

# POLITICKÉ VEDY / POLITICAL SCIENCES

Časopis pre politológiu, najnovšie dejiny, medzinárodné vzťahy, bezpečnostné štúdiá / Journal for Political Sciences, Modern History, International Relations, security studies

URL časopisu / URL of the journal: <http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk>

**Autor(i) / Author(s):** Peter Lizák  
**Článok / Article:** Historical Development of Great Britain's Foreign Policy  
**Vydavateľ / Publisher:** Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov – UMB Banská Bystrica / Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations – UMB Banská Bystrica

**Odporúčaná forma citácie článku / Recommended form for quotation of the article:**

LIZÁK, P. 2013. Historical Development of Great Britain's Foreign Policy. In *Politické vedy*. [online]. Roč. 16, č. 2, 2013. ISSN 1335 – 2741, s. 122-126. Dostupné na internete: <[http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk/userfiles/file/2\\_2013/LIZAK.pdf](http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk/userfiles/file/2_2013/LIZAK.pdf)>.

Poskytnutím svojho príspevku autor(i) súhlasil(i) so zverejnením článku na internetovej stránke časopisu Politické vedy. Vydavateľ získal súhlas autora / autorov s publikovaním a distribúciou príspevku v tlačenej i online verzii. V prípade záujmu publikovať článok alebo jeho časť v online i tlačenej podobe, kontaktujte redakčnú radu časopisu: [politicke.vedy@umb.sk](mailto:politicke.vedy@umb.sk).

By submitting their contribution the author(s) agreed with the publication of the article on the online page of the journal. The publisher was given the author's / authors' permission to publish and distribute the contribution both in printed and online form. Regarding the interest to publish the article or its part in online or printed form, please contact the editorial board of the journal: [politicke.vedy@umb.sk](mailto:politicke.vedy@umb.sk).

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF GREAT BRITAIN'S FOREIGN POLICY

**Peter Lizák\***

---

**HLAVÁČEK, P. a kol.:** *Zahraniční politika a strategie Velké Británie ve 20.století*. Brno: Václav Klemm – Vydavatelství a nakladatelství, 2012. 168 s. ISBN 978-80-904083-3-3

---

Reviewed book is written by the authors from the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen led by PhDr. **Pavel Hlaváček**, PhD., who works at the university as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Sciences and International Relations. It is co-authored by the students and doctoral students of University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, namely by **Lucie Horáčková**, B.A.; **Monika Rýglová**, B.A.; **Lucie Novotná**, B.A.; PhDr. **Linda Piknerová**; PhDr. **Peter Jurek**, M.A.; **Pavlna Čurdová**, B.A.; and **Aneta Doljaková**, B.A.

The book focuses on the development of foreign policy and strategies of Great Britain in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is divided into six chapters and several subchapters. The authors succeeded in characterizing briefly but precisely changes in the strategies of Great Britain in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, starting from the perfect isolation, through balancing Germany, later on continuing with the policy of appeasement, and, finally, the period of European integration and balancing against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The first chapter begins with a period preceding the "perfect isolation" of Great Britain, ranging from 1816 to 1904. The author of this chapter seeks to interpret British foreign policy in relation to the concept of "overseas balancing". Appropriately selected key historical events demonstrate and explain the behaviour of Great Britain towards to the European countries. Consequently, on the example of organising the Europe after the Congress of Vienna, the Crimean War and the rise of Germany the development of British foreign policy

---

\* PhDr. Peter Lizák is a Ph.D. student at the at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovak Republic, e-mail: peter.lizak@gmail.com.

is highlighted, always in relations to the corresponding concept of “overseas balancing”. Reason why the United Kingdom acted as a sea power was the geographic barrier represented by the English Channel, which separates Britain from Europe. For the island nation was difficult to maintain influence in Europe, where, moreover, rival superpowers operated. Therefore, the United Kingdom did not attempt to gain dominance over Europe, but preferred to focus on her interests overseas. Towards Europe diplomatic tools were preferably chosen as a means to resolve disputes. If there was a balance of power in Europe, Britain was focusing on building its overseas empire. As soon as balance of power seemed to be imperilled, bringing about a real danger of establishing hegemony of a single superpower over Europe, the United Kingdom was ready to intervene. Threat came during the Crimean War, because of fear from growing Russian influence in this strategic area. Later they underestimated the rise of Germany and did not participate in the Austro-Prussian War and later on in the Franco-Prussian War to prevent the unification of Germany. Consequently, Germany with the United States began to catch up Britain economically and militarily and, moreover, the disputes started to accumulate throughout the overseas possessions of the British Empire. United Kingdom decided to start signing the alliance contracts, because of growing threat from Germany. In 1902 they entered into a contract with Japan and in 1904 they signed the so-called *Entente Cordiale* with France. Reason why Great Britain decided to form alliances was mainly the German threat, but it has to be noted that in this period not even these duties were able to weaken position of the United Kingdom as a sea power, mostly due to the fact that those contracts were not typical alliance agreements, but an agreements on informal collaboration.

