup>7</sup> When American historian Arthur Marder investigated British naval policy prior to the First World War in the 1930's, he was granted unprecedented access to official Admiralty documents.<sup>8</sup> The five-volume work he prepared from these materials appeared to be definitive. Later works added a gloss to the primary text, without disputing the essential

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<sup>6</sup> See Robert Gardiner, ed., *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1860-1905* (London: Conway Maritime Press Ltd., 1979), George Modelski and William R Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics, 1494-1993* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1988), 76. This extreme view neglected the value still possessed by older pre-Dreadnought type battleships, and the unassailable British preponderance in these weapons. However, it did convey the prospect for a future shift in the naval balance of power as these older ships rapidly exited first-line service.

<sup>7</sup> Winston S Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911-1914* (London: Thornton Butterworth Limited, 1923), Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs* (London: Hurst & Blackett, Ltd., 1920).

<sup>8</sup> Jon Tetsuro Sumida, "Sir John Fisher and the Dreadnought: Sources of Naval Mythology," *Journal of Military History* 59, no. 4 (1995): 628-29.

points. Paul Kennedy's account in particular added depth to the diplomatic history, emphasizing economic aspects of Anglo-German relations.<sup>9</sup>

However in recent works, historians have questioned the primacy of the Anglo-German naval arms race as a *casus belli*. These accounts have either reinterpreted the diplomatic history of the pre-war era or challenged the standard account of British naval policy. The first of these strands of historic interpretation posits that British diplomacy aimed to counter a Russian threat to the British Empire, not a German challenge. The latter strand, drawing upon the above theory of a Russian-oriented policy, holds that British naval construction policy sought to balance all naval competitors, not merely Germany. Both imply that Great Britain did not enter war in 1914 because of a rising German naval threat.

Reinterpretations of British diplomatic history have started with the premise that the primary strategic challenge facing Great Britain in the first two decades of the twentieth century was rising Russian strength. Edwardian strategists recognized, that with the completion of the southern spur of the trans-Siberian railroad, Russian land power finally posed a direct threat to British India.<sup>10</sup> The new railroad line would allow the Russians to rapidly shift armies overland to the Afghan border, and from there, to possibly overwhelm British troops on the Northwest Frontier of India. Great Britain had previously defended its empire with sea power. The ability to move large armies directly to India would circumvent Great Britain's superiority in sea power.<sup>11</sup> The British general staff recognized the financial impossibility of maintaining an army in India large enough to counter the Russian threat,<sup>12</sup> and sought alternative means to address this security concern. The recent theory holds that the 1904 French entente served to curry favour with the Czarist Court, and this policy bore fruit with the 1907 Anglo-Russian entente.

Keith Wilson extrapolates further, imputing an extraordinarily skilful and duplicitous diplomacy to Sir Edward Grey's Foreign Office. Recognizing that the miniscule British Army could not provide a meaningful contribution to victory in a continental war, the British Foreign Office concocted a German naval threat, which their navy alone could

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<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914*.

<sup>10</sup> J McDermott, "The Revolution in British Military Thinking from the Boer War to the Moroccan Crisis," in *War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880-1914*, ed. Paul M Kennedy (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), 101, Pascal Venier, "The Geographical Pivot of History and Early Twentieth Century Geopolitical Culture," *Geographical Journal* 170, no. 4 (2004): 331.

<sup>11</sup> Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar: British Policy and Russia 1894-1917* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 117.

<sup>12</sup> McDermott, "The Revolution in British Military Thinking," 101-02.

provide a balance.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the Liberal government embraced the concept of balance of power, fully aware of British irrelevance to its calculation. The six divisions of the British Army would prove just sufficient to turn the tide against the nearly balanced French and German forces, and more importantly, the British Navy alone would protect entente interests on the high seas.<sup>14</sup>

These recent reinterpretations find further confirmation in studies on British naval policy.<sup>15</sup> By 1900, the British Navy could no longer maintain its two power standard, which required the Navy to possess sufficient strength to defeat the next two largest navies in the world. Previously, Great Britain sought to counter the Russian and French navies, but the rise of German, American, and Japanese fleets complicated the British position. The British Navy faced its main challenge in meeting new competitors with a limited financial basis.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, Germany presented only one threat among many. While British naval construction aimed to meet German expansion, it also sought to counter other fleets, thus Marder's emphasis on the Anglo-German naval antagonism is misplaced.

