CHAPTER 1

What principles guided Britain’s foreign and imperial policies between 1846 and 1902?

The foundations of British foreign policy towards Europe had been laid in 1815. The European great powers, of whom Britain was one, had established the Concert of Europe. Commitment to this was to be of primary importance to Britain for at least the next 50 years.

The Concert was a purely European arrangement, but Britain’s interests extended well beyond Europe. Nevertheless, throughout the nineteenth century there was a direct link between order in Europe and the protection and expansion of the British Empire. A strategically and diplomatically stable Europe not only enabled Britain to retain its status as a regional and continental power, but also as an imperial power. This relationship between European peace and British imperial power was a central factor that drove Britain’s foreign and imperial policies throughout most of the nineteenth century. There was a degree of consistency in the principles on which the policies were based, but the methods employed to ensure that Britain’s vital national interests were guaranteed changed over time.

WHAT WAS THE BALANCE OF POWER IN EUROPE?
From 1846 to 1902, one of Britain’s primary objectives was to maintain a balance of power in Europe. Throughout this period, Britain was only involved in one European war, the Crimean War (1854–6), fought to enforce and maintain the balance of power in Europe. The preservation of this stability was dependent upon a willingness by Britain and the other Great Powers of Europe to:

- recognise the central importance for all of them of preserving peace, order and balance in Europe
- put this objective above the national interests of individual states
- agree that no state should increase its territorial size or its political influence in Europe unless the other great powers agreed to it
• prevent a weak and vulnerable state from becoming the victim of a stronger aggressor
• take joint action, including war if necessary, against any state whose actions might threaten to upset the balance
• respect treaties, which have been agreed to as part of the preservation of the balance of power.

Why was the European balance of power so important for Britain?
There was a direct link between British foreign policy in Europe and Britain's global imperial policy. Both strands of government action were founded upon economic priorities.

• Foreign wars were expensive and the outcomes were often unpredictable. Peace was financially cheap. Inevitably, the costs of wars were met through taxation and government borrowing. Diplomacy rather than military force was a far cheaper way of protecting Britain’s vital national interests, particularly in an age when economic growth, rather than military spending, was a priority for the British ruling class and its entrepreneurial supporters.
• By 1850, Britain was a major exporting nation. Most of Britain’s trade was with North America, Africa and the Pacific, which were also the main areas of investment. These lucrative markets needed to be protected by a large and expensive navy. A considerable amount of naval activity occurred along the coast of West Africa to prevent the slave trade. A peaceful and stable Europe contributed towards Britain’s ability to fund its navy and thereby protect trade and the national economic prosperity to which it contributed.
• Britain’s status as a great European power had been established and fixed in 1815. Any significant change in the distribution of power in Europe could threaten that status. Status as a European power complimented and supported Britain’s status as an imperial power. Without stability in Europe and continuity in the distribution of power in Europe, Britain’s ability to project itself as a regional and global power would have been under threat. One alternative strategy to adopt when the balance of power in Europe was less certain after 1865 was for Britain to embark on a massive expansion of its

**KEY TERM**

Entrepreneurial The practice of investing in new ideas and taking risks by supporting new economic ventures. The rewards for success were usually very high.
imperial power in order to counter the challenge from rivals in Europe.

- Britain’s priority was to preserve its international status. This was not necessarily to be achieved by the preservation of the map of Europe fixed in 1815. The key principle underlying Britain’s policy was that any changes in the territorial balance should not result in a relative decline in Britain’s international status.

PROTECTING OVERSEAS TRADE AND THE ECONOMY

An examination of the British economy and Britain’s position as a trading nation amply explains why these were so important as determining factors influencing foreign and imperial policy. Economic wealth and **global trade dominance** were essential criteria in determining great power status. It was a guiding principle of British imperial and foreign policy that they should remain a great power.

**Mid-Victorian prosperity, 1851–73**

This period was one of unprecedented growth in the development of the British economy. Between 1854 and 1860 economic growth averaged 1.7% and this rose to 3.6% between 1861 and 1865 and 2.1% between 1866 and 1874.

