

France and Britain Part Ways on Treaty Enforcement

Throughout the first half of the 1920s, French governments of diverse political tendencies devoted their diplomatic skill to the achievement of one overriding objective: the resurrection of the alliance with Great Britain that had lapsed in 1920 after the United States Senate failed to consent to the French security treaty signed by President Wilson in Paris. The ostensible reason for Britain's repudiation of its commitment to defend France against unprovoked German aggression was purely legalistic; the Anglo-French security pact was to become operational only as an integral component of the ill-fated Franco-American agreement. The explanation of London's subsequent refusal

to replace this moribund treaty with a strictly bilateral guarantee of France's frontier with Germany requires a cursory review of Great Britain's conception of its national interest.

As always, British foreign policy after World War I was dictated by the interrelated objectives of protecting the British Isles, preserving the empire, and controlling the sea communications between them. When Germany's "world policy" after the turn of the century had endangered those vital interests, Great Britain composed its differences with France and Russia in North Africa and South Asia, respectively, to form a common front in opposition to any further accretion of German power. As a result of the First World War and the peace conference that terminated it, the principal threats to the security of Great Britain and its empire had been removed: The abolition of the German air force, the reduction of the German navy to insignificance, and the dissolution of the German colonial empire had the combined effect of denying Germany the capacity to project its power beyond the European continent. The internal disarray of Russia removed the other potential menace to British imperial interests, namely, aggression by land against India, disruption of the British lifeline to Asia, and pressure against British-controlled petroleum resources along the Persian Gulf. In fact, as long as Germany was disarmed and deprived of its naval power and colonial bases; Russia was blocked in Southeastern Europe and South Asia; and Japan remained content to confine its expansionist aspirations to the region north of the Yangtze River in the Far East, the only conceivable peril to Britain's imperial communications came from France itself. France's ambitions in its newly acquired mandates in Syria and Lebanon and its intrigues in Turkey caused considerable friction with Great Britain, which insisted on preserving its undisputed position of dominance in the eastern Mediterranean to ensure the security of the "lifeline" to its Asian possessions.

In conjunction with its "empire first" strategy, London reverted to its traditional policy of promoting a balance of power in Europe while striving to prevent any one of the great continental nations from amassing sufficient military might (especially air and naval power) to pose the threat of an invasion across the English Channel. This policy inevitably inspired British opposition to France's quest for an overwhelming margin of military superiority over Germany. It is easy to forget, in light of the subsequent debacle of 1940, that France in the 1920s possessed the most formidable land army and air force in the world. With military disarmament in Germany by diplomatic fiat and in Great Britain and the United States by choice, France was the only one of the former belligerents to retain land and air forces of wartime dimensions. Though unmistakably intended for defense of the eastern frontier, French air power alarmed British strategists, who realized that the English Channel no longer provided the security from attack that it had before the advent of the air age, particularly since Britain had begun to dismantle its own air arm shortly after the armistice.

In light of Germany's disarmament, and France's acquisition of undisputed military preponderance in Europe, it comes as no surprise that Great Britain systematically rebuffed French attempts in the early 1920s to secure a British commitment to defend by force of arms the territorial settlement in Western Europe. This refusal to accord France the promise of the military assistance she so ardently sought did not signify any willingness on Great Britain's part to tolerate German aggression against France. The problem lay in the conflicting views in Paris and London of how French and therefore

British security could best be preserved. The French tenaciously clung to the notion that the only effective means of preventing Germany from endangering the peace of Europe was by compelling its strict adherence to the Versailles Treaty; any modification of the military, territorial, or reparation sections of the treaty was considered inadmissible in Paris on the grounds that it would encourage further efforts at revision. And a Germany freed from the restrictions imposed on it at the peace conference would inevitably threaten the political status quo on the continent because of its position as the most populous and potentially the most economically productive nation in Europe. By contrast, British policymakers contended that European security could best be assured by removing those irritants embedded in the Versailles Treaty that prevented Germany from accepting its reduced status in the world: hence the British refusal to promise military aid to France against Germany; Britain's campaign to reduce Germany's reparations burden; and British opposition to French efforts to compel German adherence to the Versailles Treaty by the threat or actual application of military sanctions. Underlying this British approach to European affairs was the conviction that a productive, stable, secure Germany could be enticed to rejoin the community of great powers as a peaceful, cooperative member. A Germany torn by economic chaos, political instability, and military insecurity could be expected to harbor sentiments of resentment and revenge.

France's Search for an Anti-German Coalition

The disappearance of the Anglo-American guarantee of France's border with Germany in 1920 prompted France to begin a compensatory quest for allies among the states on the European continent that shared with it a common interest in preserving the post-war political settlement. On September 7, 1920, France concluded a military alliance with Belgium, whose acquisition of the frontier districts of Eupen and Malmédy from Germany and whose strategic location astride the historic invasion route in Northern Europe rendered it a likely victim of German aggression in a future war on the continent. This terminated that small country's long-standing status of neutrality and formed the basis of close Franco-Belgian cooperation to enforce the provisions of the Versailles Treaty.

On the opposite flank of Germany lay those states of Eastern Europe that been formed or enlarged at the expense of the Central Powers after the war and therefore were prime candidates for inclusion in the emerging continental coalition organized by Paris during the first half of the twenties. Foremost among these was Poland, which had been carved out of German, Austrian, and Russian territory to form an independent republic on November 3, 1918. Poland had obtained Allied recognition of its western frontiers with Germany in the Treaty of Versailles, thereby acquiring large parts of West Prussia and Posen (the corridor along the Vistula River to the Baltic Sea) as well as special economic privileges in the port city of Danzig (Gdansk), which became a "free city" under the authority of the League of Nations. German resentment of Poland's acquisition of this territory and a portion of Upper Silesia (an important industrial region of mixed German-Polish population that contained Germany's largest coal reserves) predisposed the government in Warsaw to seek the military protection of France. Paris responded favorably to these overtures from a fellow opponent of German revisionism; on February 19, 1921, the two states concluded a military alliance