Furthermore, British naval construction policy aimed more at addressing imperial defence than continental needs, suggesting that Whitehall did not focus on meeting Germany in the North Sea.<sup>17</sup> Imperial defence requirements included protection of the trade routes and overseas colonies, whereas continental defence necessitated dominance of the seas surrounding the British Isles. These defence tasks required different tools. Continental defence, useful against the German Navy, relied upon fleets of heavily armoured battleships capable of defeating any warship at sea and able to blockade enemy coastlines.<sup>18</sup> Imperial defence demanded warships like the armoured cruiser, ships with the high speed necessary to outrun

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<sup>13</sup> Keith M Wilson, *The Policy of the Entente: Essays on the Determinants of British Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 69, 106, 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 62, 115.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas A Lambert, "Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence, 1904-1909," *Journal of Military History* 59, no. 4 (1995), Nicholas A Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), Jon Tetsuro Sumida, "British Capital Ship Design and Fire Control in the Dreadnought Era: Sir John Fisher, Arthur Hungerford Pollen, and the Battle Cruiser," *Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 2 (1979), Jon Tetsuro Sumida, "British Naval Administration and Policy in the Age of Fisher," *Journal of Military History* 54, no. 1 (1990).

<sup>16</sup> Sumida, "British Naval Administration and Policy in the Age of Fisher," 3.

<sup>17</sup> Sumida, "British Capital Ship Design and Fire Control," 207, fn4. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 8.

any swift enemy commerce raider, capable of rapidly moving from conflict zone to conflict zone across the globe.

Here, historians Jon Sumida and Nicholas Lambert each weave an ingenious narrative from a variety of sources, including the private correspondence of inventors of naval gunnery technology and results of pre-war naval manoeuvres with memoranda left by key figures in the British Admiralty.<sup>19</sup> Their narrative indicates that British First Sea Lord Sir John Fisher developed the *Dreadnought* battleship in order to test new technologies, including all big gun armament and the steam turbine. After completing this prototype, Sumida and Lambert both hold that Fisher intended to shift naval construction away from traditional battleships to a hybrid warship type, the battlecruiser.<sup>20</sup> Battlecruisers combined the heavy guns of a battleship with the high speed and thin armour of the armoured cruiser, doing away with both types of warship. The battlecruiser, together with submarine and torpedo boat flotillas, would replace the battleship and armoured cruiser squadrons, providing an economic alternative.<sup>21</sup> Crucially, these historians believe Fisher intended the battlecruiser to perform a role in imperial defence, not in a continental blockade.<sup>22</sup>

These studies of naval technology imply that the British Admiralty sought to address an overseas threat not presented by the German Navy. The focus of Great Britain's foreign and naval policy was to defend the overseas empire at an affordable level. The new British Navy would be organized to respond to the challenge to overseas British trade created by fast Russian and French armoured cruisers.<sup>23</sup> Since the battleship was to become superfluous to British naval policy, Germany's expanding fleet of these warships could not pose a fundamental threat to British security. Despite misgivings among more conservative naval officers, the Fisher strategy would check the battleship in the North Sea by numerous inexpensive torpedo craft. In this model, the Dreadnought race with Germany did not lead to British entry into the Great War, as Britain had greater naval challenges on the horizon.

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<sup>19</sup> Nicholas A Lambert, "British Naval Policy, 1913-1914: Financial Limitation and Strategic Revolution," *Journal of Military History* 67, no. 3 (1995), Sumida, "British Capital Ship Design and Fire Control."

<sup>20</sup> Sumida, "British Capital Ship Design and Fire Control," 210. Lambert, "Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence, 1904-1909," 641.

<sup>21</sup> According to Lambert, these submarine and torpedo boat flotillas were to play a crucial role in the new naval strategy. Anticipating the concept of "sea-denial," these small vessels could prevent larger ships from safely navigating in the North Sea and threatening the British Isles. Lambert, "Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence, 1904-1909." 654-655.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: 643-44.

<sup>23</sup> Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 23-24.