Britain’s staple industries (coal, cotton textiles, iron and steel) were at the heart of economic growth. Between 1850 and 1875, annual coal production rose from 49.4 million tons to 131.9 million tons. Export of cotton textiles increased from an annual average of 978 million yards in the 1840s to 3573 million yards in the 1870s. This economic boom not only benefitted the business community but also the domestic workforce. The following table illustrates the rising prosperity that went beyond 1873.

| Base Year: 1850 = 100
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Money wages</th>
<th>Real wages</th>
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<tr>
<td>1850</td>
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What principles guided Britain’s foreign and imperial policies between 1846 and 1902?
Another indicator of the growing prosperity in the mid-nineteenth century was the increase in the workforce in staple industries. For example, in 1850, there were 191,000 cotton spinners and 216,000 coal miners. By 1873, these figures had risen to 230,000 and 465,000 respectively. Between 1850 and 1870, the value of imports increased from £103 million to £303 million. Exports went from £83 million to £244 million in the same period. This clearly reveals a balance of payments deficit. This was offset by invisible earnings such as shipping, insurance and banking. The deficit underlines Britain’s growth as a consumer nation in the mid-nineteenth century.

There was no doubt that Britain was the world’s leading trading nation. The nature of the imports reveals some important evidence that helps to explain why economic prosperity was so closely linked to foreign and imperial policy. By 1870, 27 per cent of the total value of imports was accounted for by textile raw materials, while foodstuffs accounted for a further 34 per cent of the total value of imports. These figures indicate the expansion of British industry and job creation. They also underline the increased consumption of food across the whole population. British foreign and imperial policy had to protect trade because businessmen and entrepreneurs were prospering and the general population demanded a share in the benefits of prosperity through increased consumption.

**KEY TERM**

**Balance of payments deficit** The difference between the income a country earns and the amount it spends. It is usually expressed as a comparison between the value of exports compared to the cost of imports.
In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Britain adopted a more expansionist view of imperialism. The British Empire up to this point had been a source of profitable markets for British manufactured goods and a provider of cheap raw materials. The expansion of the empire became a guiding principle of British imperial policy after 1885. The key question is why did this development in policy occur?

- Economic imperialism – One commonly held explanation for imperial growth is that Britain needed to develop new markets for its manufactured goods. Trade patterns in the last quarter of the nineteenth century were changing. The European markets were becoming saturated, and demand for British manufactured goods was in decline. One reason for this shift was the fact that Europe was experiencing its own industrialisation and was therefore becoming self-sufficient and less dependent upon British imports. An expanded empire presented new opportunities to offset the decline in Britain’s European export market. Furthermore, protectionism in the USA, France and Germany limited Britain’s access to markets in these countries. Another factor lies in the influence of British industrialists, manufacturers and investors over government policy. Some historians have argued that there was a surplus of investment capital in Britain.

The economic wealth of Britain was not generated solely through manufacturing. Invisible earnings were a major contributor, particularly in reducing the balance of payments deficit. An expanding empire offered new opportunities for investment.

- Strategic imperialism – In order to protect existing trade routes, particularly to India, and the development of new routes for imperial trade, it was necessary for the British navy to strengthen its strategic power on a global scale. In effect, this meant having more territorial bases. It meant having a larger empire. In addition to this, it was clear that by the 1870s that the industrialisation and economic expansion of the USA and Europe had not only weakened Britain’s hitherto unrivalled economic power, but also heightened competition amongst nations with increasingly
comparable economic strength. Britain’s answer was to protect its position by expanding its empire in order to extend its strategic power.

From the 1870s not only was Britain’s economic power under threat, particularly from the USA and Germany, but also its status as a great power. If other states began to increase their territorial power then so must Britain. Empire was increasingly becoming a measure of international power. International rivalry and the race for power stimulated imperial expansion.

- Cultural imperialism – This is the idea that Britain wanted to bring ‘civilisation’ to those parts of the world as yet ‘uncivilised’. For the British, civilisation meant British culture and this meant educating the indigenous peoples to accept the notion of European superiority and, therefore, the logic of their own inferiority. Cultural imperialism may be seen as an outcome of imperialism rather than as a primary motive for imperial expansion. By attempting to westernise the values and culture of the local populations, Britain sought to secure its control more effectively.

