Security Dilemma, Strategic Imbalance and Imperial Germany's Fragile Rise

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Germany's unification in 1871 was one of the most far-reaching incidents in international politics of the late 19th century. Its consequent rise, firstly as a dominant European power, and then as a world power, decidedly shaped the structure of relations and interactions among great powers before 1914, while the failure and errors of its policies contributed largely to the outbreak of the First World War. However, the dynamic and lessons of Wilhelm Germany's fragile rise remain highly controversial almost 100 years on.

The Success of Bismarck: Endurable or Not?

In retrospect, Bismarck's most prominent achievement, as well as his most arduous work, was not to unify Germany, but to realize the peaceful rise of this nation after its unification. He did this by overcoming the security dilemma present at that time, which allowed Germany to enjoy a distinct growth of power. In 1871, Benjamin Disraeli's warning in his famous February 9 speech expressed a deep-rooted suspicion of the new empire. During the "War in Sight" crisis, the pressure from Britain and Russia became so obvious that the security dilemma for a rising power loomed

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large. But Bismarck's policy and his diplomatic maneuvers, from the first *Dreikaisersbund,* to the extremely complicated alliances and alignments in the late 1880s, successfully prevented both a major conflict, and the formation of an anti-German coalition. Due to his efforts, Germany's security environment improved significantly if compared with that in 1871 and it was able to enjoy an almost 20-year rise in strength and influence.

Here comes the question: was this success durable? Some argue that the success of Bismarck was only temporary, because he could not prevent the eventual formation of a Franco-Russian alliance, which doomed Germany's strategic position in Europe. Besides, it is believed that the structural forces and dynamics of international politics will sooner or later overcome the efforts of any individual statesman. In other words, as German power continued to grow, the deterioration of the relationship between Germany and Great Britain was inevitable, along with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

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For others, this question is much more complicated. Bismarck's success depended highly on the flexibility of his foreign policy, which was fully expressed in his motto: policy is "the art of possibility." He did not make any serious effort to achieve "ever-lasting" goals. In fact, he did not even believe that any political result could be "ever-lasting." His efforts focused mainly on creating such situations that the other powers shared the responsibilities of maintaining the status quo, so that Germany could enjoy a certain degree of freedom of action.[1] However, his successors could neither understand nor carry out such a policy. The non-renewal of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia in 1890 was the first step towards the loss of flexibility in German policies, which led to the quick collapse of the whole architecture of Bismarck's alliances, and alignments. By the time of the formation of the Franco-Russian Alliance, German foreign policy had lost most of its flexibility, and had become increasingly rigid and dogmatic.

In addition, Bismarck's success also depended on self-restriction and good coordination among different policies, particularly

between foreign policy and military strategy. After the unification, Bismarck consistently declared that Germany was a "satiated" state, and his "conservative" foreign policy confirmed this point.[2] As for the coordination between diplomatic and military affairs, the cooperation and communication between Bismarck and Helmuth von Moltke played an important role. The latter's military strategy, which was also conservative and served a limited purpose, complemented Bismarck's foreign policy, and guaranteed the security of Germany at a reasonable cost, both financially, and politically.[3]

As a result, Bismarck achieved a good balance in terms of grand strategy. The foreign policy and military strategy of Germany were balanced and complementary. The political order of Europe was not based on "Balance of Power," but rather on a network of complicated alliances and alignments without distinct demarcation. The crucial relationship between Germany and Great Britain was managed in such a way that the latter had to commit itself to continental issues, since there was a subtle balance that required the involvement of both of these powers in order for it to be maintained. To keep such a strategic balance played a central role in Bismarck's success, and if his successors had been capable enough to keep this balance, the deterioration of Germany's strategic environment would not have been "inevitable."

Foreign Policy and Security Dilemma

The non-renewal of the Reinsurance Treaty and the subsequent "New Course" ruined the subtle balance in Germany's foreign policy. The Franco-Russian alliance could be viewed as the first step to balance Germany's rise. The prospect of two-front war began to press heavily on the German decision makers. As a counter-measure, Bismarck's successor, Imperial Chancellor Caprivi, tried to push an unprecedentedly large military bill through the Reichstag in 1892, and went on to supervise the largest expansion of the German army since the unification in 1871. By this point, the pressure and count-pressure interactions became increasingly obvious. Thus, after a peaceful rise that lasted more than twenty years, Germany

began to be confronted with the security dilemma that had been postponed and subdued by Bismarck's policy.