## Evidence of an Arms Race

The combined effect of these new diplomatic and technological arguments is to refute the notion that the British government framed its policy around either containment of Germany, or on possession of the paramount battleship navy. The arguments developed in favour of these theories are innovative and show high craftsmanship in identifying and interpreting obscure source material. Yet despite the seductively counterintuitive appeal of these revisionist histories, the arguments fail to adequately address the full historic record.

The recent diplomatic histories shift the focus from the German foreground to the Franco-Russian background. Paul Kennedy anticipated these arguments by noting that various factors pushed or pulled British naval squadrons to home waters, before dismissing the debate as intellectual.<sup>24</sup> Great Britain feared both renewed isolation from France and Russia as well as the German policies that exploited this isolation. In disputing the British claims of contributing to the balance of power before the Great War, Keith Wilson correctly notes that Germany possessed a hegemonic position after Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War and subsequent revolution in 1905.<sup>25</sup> Yet Wilson focuses on the lack of German aggression in asserting that the threat from this power was contrived.<sup>26</sup> Instead of concentrating on the havoc Germany could wreak on the continent, the author considers what the imperial implications would be to Great Britain had German policy resulted in British isolation.

Certainly, British experience in the 1890s turned public opinion against "splendid isolation" and led to an acceptance of greater ties to continental powers. At various points during this decade, the British faced German opposition to the Boer War, American antagonism over a border conflict in Venezuela, a Russian challenge to the independence of Turkey and hence to British trade lanes to India, and almost open war with the French over the Sudan during the Fashoda crisis.<sup>27</sup> Great Britain feared facing several enemies simultaneously without any allies, thus isolation became a less attractive diplomatic option. Yet this does not equate with a British preoccupation with Russia. During this time, Russia presented only one among many threats to the British Empire. For much of the period between 1905 and 1914, Russia lacked the military capability to influence either the European balance or to pose a threat to Great Britain in India, precisely at a time when the German threat on the continent was at its

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<sup>24</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 237.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *The Policy of the Entente*, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur J Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905*, 3rd Edition 1972 ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1940), 257.

zenith. A British preoccupation with Russian friendship would have belied the current international situation.

The revisionist accounts have attributed British preoccupation to a long-term concern with the rise of Russia. The historic reinterpretations replace the conventional accounts of British policy of balancing power with narratives of British “bandwagoning” with rising states. These interpretations in themselves are not troubling as there are other examples of Great Britain following such a diplomatic course. For instance, Great Britain adopted a policy of bandwagoning with the United States when facing a similar dilemma over Canadian defence. Yet while Russia potentially could overwhelm British economic productivity within several decades, the German eclipse of Great Britain’s economy was already actually occurring.<sup>28</sup> Germany provided a far more likely candidate for British bandwagoning.

Moreover, the record does not support Wilson’s claims of a Russophobic proclivity of the Foreign Office. Sir Edward Grey, Assistant Under Secretary Eyre Crowe and other figures acquired a reputation for anti-German bias, yet no comparable cabal of Russophobes is found in the British government. Surely, had the British Foreign Office possessed an anti-Russian predisposition, some of its leading figures would have reflected these views. What remains clear in the historic record is a preoccupation with erratic German diplomacy. The Kaiser’s congratulatory telegram to the Boers in 1896, his *Daily Telegraph* interview in 1908 on Anglo-German relations, and generally German imperial ambitions impressed the British Foreign Office with the unpredictable and often hostile nature of German foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> The single incontrovertible element in Anglo-German relations was the construction of a German fleet. This force could serve no other function than as a weapon against Great Britain, and reduced the resources available for the army.<sup>30</sup> Logically,

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<sup>28</sup> By 1900, German iron and steel production exceeded that of Great Britain, and between 1907 and 1914, German production was nearly double the British level. Correlates of War Dataset 3.02, J. David Singer, "Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States, 1816-1985," *International Interactions* 14 (1987). For a general account of the economic rise of Germany and its impact on Anglo-German relations, see David Calleo, *The German Problem Reconsidered: Germany and the World Order, 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 35-36., and especially Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914*, 464-65. Kennedy firmly holds that the alteration of the relative economic strength of the two nations was the principal source of conflict.