- Social imperialism – Success in expanding Britain’s power base had vote winning potential at home. The Conservative Party under Disraeli and Lord Salisbury exploited this phenomenon as British influence in Africa grew. The electorate was expanding as a result of the Parliamentary Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884. Patriotism was becoming a popular concept and successive governments were able to use imperial expansionism to generate patriotism and increase their own popularity amongst the voters.

WHY DID BRITAIN FEAR RUSSIA?
In part, Britain’s priorities were founded upon preserving the European balance of power and protecting its own international trade, particularly with India. The greatest perceived threat to these objectives was Russia. Russia was regarded as:

- Expansionist – The aim of Russian foreign policy was seen as a desire to expand westwards into Europe. This would be achieved by exploiting the weaknesses of the Turkish Empire.
Aggressive – Russia was seen as being willing to use aggressive diplomacy and military force to achieve its objective of westward expansion.

This image of Russia underpinned British foreign policy thinking from the 1840s. The Turkish Empire and Eastern Europe were seen as the key to Britain’s ability to protect its own interests. Any expansion or exploitation of instability or weakness in these regions would threaten Britain’s influence in the Mediterranean and ultimately its trade routes to India. By the turn of the century Britain became more inclined to cooperate with the Russians. The view was that the Russian threat to India had declined. India not only had a huge population, it also provided cheap, essential commodities such as tea. It was a lucrative market for British manufactured goods and it gave Britain incomparable levels of international prestige. It was, by the 1870s, ‘the jewel in the imperial crown’. This was amply illustrated when, in 1876, Disraeli persuaded Parliament to grant Queen Victoria the title Empress of India. This reinforced the link between imperialism and patriotism, a link that was to become increasingly significant after 1880.

Were the principles put into practice?

Viscount Palmerston may be regarded as the first in a series of influential figures who shaped British foreign and imperial policy in the second half of the nineteenth century. An examination of the key events will illustrate the nature of this contribution.

THE REVOLTS IN EUROPE, 1848

France

In February 1848, the reign of Louis Philippe was brought to a sudden end. Initially he was replaced by a radical government and then, finally, in July 1848, by the election of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte as President. France had become a republic.

Palmerston offered Louis Philippe no support but he did support Louis Napoleon. Palmerston backed Louis Napoleon, not because he favoured republicanism and democracy, but because he wanted a stable government in France with which he could do business. A republic in
France meant order, and order greatly reduced the threat to the preservation of the balance of power.

Austria
Palmerston showed no sympathy for the liberal movements in Austria. In March 1848, rebellion flared up across the Austrian Empire. The critical issue for Britain was the maintenance of the Austrian Empire, or at the very least its preservation to a point at which it was able to continue its role as a barrier to possible Russian expansion. Disorder in the empire could herald the disintegration of European stability.

Palmerston urged Austria to consolidate its empire by withdrawing from its Italian possessions following the revolts in Venice and Lombardy. Palmerstonian pragmatism was clearly at work here. In Palmerston’s view, a reduced but stronger Austrian Empire was preferable to a larger weak empire, particularly when the Turkish Empire was also facing serious weaknesses which might open up opportunities for expansion to the Russians. Austrian imperialists responded quickly. The revolts amongst the Czechs were crushed, the constitutional government in Vienna was overthrown, and Venice and Lombardy were restored under direct Austrian rule. Austria then sought Russia’s help in crushing the revolts in Hungary. Up to this point Palmerston was content, but the inclusion of Russia in the events forced him to condemn Austria’s treatment of the Hungarians. He appeared to be the defender of liberals and revolutionaries. Reality was quite different. It was the presence of Russian troops in Hungary and an apparent Russo–Austrian alliance that alarmed Palmerston. The twin fears of Russian expansionism and threats to the balance of power motivated Palmerston’s action, not the desire to protect democracy in Hungary or, indeed, anywhere else.

THE DON PACIFICO INCIDENT, 1850
Don Pacifico was a Portuguese Jew who had been born in the British colony of Gibraltar. After his property had been damaged in Athens in 1847, he demanded compensation from the Greek government. Palmerston supported Don Pacifico and sent gunboats to Athens and seized a number of Greek ships. Don Pacifico received his compensation.
This affair shows no real consistency with the aims of British foreign policy. It offended Austria, Russia and France. All these states had guaranteed Greek independence for which Britain had shown such little regard. It merely served to add to Palmerston’s reputation as a bully of small nations. It was a blatant piece of aggressive patriotism and had more to do with Palmerston’s political popularity than British foreign policy priorities.