However, German foreign policy did nothing to reduce or control such a security dilemma. The "New Course" leaders even tried to utilize it as leverage to increase the Anglo-German relationship when they realized that a Franco-Russian alliance was imminent. Their plan soon proved to be only wishful thinking when Britain firmly declined their suggestions. Since the subtle balance of mutual demand between Britain and Germany was destroyed by the "New Course," particularly through the non-renewal of the Reinsurance Treaty and conclusion of Helgoland-Zanzibar Treaty, Britain felt it was no longer necessary to "pay" for German friendship. British statesmen quite happily discovered that the new German leaders were much easier to deal with after "their Achitophel had gone."[4] Naturally, they were determined to regain the "freedom of action" which they had been largely deprived of by Bismarck.

Failing to gain Britain's friendship, German foreign policy became more imbalanced. Facing the pressure from the Franco-Russia alliance, Germany had to rely more heavily on its only ally on the continent, Austria, and subsequently had to be more supportive with regard to the latter's Balkan policy. Consequently, Germany found itself increasingly involved in the Austro-Russian feud, which Bismarck had tried with all his might to escape from. The end of the "New Course" did not do any good for such imbalances. German leaders, particularly Holstein, still had a fancy idea of forming a "continental league," in order to coerce Great Britain back onto a pro-German tack. However, the Franco-Russian Alliance had revolutionarily changed the continental strategic situation. Such an illusion was completely shattered by the "Kruger Telegram" when Germany's awkward maneuver triggered a violent tide of anti-German sentiment within Britain.

Britain's response also deserves more investigation. Only weeks before the Kruger telegram episode, Britain received a heavy reprimand from the United States. President Cleveland's message regarding the boundary between Venezuela and British Guiana used much stronger language than the Germans did in the Kruger

telegram, and the British papers like the *Times*, the *Telegraph*, and the *Standard,* all declared the American position inadmissible, and even "monstrous and insulting."[5] However, British government, as well as British society in general, did not call for a strong response. On the one hand, this could be explained by the Anglo-Saxon culture relationship, but the *realpolitik* considerations were equally as important. After the formation of the Franco-Russian alliance, Great Britain experienced a series of set-backs in terms of foreign policy. For the English, a strong response was necessary, but to choose a suitable object was crucial. It was obviously unwise to choose the U.S. as the recipient when it was a growing continent-sized power with a large navy in play. Moreover, American industrial output had already surpassed that of Britain in 1890. In comparison, Germany was an ideal object because of its small navy, and commercial competition with Britain. Chamberlain understood this perfectly well, as he wrote to Salisbury on January 4 that some strong action would be needed to sooth the wounded vanity of the nation: "It does not much matter which of our numerous foes we defy, but we ought to defy someone."[6]

Such a response played an important role in intensifying Germany's security dilemma. To most Germans, the vehement anti-German tide within Britain after the Kruger telegram proved Britain's hatred, and jealousy of a rising Germany. Therefore the telegram episode deteriorated not only the relationship between the two governments, but also that between the two societies, which proved much more difficult to revive. When confronted with an essentially hostile alliance on the continent, the switch of Britain's attitude towards an anti-Germany tack had very negative affects on the German public. The image of Britain as a "deadly competitor" became widely accepted in Germany and the idea of "encirclement" began to take root. Although this was not the origin of Germany's bid for a grand navy, such a change of public psychology definitely provided a suitable environment for the Tirpitz plan after 1897.

Geo-political Identification and Navalism

Germany's naval policy was much more decisive than its foreign policy in the escalation of its security dilemma, and it displayed the strategic imbalance of German policy much better than all other policies.

The expansion of German overseas interests was an important catalyst for the thriving navalism, and fleet building in the second half of the 1890s. German leaders believed that their nation needed a large navy to protect their maritime communications and trade with the non-European world. Hohenlohe, the successor of Caprivi as the Reich's Chancellor, stated in the Reichstag that, due to disturbances overseas, it was necessary "to increase our navy at least to such an extent as to make it capable of providing for our overseas interests the protection without which commerce and shipping cannot exist."[7]

The power-politics, particularly the deterioration of the Anglo-German relationship was another, perhaps more powerful, motive. At the very beginning, the enthusiasm of Wilhelm II for a large fleet was not aimed particularly at Britain. Perhaps influenced by Mahan's book, he followed an abstract formula in which naval power, overseas interests, and one's position as a world power were closely tied. In his point of view, building a strong navy was first of all an approach to world power and prestige. His original fleet building plan was also designed with only a vague strategic goal aimed mainly against the joint naval power of France and Russia. However, the long-term naval construction plan produced by Alfred von Tirpitz, the leader of the Imperial Naval Office, was explicitly aimed at Britain. In his famous memorandum of 1897, Tirpitz made it clear that "the most dangerous naval enemy" was Britain, "against which we most urgently require a certain measure of naval force as a political power factor."[8]