<sup>29</sup> Memorandum of Eyre Crowe, 1 Jan 1907, in G P Gooch and H Temperley, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War* (London: H M Stationery Office, 1926-1938), vol III, 397-420.

<sup>30</sup> “The German Reich stands or falls by the army, but the navy is a different story. Large demands for the navy would now be grist to the mills of our enemies.” Friedrich von Holstein as quoted in

the British Foreign Office reached the conclusion that Germany intended its navy for anti-British purposes, regardless of present relations.<sup>31</sup>

If the British accepted that Germany intended its navy to fight for control of the North Sea, the next task was to assess the extent of this threat. From the 1909 Dreadnought Scare and other evidence, it is clear that key members of the British government perceived a serious threat emanating from Germany.<sup>32</sup> In early 1909 it appeared German industry had developed the capacity to build warships as fast as British shipyards, and possibly overtake Great Britain's lead in dreadnoughts.<sup>33</sup> When coupled with reports that German munitions manufacturers had stockpiled key battleship components, it appeared possible that Germany would soon possess naval predominance in the North Sea.<sup>34</sup> By 1909, the German Navy appeared distinctly menacing, with the possibility that it would grow even larger.

In 1905, the German naval challenge had been hypothetical. The conclusions of Sumida and Lambert appear strongest when assessing British naval policy in 1904 and 1905, yet weaker in accounting for British naval history in the following decade. Certainly in 1904, when Admiral Fisher joined the Board of Admiralty, British naval policy remained focused on the Russian threat. The destruction of the Russian fleet at the battle of Tsushima in 1905, and the expansion of the German Navy, which had overtaken France as the second largest battleship navy by 1905, altered these priorities.<sup>35</sup> The technologically-centred histories do not explore the impact of politics. For instance, little mention is made of the 1909 Dreadnought scare in Great Britain, or of the Foreign Office struggle to limit naval expenditure through negotiation with Germany. While the

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Norman Rich, *Friedrich Von Holstein: Politics and Diplomacy in the Era of Bismarck and Wilhelm I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 805.

<sup>31</sup> Goschen to Grey, 4 Nov 1909, in Gooch and Temperley, eds., *British Documents*, vol VI, 304-12.

<sup>32</sup> Goschen to Grey, 16 Apr 1909, in *Ibid.*, vol VI, 265-66, Kenneth J Moll, "Politics, Power, and Panic: Britain's 1909 Dreadnought 'Gap'," *Military Affairs* 29, no. 3 (1965): 133-44.

<sup>33</sup> Richard J Stoll, "Steaming in the Dark? Rules, Rivals, and the British Navy, 1860-1913," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 2 (1992): 271-72. Grey to Goschen, 4 Jan 1909, in Gooch and Temperley, eds., *British Documents*, vol. VI, 237-238.

<sup>34</sup> Moll, "Politics, Power, and Panic: Britain's 1909 Dreadnought 'Gap'," 143.

<sup>35</sup> Modelski and Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics*, 76.

British government contemplated threats emanating from all growing navies, the German threat presented the greatest security challenge.<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, these technological studies concentrate on the role of the visionary Admiral Fisher in devising a new naval strategy, but his views cannot be attributed to the government at large. Fisher endured a contentious and divisive tenure at the Admiralty, due to questions about the wisdom of his reforms.<sup>37</sup> He never succeeded in implementing his strategic plans, indicating that his strategies were never entirely accepted by the Admiralty, let alone the government.<sup>38</sup> Great Britain continued to build battleships, and at no point did Great Britain possess more battlecruisers than battleships.<sup>39</sup>

Even if the Admiralty intended to retool the Navy to a force of battlecruisers and defence flotillas, the move depended upon Great Britain maintaining an innovative lead. Once Germany possessed battlecruisers that could engage their British counterparts, the lack of armour in the design would become a weakness. British naval policy of constant innovation would perpetuate instead of avoid a naval arms race. By regularly utilizing new technologies like the Dreadnought to make existing fleets obsolete, Britain's fleet included, the Admiralty would be constantly forced anew to out-build rivals in new categories of ships. Moreover, any aspiring competitors would have the motivation of seeing British preponderance in numbers eliminated, providing a better chance of overtaking the island nation.