**THE SECOND ANGLO–CHINESE WAR, 1856–60**

In 1856, the *Arrow*, sailing under a British flag, was seized by the Chinese. They accused its crew of acts of piracy. The British Consul in Canton demanded the ship’s release and an official apology. When China refused, Palmerston supported the decision to bomb Canton. With French support, British troops went on to assault Peking in 1860. It was at this point that the Chinese had no option other than to submit to British demands. The outcome led to an expansion of trade with China as more Chinese ports were opened up to international trade. Britain also received a guarantee of access to the Chinese interior.

Palmerston had protected British interests. He had expanded Britain’s international trade and the British economy benefitted. British international prestige was enhanced. The aggressive pursuit of Britain’s national interests was possible in the Far East because it did not threaten European stability or British interests in Europe.

**ITALIAN UNIFICATION, 1859–60**

Palmerston regarded Italian nationalists and liberals as a block on the more radical groups who might threaten British commercial and strategic interests in the Mediterranean if they were to come to power. He also saw an Austrian presence in Italy as a restraining influence against French expansionism there.

However, when Piedmont invaded Austrian territory in northern Italy, Palmerston backed the Piedmontese. In 1860, Garibaldi invaded Sicily. The British navy helped Garibaldi not only to reach Sicily but also Naples. This was a vital step in the creation of the independent sovereign state of Italy. Palmerston’s priority was to support Italian unification to enable Austria to consolidate its own position.
in the rest of its territories without Italy being an additional burden. Austria was an essential element in Palmerston’s determination to maintain stability in Europe. French influence in Italy was limited as Britain basked in the support of a grateful Italy. Trade with Italy increased and Britain had a strategically important ally in the Mediterranean.

The incident illustrates Palmerston’s commitment to preserving the balance of power in Europe. An expansion of French power had been prevented. Austria could continue to play its role without too many problems caused by the loss of Italian lands. British interests in the Mediterranean had been protected and enhanced.

**FOREIGN AND IMPERIAL POLICY FROM 1865**
William Gladstone’s first administration began in 1868 and ended in 1874. By 1871, Prussia had defeated France and created a new, united Germany in Europe. Germany was rapidly moving towards becoming the dominant great power in continental Europe. Germany’s European strategy became focused on diplomatically isolating France in order to enhance Germany’s power base.

In imperial affairs, an important change had taken place in 1867. The British North America Act gave Canada internal self-government. This signalled a shift towards granting Britain’s other white dominions similar status.

India was exposed to a growing threat after Russia conquered territories close by in central Asia. The conquest of Samarkhand, Khiva and Bokhara opened up India’s northwest frontier to Russian aggression. Protecting India became a priority of British imperial policy after 1870.

During his first ministry, Gladstone wanted to break with what he regarded as Palmerstonian ‘sabre rattling’ and the aggressive foreign policy that seemed to characterise it. He wanted to raise the conduct of British foreign policy to a higher moral level. He was strongly criticised for rejecting interventionism and promoting the rights of nations. To many, this appeared to be disregarding the interests of Britain. The question is, is this a valid interpretation of Gladstone’s policies and does it suggest a break with continuity?

**KEY PERSON**
William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98)
Gladstone was born into a wealthy Liverpool merchant’s family. In 1832, he was elected Tory MP for Newark. He was Chancellor of the Exchequer between 1853 and 1855, and subsequently joined the Liberal Party and served as Chancellor from 1859–66. Between 1868 and 1894, he was Prime Minister on four occasions. In terms of foreign and imperial policy, he was committed to the Concert of Europe. He favoured peace not war and believed that diplomacy and arbitration were at all times preferable to fighting. He was convinced that Britain had a responsibility to rule its empire but was not committed to defend the colonies’ internal security when they attained self-governing status.