Subsequently, the second chapter is dedicated to the ability of Great Britain to balance German Emperor Wilhelm (1904-1930). Year 1904 represents a major milestone in British foreign policy, because the Empire finally withdrew from politics of perfect insulation. In practice it means that Britain's foreign policy was manifested mainly by convergence with France and Russia. Due to its growing economic, military and economic potential Germany has been perceived soon to become a new challenger to Britain at that time, as well as a new threat to Europe. The biggest danger was the rapid rise of German maritime power and its increasing demand for rearranging borders, mostly overseas. After the outbreak of the First World War was the European balance of power disrupted and thus the United Kingdom was forced to withdraw from passive role of overseas balancer and to become actively involved in the

fighting in Europe. The reason for such a change was the fact that if France and Russia suffered a defeat, Germany would be able to achieve hegemony in Europe. After the defeat of Germany, United Kingdom took an active part in the Versailles Peace Conference and became a member of the League of Nations in order to restore the European balance of power. Through the participation in formal agreements, they preferred the existence of several great powers, before accumulating political and economical power in the hands of one state. Britain has tried to maintain the status quo between European powers and prevent the rise of France. All this confirms the strategy of an overseas balancer.

The third chapter analyses the foreign policy of Great Britain in 30 years of the past Century, when Britain's strategy or policy may be characterised as an appeasement. Island power in this way responded to the rise of so-called revisionist powers: Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan. Appeasement was at first sight opposed to the policy of balancing, but it did not mean, however, an irrational choice. British politicians of the mid-30s years realised that if under such conditions the conflict broke out they would be forced to resign on defence of some parts of its empire. British forces could not face under any circumstances the coalition of Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously. This fact was at the origin of the interwar appeasement. Appeasement should be regarded as a form of purely temporary, emergency solution. Author points out that if the policy was aimed at both saving resources against secondary superpowers (Japan, Italy) which did not endanger the existence of Great Britain, and at the same time to delay the outbreak of war until the British armed forces would have become strong enough to repel aggression of primary threat (Germany), then such behaviour is fully consistent with strategy of overseas balancing.

The aim of the fourth chapter was to analyse the decolonisation process of the British Empire. Following the end of the World War II, Great Britain has to deal with the retreat of power, which was necessarily accompanied by a change in foreign policy towards their formerly dependent territories. Step by step, the British wanted to revise colonial injustices and promote the empowerment of local nationalists. However, events that occurred in connection with the Cold War also exerted significant impact on British policy. In addition to the economic and political strengthening of the United States it is worth to mention the situation in Europe in early 1950s, when the process of European integration started and Britain had to respond to it.

The fifth chapter discusses the post-war situation and European integration.

The basic objectives of the post-war Great Britain's foreign policy was at first to secure national interest, consisting in maintaining the greatest possible influence in international relations while ensuring the conditions for successful economic development. At first Britain did not consider European integration as a way to secure any of these objectives. Changes in this attitude came after the foundation of EEC and when first indicators of the successful functioning started to be visible. This eventually led to several British attempts to join EEC, which was after several rejections from Charles de Gaulle finally confirmed. Effects of integration were not, however, as expected, and this has led British politicians to contemplate withdrawal from the EEC. In regard to the second objective of the British national interest, i.e. maintaining the maximum possible influence on the international system, considering the negotiations of British prime ministers and their attitudes revealed through integration that objective were not fulfilled. From the beginning, British politicians were very sensitive to the issue of national sovereignty. They all tried to maintain international prestige both with close alliance with the United States and through maintaining relationships within the Commonwealth. The authors point out the logic of British steps in terms of competitiveness against tandem France – Germany, in case of change to a more supra-nationality in the EU. It should be noted, however, that in terms of strategy of overseas balancing, apart from the economic side of the integration, from the political point of view the decision to enter was correct, because they succeeded in preventing the accumulation of power by one state through this integration. The conclusions of this chapter have been formulated by analysing the famous prime ministers as Attlee, Churchill, Macmillan, Thatcher, and Major.

The last chapter deals with foreign policy behaviour of Great Britain as a maritime power during years 1945-1990. Even after the Second World War, Britain tried to maintain a conservative isolationist approach in respect to what was happening on the continent. Due to the large number of historical events this chapter is focusing primarily on the key ones and the application of strategy overseas balancing and its manifestations in British politics. The basic concept of British foreign policy during the Cold War became an effort to resist the Soviet Union, and at the same time take advantage of relationships with the United States to strengthen its own position in international relations. After World War II Britain classically tried to weaken the power of Germany and so they looked favourably unto division of Germany and its occupation by the great powers. At the time of the Suez crisis Britain assumed that membership in NATO and the war against the common enemy - the Soviet Union, authorised

them to continue to assert their interests in their former empire. Britain, along with France and Israel attempted in 1956 to stop the Soviet influence to penetrate the Middle East, but they met with resistance of the United State and they were forced to withdraw. Author then evaluates the individual events of this period as the Suez crisis, the Berlin crisis, the Cuban missile crisis, the Falkland Islands War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the unification of Germany.

The authors have managed to explain individual political actions of Great Britain in the period from point of view of strategy of overseas balancing. The book offers to readers a clear overview of the most important events in Great Britain's foreign policy, and also a possible explanation for their actions in terms of their national interests. We can say that the book is a great asset for the study of modern foreign policy of Great Britain with reference to traditional historical approaches.