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The rhetoric used by Wilhelm II and Tirpitz echoes Mahan's argument. In spite of this, they both neglected some important conditions in Mahan's

sea power theory, particularly the significance of a country's geographical position. Germany was definitely not among those countries "so situated that it is neither forced to defend itself by land nor induced to seek extension of its territory by way of the land."[9] In terms of geography or geopolitics, Germany should be categorized as a "land-sea hybrid power," which means its strategic aim is prone to be distracted into two directions: land and sea. In history, land was always the most crucial element to Germany's survival. In the Bismarckian era, Germany continued to focus on the continent and thus identified itself mainly as a land power. After 1890, however, Germany started to treat itself as a sea power. This geopolitical identification was justified by Germany's growing overseas interests, along with the potential threat posed by Britain's maritime supremacy.

As in the field of foreign policy, Britain's naval policy, and its press, helped to intensify the security dilemma and contributed to the rising navalism in Germany. When Germany became increasingly dependent on overseas trade and food imports, Britain did nothing to alleviate Germany's worry about its maritime communication being severed, but instead tried to utilize this fear as political leverage. With the decline of Anglo-German relations in 1890s, the British press was inclined to warn Germany of the overwhelming strength of the Royal Navy. Shortly after the Kruger Telegram episode, the famous article by the *Saturday Review* on September 11, 1897, advocated that Britain was the only great power that could fight Germany "without tremendous risk and without doubt of the issue." The article went on to say that German fleet building could only "make the blow of England fall on her more heavily… Hamburg and Bremen, the Kiel Canal and the Baltic ports would lie under the guns of England, waiting, until the indemnity were settled."[10] In addition to the strong language utilized by the British press, the Royal Navy detained German civilian ships in 1900 and 1905. These actions were viewed as a demonstration of British naval superiority and caused fear and fury among ordinary German people.

On the German side, Tirpitz successfully turned people's fear into widespread support for the construction of a great fleet. Within

the government, Tirpitz and his allies almost made the naval policy the centre of policies. Foreign policy was designed to safeguard the fleet construction through the expected "danger zone," the period during which the Royal Navy could take a preemptive strike against the German fleet before it grew to full strength. In other words, the foreign policy of a nation served a policy of a military service, instead of vice-versa. Such a strategic imbalance made the security dilemma impossible to keep under control.

Quite against Tirpitz's assumption, diplomatic skill, if Imperial Germany had any, could not prevent Britain from being alarmed. Only two years after the second Navy law in 1900, the British admiralty was convinced that "the great new German navy is being carefully built up from the point of view of a war with us… It cannot be designed for the purpose of playing a leading part in a future war between Germany, and France and Russia."[11] Faced with this challenge, Britain was determined to strike back. When Admiral John Fisher became the First Sea Lord in 1904, he proposed to "Copenhagen" the German fleet. That is, to launch a preemptive attack against the Kiel and Wilhelmshaven naval bases.[12] At the end of 1904, some elements of the British press openly advocated for a strike against the German navy before it became too large, while Admiral Fisher took concrete actions to reorganize and redistribute the Royal Navy as a part of the "Fisher revolution." Such rhetoric and actions on the British side caused serious panic in Germany. Most people within the German decision-making circle believed a sudden attack by Britain was imminent. In Kiel, a rumor of "Fisher is coming" circulated so widely that many Germans kept their children from school for days.[13]

Accordingly, a vicious circle was formed: the more scares roused by a probable British preemptive attack, the more efforts were made by Germany to accelerate its naval building, which in turn provoked Britain into increasing its own naval power, both in general, and in the North Sea. With the introduction of the revolutionary battleship type, *the Dreadnought* class, the Anglo-German naval rivalry turned into an intensified naval arms race. From 1906 to 1912, naval building remained the dominant factor in German policies. When a two-front war loomed large, some

German politicians (including the Reich chancellor Buelow and Bethmann-Hollweg) tried desperately to stop, or at least slow down, the building race in order to keep Britain neutral in case of a continental war. However, such a goal proved impossible. The naval arms race continued until the outbreak of the First World War, although many high-rank officials after 1912 confessed privately that Germany had already lost the race.