**KEY TERMS**
- **White dominions** Those parts of the British Empire which were colonised by white people who assumed control and did not include the native population in decision-making. Such colonies included New Zealand, Australia, Cape Colony and Canada. Non-dominion colonies were completely ruled by Britain and its representatives in the colony.
- **Interventionism** States will take action in the affairs of another country if such action appears to strengthen or protect their own interests.
THE FRANCO–PRUSSIAN WAR, 1870–1
Gladstone’s inaction was consistent with his commitment to non-interventionism, but it made no contribution to preserving the European balance of power. A significant redirection of policy had taken place as Britain allowed Germany to emerge as the focal point of European diplomacy. It was not simply a question of one great power, France, being replaced by a successor, Germany. Economically and militarily, Germany posed a far greater threat to the balance of power because it had the capacity and the ambition to become ever stronger.

Prussia’s victory over France heralded the transformation of the balance of power in Europe. This was a serious external crisis for Britain. Gladstone took no action beyond securing a commitment from Prussia and France to jointly respect Belgian neutrality.

THE REVOCATION OF THE BLACK SEA CLauses
OF THE TREATY OF PARIS
The Treaty of Paris, which had ended the Crimean War, had banned Russia from maintaining a naval fleet on the Black Sea. The potential danger of a Russian fleet in the Black Sea had been a major reason for Britain’s involvement in the war. Gladstone convened a Great Power Conference. Once again, Gladstone had avoided war but he had also abandoned Britain’s policy of controlling Russian expansionism. He clung to the idea that the Concert of Europe was intact and could be used effectively to preserve peace.

THE ALABAMA AWARD, 1872
The USA repeated its claims for compensation for damage caused by the Alabama, a warship built in Britain for the South during the American Civil War. During the war, the Alabama had contributed to the capture or sinking of up to 57 Northern vessels. Unlike Palmerston, who had simply rejected such claims, Gladstone agreed to an international conference at Geneva. This awarded the USA £3.25 million in damages and Gladstone agreed to pay.

The incident illustrates his commitment to the collective will of international opinion in contrast to the
Palmerstonian approach. Many saw this as a blow to British international prestige, although it did ensure Britain remained on good terms with the USA. It suggested that international cooperation was successful at a relatively small price.

**IMPERIAL AFFAIRS, 1868–74**

Gladstone implemented a series of actions that appeared to suggest that he was not an imperialist and was therefore breaking faith with traditional policy.

- He withdrew British troops from Canada and New Zealand at a time when these colonies faced internal revolt.
- He offered the pro-independence Canadian Prime Minister, Alexander Galt, a knighthood.
- In 1872, Cape Colony was granted self-government.

However, Gladstone was not seeking to dismantle the empire. He believed that the ‘white’ colonies should be self-governing but still closely linked to Britain. The rest, including India, would be ruled directly by Britain. In this way, Gladstone was consistent with his predecessors’ commitment to the centrality of India at the heart of Britain’s imperial power.

**Benjamin Disraeli**, Gladstone’s life-long political rival, was committed to the empire but he had no definite plans for its expansion. He believed that the empire was a measure and an expression of Britain’s power. The maintenance of this power over India was central to his thinking, to the point where he added the description ‘Empress of India’ to Queen Victoria’s titles in 1876. This served to link the monarchy with the empire and to bind India more closely than ever before to Britain.

**IMPERIAL AFFAIRS, 1874–80**

**The Suez Canal Shares, 1875**

Disraeli started Britain’s involvement in Egypt through his purchase of shares in the Suez Canal. Disraeli secretly used a £4 million loan from the Rothschild family to purchase a 44 per cent share in the canal. This decision turned out to be of vital importance in the development of British influence in Africa and it was an essential development in

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**KEY PEOPLE**

**Alexander Galt (1817–93)**

Originally from England he moved to Canada in 1835 and became a member of the Canadian Parliament in 1849. Along with other posts, he was Canadian High Commissioner in Britain between 1880 and 1883.

**Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81)**

Disraeli was born into a wealthy Jewish family, although in 1817 he was baptised into the Anglican Church. He was elected as MP for Maidstone in 1837. After attacking Peel over the Corn Laws, he rose to become leader of the Conservative Party in the House of Commons in 1848. He became a life-long political rival of Gladstone and this was fully reflected in the very different approaches the two men took towards foreign policy. He became an unrivalled favourite of Queen Victoria and in 1876 she elevated him to the title of Earl of Beaconsfield. He was Prime Minister in 1868 and between 1874 and 1880. He died in 1881.