British naval policy never reflected a clear imperial strategy. Following a lengthy internal Admiralty dispute, Fisher was eased into retirement in 1910 and his successors retained a predominant role for the battleship. Moreover, the strategic concept of his successors centred upon a decisive naval engagement against Germany in the North Sea.<sup>40</sup> Even Winston Churchill, Fisher's protégé and Sea Lord from 1911 to 1915,

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<sup>36</sup> "It must be remembered that the one obstacle to German hegemony in Europe has been the strength and independence of the British navy." Notes of Charles Hardinge, in Goschen to Grey, 4 Nov 1909 in Gooch and Temperley, eds., *British Documents*, vol VI, 309-12. See also minutes in Goschen to Grey, 10 May 1911, in Gooch and Temperley, eds., *British Documents*, vol VI, 627-29. Numerous such citations litter the British record.

<sup>37</sup> Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 171.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 170. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 234.

<sup>39</sup> Antony Preston, "Great Britain" in Robert Gardiner, ed., *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1906-1921*, 3rd ed. (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1985), 1-104. At all points after the 1905-1906 program, Great Britain built at least twice as many Dreadnought battleships as battlecruisers.

<sup>40</sup> Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 203-04.

preferred building battleships to battlecruisers, as the construction record of his tenure indicates.<sup>41</sup>

While Lambert has argued that submarine and torpedo boat flotillas would deny sea access to the British coast from German dreadnoughts, this view was not fully accepted by either the Admiralty or the government at large. Arms races are based upon perceptions and responses as much as actual threats, and in this case, a critical faction of the British government perceived a clear danger. The British Admiralty explicitly based their force levels on German *battleship* strength, mandating 60% superiority over the German High Seas Fleet.<sup>42</sup> Great Britain engaged in a policy of feverish naval construction to maintain their superiority in dreadnoughts, succeeding in part due to their realization of the scope of the German challenge. The lead in battleships possessed by the British in 1914 ultimately resulted from the extra capital ships built under the 1909 slogan “we want eight and we won’t wait!”<sup>43</sup>

Underlying the 1909 scare were a number of factors, including opportunistic Conservative opposition to Liberal naval budget reductions, and the public realization that the *Dreadnought* eliminated the British preponderance in older battleships. Within Parliament, many Conservatives had immediately disliked the *Dreadnought* as well as “Radical Jack” Fisher’s other naval reforms. To these opponents, the construction of the *Dreadnought* unnecessarily outmoded the large British battleship navy, risking British security for the sake of fiscal economy.<sup>44</sup> These Conservative politicians, fearing the Liberals were sacrificing national security, minutely scrutinized the naval building programs of both Great Britain and Germany and kept the issue before the public. Ultimately, this campaign became a political rallying-cry, and when reports circulated in the popular press that Germany would out-build Great Britain in dreadnoughts, it resulted in a panic.

The Liberal Government needed to maintain a strong national defence to defuse criticism from this opposition.<sup>45</sup> But the Government also

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<sup>41</sup> Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, vol I, 439-41. “I do not believe in the wisdom of the Battle-Cruiser type.” Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911-1914*, 128, fn 1.

<sup>42</sup> Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, vol I, 184-85. Note also the specific linkage to *German* naval strength, a departure from the Two Power Standard.

<sup>43</sup> Moll, "Politics, Power, and Panic: Britain's 1909 Dreadnought 'Gap'," 144. The slogan referred to demands for a naval program of eight capital ships to meet rising German construction.

<sup>44</sup> Fisher initiated a number of reforms in the British Navy to increase efficiency and lower overall expenditures. The advent of the *Dreadnought*, by forcing other nations to postpone construction for several years while they designed their own all-big gun battleships, allowed Great Britain to reduce the naval construction budget for about three years. Ibid.: 134-35.

<sup>45</sup> Additionally, politicians of both parties could ill-afford to change construction priorities away from dreadnought battleships, as the public grasped the utility of these weapons. Any far-sighted

needed to balance intra-party politics. Prior to the elections of 1905, the outgoing Conservative government presided over a major increase in military expenditures during the 1899-1902 Boer War, and the public sought a reduction of defence outlays. The Liberal government that entered power in December of 1905 pledged reductions in arms expenditures and a shifting of funds to social programs.<sup>46</sup> The radical wing of the Liberal party sought drastic military cuts, while the moderate faction, of which Grey was a member, sought a firm national defence in the face of an expansive German Navy. By maintaining heavy defence outlays for new dreadnoughts, the Government risked splitting the party.