Encirclement Complex and the Policy of Showdown

With the acceleration of Anglo-German naval competition, Germany's foreign policy suffered further frustration and humiliation. Since German government stubbornly believed that an Anglo-French reconciliation was impossible, the entente in 1904 gave Germany a particularly stunning shock. In order to regain some "prestige," German foreign office tried to arrange an international conference in Algeciras. However, the conference witnessed a total failure of German diplomacy when almost every other participating power lined up against Germany's stance. Since 1906, German politicians began to use *Einkreisung* (encirclement) publicly, and this word soon became widely accepted in Germany. Many Germans believed that their country was increasingly being encircled by a hostile alliance, with Britain as the mastermind. Such an idea became a sort of social psychological trend permeating the whole country, which drove Germans to interpret almost every step made by Britain, France and Russia as further evidence of this claim. The famous article, *Der Krieg in der Gegenwart,* by Alfred von Schlieffen, the retired Chief of General Staff, exemplified such an encirclement complex and entrenched the idea that the war between the German-Austrian alliance and the "entente bloc" was inevitable. Then in 1911, another German general published the book *Deutschland und der naechste Krieg* (Germany and the Next War), which signified the evolution of such complex into a desperate prescription of Germany's security.

The encirclement complex in Germany made the situation during 1906-1914 an almost classic case of a "self-fulfilled prophesy." When Britain and France started staff to staff talks, the German

government and military became seriously alarmed. The Anglo-Russian entente in 1907 was another serious shock for Germany and made its decision makers more pessimistic and desperate. Most of them believed that Germany's only alternative was to further expand the army and navy in order to prepare to "break through the encirclement." Germany then started to take highly risky policy decisions within which the diplomacy and military strategy were pursuing divergent goals. This risk-prone policy and lack of inter-agency coordination intensified the tension between Germany and the entente powers. In addition, these actions eventually led to the entente powers strengthening the strategic links between them. In short, Germany's intention to break through the encirclement only strengthened the encirclement it confronted.

The policy of entente powers, particularly Britain, consolidated Germany's encirclement complex. Britain was among the most displeased by Germany's entry into the colonial sphere.[14] As a response, the British government took actions to frustrate Germany's colonial bid, sometimes in quite humiliating ways. In the case of Morocco issue after the Anglo-French entente in 1904, the British government adamantly refused to give Germany any compensation, and called the latter's meager claim for 70,000 pounds "a great piece of effrontery," even though Britain was ready to make similar concessions to other Powers.[15] Such unnecessary offensive action undoubtedly intensified Britain's "enemy image" in Germany, and made the security dilemma more difficult to control.

The British government viewed the strategic rivalry with Germany not only as a vital struggle for power, but also as an irreconcilable competition. The famous Crowe Memorandum submitted on New Year's Day 1907 articulated the mainstream view with regard to Anglo-German relations within the British government. In this Memorandum, Eyre Crowe drew a decisive conclusion that a rising Germany would pose a serious threat to Britain regardless of Germany's intention. Crowe also argued that Germany's desire for naval supremacy was completely "incompatible with the existence of the British Empire."[16] The decisiveness and certainty of the conclusion contrasts distinctly with the more moderate and balanced document written just

following the Crowe Memorandum by the former Permanent Under-secretary for Foreign Affairs, Sir Thomas Sanderson; an experienced senior official in the British Foreign Office.[17] However, Sanderson's analysis and conclusion was almost the last echo of traditional British diplomacy in the pre-war period. His Memo did not attract enough attention, while Crowe's mindset, essentially a German mindset (Ironically, he was a German), more a priori and less empirical, increasingly gained the upper hand within the British government.[18] The "enemy image" of Germany in Britain thus became increasingly rigid, as did British policy towards Germany.

Within such a context, successful crisis management was essentially impossible. The Bosnia Crisis in 1908 and the second Morocco Crisis in 1911 only further entrenched the "enemy image" on both sides. After suffering from the diplomatic failure of the second Morocco Crisis, Germany became determined to take a more decisive stance, which led to the adoption of a more desperate and risk-prone policy. Moltke, Chief of Prussian General Staff, angrily asserted that Germany should never retreat in the next struggle.[19] With the general intention for a "showdown," Germany and the entente powers entered the July Crisis in 1914. Oddly imbalanced strategy, lack of inter-agency coordination, and unskillful diplomacy led to a complete failure by Germany to manage the crises effectively. The resulting war from 1914 to 1918 eventually destroyed the German Empire, and halted Germany's rise as a world power.