**The Rothschild family**

A wealthy family whose riches were based on the banking dynasty founded by Meyer Rothschild (1743–1812).
A cartoon published in 1876 in the magazine Punch. The caption reads ‘The Lion’s Share. Take care anyone who touches it!’

**KEY PERSON**

Lord Lytton (1831-91)
A statesman and a diplomat who, in addition to being Viceroy of India between 1876 and 1880, was British Ambassador in Paris in 1887. He was also a poet and a novelist.

**KEY EVENT**

The Battle of Isandlwana, 1879
A humiliating defeat for the British, when almost 1200 troops were massacred by poorly armed Zulu warriors.

**KEY PERSON**

Sir Bartle Frere (1815-84)
Primarily associated with India, he was appointed High Commissioner for South Africa in 1877. He was a keen defender of British imperial interests. His decision to make a pre-emptive strike against the Zulus in 1878, and thereby strengthen British control, was prompted largely by a fear of a Russian attack on South Africa brought on by events in Europe and the Balkans in 1878.

The protection of the route to India. Strategically and commercially, the canal was vital to British interests, not only in the Mediterranean but also in India, the Far East and Austral–Asia.

**The Afghan Wars, 1878 and 1879**

Afghanistan was seen as the route that Russia might have used to threaten India. Therefore, by controlling Afghanistan, Britain could strengthen Indian security. Once again, the protection of India figured largely in British policy. The decision to install a pro-British ruler in Afghanistan made by the India Secretary, Lord Cranbrook, and the Viceroy of India, Lord Lytton, proved disastrous. British troops were involved in two futile campaigns, which only served to humiliate Britain and weaken its international prestige.

**The Zulu War, 1878**

An equally humiliating defeat was experienced by Britain at the hands of the Zulus at the Battle of Isandlwana. Once again, a British official, Sir Bartle Frere, the High Commissioner of South Africa, had taken an initiative that went seriously wrong. Rather than being a reckless imperialist, Disraeli may be seen as the victim of the
recklessness of others. His weakness lies in the fact that he did nothing to stop the dangerous actions of others.

**The ‘Eastern Question’, 1875–8**
A decaying Turkish Empire appeared to open up opportunities for Russian expansionism southwards. Disraeli was convinced that this would ultimately threaten the Suez Canal and therefore the security of the route for Indian and British commerce. The defence of Britain’s trade and international prestige were central to Disraeli’s objectives in terms of his reaction to the ‘fate’ of the Turkish Empire. These objectives were totally consistent with longstanding British foreign policy objectives.

When Russia threatened Constantinople, Disraeli moved troops from India to Malta, called up reservists and placed Britain into a state of war readiness. Avoiding war at all costs was clearly not at the top of Disraeli’s agenda. Ultimately, the Congress of Berlin in 1878 was, in many respects, a triumph for Disraeli’s approach. Russia was forced to abandon many of its gains and Britain’s position in the Mediterranean was strengthened through the acquisition of Cyprus. The European balance of power had been preserved.

**GLADSTONE’S SECOND ADMINISTRATION, 1880–5**
Gladstone favoured the consolidation of the empire, partly by reducing its size and through the development of self-governing colonies. Ironically, it was during this administration that the empire expanded in size.

**The First Boer War, 1880–1**
The Dutch Boer settlers of the Transvaal demanded their independence from British rule. The government feared that this might become a general armed revolt throughout South Africa.

In 1881, a British force was destroyed at the Battle of Majuba Hill. True to his anti-imperialist stance, Gladstone convened the Pretoria Convention. This was a classic example of Gladstone’s willingness to assume some of the responsibility of a colony without having real control over it.
Egypt, 1882

Egypt was part of the Turkish Empire when nationalist revolts erupted in 1882. Gladstone accepted that it was essential that British financial investments in Egypt and the Suez Canal zone were protected. He wanted a joint Anglo-French invasion force to intervene and restore stability. This was totally consistent with his concept of international cooperation. The strategy failed and a purely British force carried out the action. Gladstone anticipated only a brief occupation, but Britain remained in control of Egypt until 1922. Almost inadvertently, Gladstone had expanded the empire and taken a hugely significant step in protecting the security of the Suez Canal and the route to India. Furthermore, he had succeeded in promoting economic opportunities for British manufacturers. Egypt was a major producer of raw cotton, which British textile manufacturers were anxious to exploit. Egypt was also a potentially huge market for the importation of British technology, particularly railway transport technology.