Moreover, Grey and leading figures in the Foreign Office believed that moderation in dealing with Germany would be more likely to lead to security.<sup>47</sup> At the very least, the Government needed to justify high naval expenditures to the radical wing of the Liberal party, and this it accomplished by explicitly linking German unwillingness to compromise to the costly defence outlays.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Grey continually sought a solution of the arms race through negotiations with Germany, and informed the British public of German unwillingness to moderate.

The political manoeuvres of both the Conservative and Liberal parties resulted in the public being bombarded with contradictory figures regarding British and German naval strength, contributing to popular anxiety. While both parties contributed to this climate of fear, neither could contain it, nor ignore popular outcry for security. Yet the internal dynamic of the arms race does not vitiate its existence. Both political parties perceived a threat emanating from Germany and sought different means of countering it.

Ultimately, British moderation in shipbuilding failed to elicit forbearance on the part of the Germans.<sup>49</sup> Great Britain cut its naval construction program between the 1905-1906 and 1908-1909 cycles by one

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attempt to shift naval policy to another type of warship would garner the most extreme reaction from the opposition party. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 165-66.

<sup>46</sup> A J A Morris, "The English Radicals' Campaign for Disarmament and the Hague Conference of 1907," *Journal of Modern History* 43, no. 3 (1971). 370-371.

<sup>47</sup> "(Hostile opinion) has come now to found itself upon the rivalry in naval expenditure. . . . Should naval expenditure increase apprehension will be intensified; if the expenditure slackened apprehension would at once diminish. . . . If this rivalry diminished, still more if the two countries came to any agreement about it, there would be increased confidence throughout the world. . ." Memorandum by Sir Edward Grey, 6 Aug. 1908, in Gooch and Temperley, eds., *British Documents*. vol. VI, 174.

<sup>48</sup> Grey to Lord Knollys, 12 Nov 1906, in *Ibid.*, vol. VIII, 198.

<sup>49</sup> Moll, "Politics, Power, and Panic: Britain's 1909 Dreadnought 'Gap'," 140.

battleship annually.<sup>50</sup> Although due in part to a desire for economy, the government also hoped Tirpitz's *Admiraltät* would recognize this reduction as an act of goodwill and match the unilateral limitations.<sup>51</sup> However, the German government responded by increasing naval construction.<sup>52</sup>

The British Foreign Office was so concerned with the naval arms race that it pursued an armament limitation policy even at the risk of losing its ententes with France and Russia. Great Britain actively sought the inclusion of arms control as a topic of discussion at the Hague Conference of 1907, despite the opposition of several great powers.<sup>53</sup> Germany refused to attend any conference discussing the level of its armaments, thus British insistence risked provoking a diplomatic crisis. Russia sought no limitation on the reconstruction of its navy, recently destroyed by the Japanese in 1905.<sup>54</sup> France preferred Germany to spend money on dreadnoughts, as it limited funds available for the army.<sup>55</sup>

In the years following the Hague Conference, Great Britain continued in its quest to limit expenditures upon armaments through direct negotiations with Germany. These talks devolved onto two elements, a British desire to limit naval armaments, and a German wish to secure British neutrality in the event of a European war.<sup>56</sup> The British could never accept an obligation of neutrality that compromised the French and Russian ententes.<sup>57</sup> However, the British continued to risk alienating its entente partners through these ongoing negotiations. France would have been displeased by an agreement allowing greater German funding for its army, and both France and Russia would have feared the sinister implications of a British neutrality agreement with Germany, no matter how it was worded.

In addition to risking French and Russian friendship by negotiations with Germany, British naval policy lent the appearance of weakness. By 1912, the British recognized that they lacked the resources to balance naval

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<sup>50</sup> Calvin DeArmond Davis, *The United States and the Second Hague Peace Conference: American Diplomacy and International Organization 1899-1914* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1975), 148.

<sup>51</sup> Morris, "English Radicals' Campaign," 371.