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In retrospect, Imperial Germany's fate was not so much doomed by "structural forces" like the balance of power or power shifts, but rather by its own policy and the ramifications caused by it. However, as mentioned above, Germany was not the only one to blame for the security dilemma that developed. The whole situation from 1890 to 1914 was an interactive process and the policy of other powers, particularly Great Britain, could have prevented the security dilemma from spinning out of control. In fact, any

cooperative efforts could have alleviated the tension, thereby giving skillful crisis management a chance at avoiding the final showdown. Ultimately, if any power had predicted the result of the war, their willingness to raise tensions would have been doubtful. This is particularly true in the Anglo-German case.

The history of Imperial Germany can be seen as an exemplary cautionary tale to many countries. To conclude, the importance of managing the security dilemma of a rising power should weigh heavily in the minds of statesmen. For the rising power, to pursue a balanced and predictable policy, or "grand strategy," is one of the most essential guarantees of preventing the escalation of a security dilemma. In addition, there needs to be adequate communication between the political elite and the citizenry in order to "shape" the public opinion into one that is supportive of a stable and sustaining policy. For the established power, to respect the core interests of the rising power is one of the most significant prerequisites for keeping a security dilemma under control. It should also be tactful when dealing with the influence of a "third party," which in many cases is a real or potential ally, if the established power wants to form a coalition against the rising power. Last but not least, both sides should strive to avoid basing policies on the presumption that the showdown is inevitable, which has proved to be a self-fulfilling prophecy throughout history.

1 In the "Kissingen dication" of 1877, Bismarck gave a primary description of such situation: "If able to work, I could develop and complete the picture that I visualize: not that of any territorial acquisition, but of a total political situation, in which all powers, except France, need us and are kept from coalitions against us as much as possible by their relations to each other." *Die Grosse Politik der*

Europaeischen Kabinette 1871-1914: Sammlung der Diplomatischen Akten des Auswaertigen Amtes, Berlin: Deutsche verlagsgesellschaft Fuer Politik und Geschichte, 1925, vol. 2, p. 154.

2 Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, vol. 2, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 252-258.

3 Gunther E. Rothenberg, "Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment," in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 306-11. Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army: 1640-1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955, pp. 273-6.

4 Lady Gwendolen Cecil, *Life of Robert Marquis of Salisbury*, vol. 4, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921, pp. 239-240.

5 Dexter Perkins, *A History of the Monroe Doctrine*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963, p. 180.

6 William L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism 1890-1902*, vol. 1, New York: Alfred. A. Knopf, 1935, p. 244.

7 Ivo Nikolai Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862-1914*, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984, p. 156.

8 Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent: Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1965, p. 209.

9 A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783*, London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1899, p. 29.

10 William L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism 1890-1902*, vol. 1, pp. 437-8.

11 Memo by the First Lord of Admiralty Selborne, 'Naval estimates 1903-1904,' October 17,. 1902. George Monger, *The End of Isolation: British Foreign Policy 1900-1907*, London: Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1963, p. 82.

12 Arthur J. Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, vol. 2, London: Cape, 1956, p. 20.

13 Jonathan Steinberg, "The Copenhagen Complex," in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1966), p. 35, p. 38.

14 However, the impact of colonial rivalry is often exaggerated. The colonial acquisition of German empire after 1890 was much smaller than that during Bismarckian era and its value to Germany was much less than those enthusiasts advocated.

15 George Monger, *The End of Isolation: British Foreign Policy 1900-1907*, pp. 161-2.

16 Eyre Crowe, "Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany," Foreign Office, January 1, 1907, (F.O. 371/257), in G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, vol. 3, London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1928, pp. 397-420. Quotation from p. 416.

17 Lord Sanderson, "Observations on printed Mem[orandu]m on Relations with France and Germany, January 1907", Foreign Office, February 21, 1907, in *ibid*, pp. 421-31.

18 To some extent, Crowe's way of thinking resembles that of Friedrich von Holstein, the soul of German diplomacy during 1890-1906. Like the latter's dislike of Otto von Bismarck's "unclear and contradictory" policy, he detested the ambiguity of Lord Salisbury. See T. G. Otte, "Eyre Crowe and British Foreign Policy: A Cognitive Map," in T. G. Otte, Constantine A. Pagedas, (ed.), *Personalities, War and Diplomacy: Essays in International History* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), p. 22.

19 Gordon A. Craig, Germany 1866-1945, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 329.