The Sudan, 1883–5

The Sudan was an Egyptian possession. A rebellion led by Mohammed Ahmad (the Mahdi) erupted and in 1883 his
followers destroyed a British led Egyptian force sent to end
the rebellion. Gladstone sent General Gordon to the
Sudan with orders only to evacuate British and Egyptian
nationals. Gordon disobeyed his orders and installed
himself in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, intending to
await relief and establish British control of the Sudan.
Gladstone delayed making a final decision about the relief
and Gordon’s force was slaughtered two days before a
British force under General Wolseley arrived.

Gladstone was condemned by the public and politicians
alike. His anti-imperialism had gone too far and he lost the
1885 general election.

Although very different, there were some significant
similarities between Gladstone and Disraeli. Perhaps the
most significant was that neither man strongly supported
the idea of an expanding empire for Britain. The protection
of India and the routes to it was another common thread
that united the two adversaries. Gladstone’s concept of
foreign policy as a moral process was less similar to
Disraeli’s thinking.

**LORD SALISBURY, 1885, 1886–92, 1895–1901**

Lord Salisbury was driven broadly by the same objectives
that had motivated his predecessors since 1846. His aim
was to protect the British Empire, one of the cornerstones
of Britain’s economic wealth and global power, and
maintain a balance of power in Europe, the guarantee of
stability and peace for Britain. Salisbury saw Russia and
France as the primary threats to the fulfilment of his aims.
He recognised the role of Germany as a major contributor
to European stability and believed that Germany could be
used to offset the ambitions of France and Russia.

What was Salisbury’s European policy in
1886–92?

Anglo–French tensions had been heightened since 1882
when Britain took over control of Egypt. This had
undermined French influence in North Africa. The issue of
Russian expansionist ambitions in the Near East and in the
states neighbouring India remained an on-going problem
for Britain. Salisbury’s strategy was to establish closer links
with the powers of the **Triple Alliance**.

**KEY PEOPLE**

**General Charles George Gordon (1833–85)**

Gordon was a career soldier who fought in the Crimean
War. In 1860 he crushed a rebellion in China and
became known as Chinese Gordon. He was appointed
Governor of the Sudan in 1877, but resigned in 1880.
He was killed at Khartoum two days before a relief
column arrived to raise the ten month siege by the
Mahdi’s forces.

**Lord Salisbury**

(1830–1903) Robert Arthur
Cecil succeeded his brother as
Viscount Cranborne in 1865
and his father as third
Marquis of Salisbury in 1868.
He was a Conservative and
became the last British Prime
Minister in the House of
Lords. He is most often
associated with isolating
Britain from foreign alliances,
but the exact nature of this is
a matter of debate. He was
not convinced that control of
Constantinople was the basis
of Russia’s threat to India.
However, the safety of the
Mediterranean route to the
East was of supreme
importance to him and Egypt
was to assume unparalleled
significance in British foreign
and imperial policy under
Salisbury.

**KEY ALLIANCE**

**Triple Alliance, 1882** This
was a military alliance
between Germany, Austria
and Italy. Essentially, it was
an anti-France and anti-
Russian alliance system,
which had been brokered by
Germany.
Salisbury did not seek to join the alliance system because he did not wish to commit Britain to a European entanglement, but equally he did not want Britain to face dangerous isolation in Europe. The agreements he made in 1887 illustrated this approach to foreign policy and how he sought to protect British interests without a formal commitment to the Triple Alliance powers. Salisbury’s style was aimed at preserving flexibility.

Two secret agreements were made in 1887 called the Mediterranean Agreements. Although Salisbury, in 1889, identified France as a potential threat, he refused Germany’s offer of a defensive alliance directed against the French. This was because it would have committed Britain to back Germany’s anti-French tactics but it would not have ensured German support for Britain against possible Russian aggression against India. Once again, Salisbury chose to build flexibility into his foreign policy by deliberately avoiding any firm ties based on treaties, however relevant they appeared to be to British interests. His alternative approach was to expand Britain’s naval power so that it maintained the two-power standard. This underlines Salisbury’s commitment to protecting the empire and therefore the priority he gave to the empire.