<sup>52</sup> Moll, "Politics, Power, and Panic: Britain's 1909 Dreadnought 'Gap'," 140.

<sup>53</sup> Sir A. Nicolson to Grey, 11 Mar 1907, in Gooch and Temperley, eds., *British Documents*, vol VIII, 213-14.

<sup>54</sup> Davis, *The United States and the Second Hague Peace Conference*, 142.

<sup>55</sup> The French would agree to discuss arms control if navy and army expenditures were linked. Grey to Sir F. Bertie, 14 Feb 1907, in Gooch and Temperley, eds., *British Documents*, vol VIII, 206-07.

<sup>56</sup> Goschen to Grey, 15 Oct 1909, in *ibid.*, Vol. VI, 293-300.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

threats in the Mediterranean along with the North Sea.<sup>58</sup> In response, the British entered into negotiations with the French, dividing naval responsibilities. In the event of war, France would guard the Mediterranean with its entire fleet, while the British would have responsibility for protecting French interests in the North Atlantic.<sup>59</sup> If Great Britain sought a German enemy to justify its naval role in the entente, then British requests for French naval aid in the Mediterranean undermined this rationale. Instead of providing a unique strength to the entente, by 1912, the rising naval challenge made Great Britain a liability. The moral obligation to France arising from the 1912 naval agreement further tied British policy to its entente partners. British response to the German naval threat led to Great Britain seeking reciprocal commitments with France that directly led the island nation into war in 1914.

## Conclusion

Governments reach decisions for a variety of reasons, without any single rationale necessarily being paramount. While the record of the British government contains evidence that many motives spurred diplomatic and naval policy, the necessity of matching German naval expansion stands out. First, the patterns of naval construction on both the German and British sides exhibited features of an arms race. Both countries explicitly linked their naval strength to the other power. Changes in the pace of construction of one country led to direct changes in domestic defence outlays in its rival. Despite long-term concerns, evidence of actual dreadnought construction confirms the immediate motivations of British policy-makers. Alternative explanations of British naval policy cannot be reconciled with the fact that the dreadnought remained the primary weapon, and the battlecruiser only an ancillary tool.

Moreover, perceptions play a more significant role than objective fact in assessing an arms race. While the passage of time may allow the historian to rationally assess the Russian challenge and downplay the extent of the German threat in hindsight, policy-makers rarely enjoyed that luxury. While long-term Russian economic growth trends could be charted and postulated into the future, the German threat was in the present. Russian railroad timetables to Tashkent and the Afghan border and the crisis they foretold on the Northwest Frontier impressed less upon the popular imagination than pulp periodicals conjuring up German invasion threats and tabulating all the world's fighting ships. This threat consisted of immediately quantifiable dreadnoughts lying only 300 miles away across a

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<sup>58</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 224.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-25. French authorities noted to the British Ambassador that their naval expenditures were for the sake of British security, increasing British obligations to France. Grey to Bertie, 19 Feb 1910, in Gooch and Temperley, eds., *British Documents*, vol VI, 440.

shallow, foggy sea. Lest the scholar dismiss this as merely an ephemeral popular anxiety, the elected leaders of these masses not only represented these constituencies' views but also formulated national policy in the same climate of uncertainty. It should come as no wonder that British construction of battleships matched that of Germany.

The alternative theory of a British response to a Russian challenge faces other weaknesses of its own. This theory posits that Great Britain accepted an extraordinarily short-term solution to a long-term problem. For much of the decade after the Russian revolution of 1905, Russia could play only a minor role in European politics. It is problematic to accept that Great Britain would accept a short-term *modus vivendi* with a country that in 1907 could not pose a short-term threat, at the cost of gravely aggrieving a country, such as Germany, that did pose such an immediate risk.

What all the alternative historic accounts fail to do is consider the planning-horizon of the Foreign Office. Russian and imperial matters played a role in decision-making, but immediate determinations had to be made based on current threat assessments. As evidenced by ongoing diplomatic discussions, negotiations fraught with peril for the British policy of entente, the British Foreign Office possessed a single-minded determination to blunt the challenge of the foremost rising naval power. Ultimately, the failure to resolve this security concern led the British government to enmesh itself deeper into a Franco-Russian entente and opt for war over the Balkans.

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