What were Salisbury’s policies outside Europe in 1895–1901?

The Balkans
Britain’s traditionally anti-Russian position was compromised by Salisbury from 1895. In 1895, Turkish massacres of Armenians living in eastern Turkey created a crisis which the Russians could have easily exploited and intervened in the Turkish Empire. Austria demanded that Britain make a binding commitment to defend Constantinople against Russian aggression. To the Austrians, this was perfectly consistent with the 1887 agreement. For Salisbury, it was an impossible situation. Binding agreements were simply not part of his political and diplomatic vocabulary. The outcome was that Britain’s links with the Triple Alliance were severed and Britain’s isolation from European diplomacy was deepened. This was a profound shift from the position of influence Britain had maintained prior to Salisbury’s administrations.
Egypt
The immediate effect of Salisbury's withdrawal from Constantinople was to increase the importance of Britain's occupation of Egypt. This state was crucial in protecting Britain's sea route to India. The defence against the Russian threat had shifted from Constantinople into the Eastern Mediterranean. This shift in strategic thinking was a break with the traditional policy of containing Russian expansionism. It also meant that British security in Egypt became a priority. To reinforce this, Salisbury accepted that the Sudan should be conquered. The Sudan controlled the upper reaches of the River Nile and the Nile was vital to Egypt's economic development.

![Map of Egypt and the Sudan, 1898](image)

In 1898, General Kitchener defeated a Sudanese army at Omdurman. This force was then ordered to stand firm against a rival French expedition in the region. This Anglo-French encounter took place at Fashoda, and the French withdrew. This incident confirmed British supremacy over the whole of Egypt and the Sudan but it undermined Anglo-French relations. Britain's European isolationism deepened.

The Far East
The Chinese Empire was in a state of terminal decay. Britain had already established a significant trading interest

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**KEY PERSON**

General Horatio Herbert Kitchener (1850-1916)
Otherwise known as Earl Kitchener of Khartoum. He defeated the Sudanese at the Battle of Omdurman and reoccupied Khartoum. Between 1900 and 1902 he was Chief of Staff in the Boer War in South Africa and commanded forces in India between 1902 and 1909. At the outbreak of World War I he was appointed War Minister. He was drowned when his ship was sunk as he travelled to Russia.
along the Yangtze Valley up to the port of Shanghai. British policy had been based on an open door approach to other European powers.

Germany and Russia were promoting their interests in China. Russian expansionism in the Far East continued through the penetration into the Chinese province of Manchuria. Despite the efforts of the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, Britain failed to draw Germany into an anti-Russian alliance designed to curb Russian ambitions in the Far East.

**DID SALISBURY’S FOREIGN POLICY PUT BRITAIN INTO A SITUATION OF ‘SPLENDID ISOLATION’?**

In February 1896, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Goschen, said:

> Our situation is not an isolation of weakness; it is deliberately chosen, this freedom, to act as we choose in any circumstances that might arise.

By 1895, Britain was the only European power not attached to a formal alliance in Europe. By 1893 France had freed itself from its international isolation through its alliance with Russia. Even by 1898 there was great hostility between Britain and France, particularly over the Fashoda incident. It was Germany’s move towards naval rivalry and support for the Boers that pushed Britain into a more conciliatory relationship with France by the turn of the century.

Salisbury was, like many of his predecessors, determined not to entangle Britain in war. Alliance commitments could easily lead to war. Prudence rather than pure isolationism

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**A cartoon entitled ‘Partners’ published in 1901 in the magazine Punch**

*BRITANNIA.* “AFTER ALL, MY DEAR, WE NEEDN’T TROUBLE OURSELVES ABOUT THE OTHERS.”

*COLONIA.* “NO; WE CAN ALWAYS DANCE TOGETHER, YOU AND I!”
characterised Salisbury's foreign policies. The evidence as to a lack of alliances is clear. Primarily, isolationism was a deliberate policy designed not merely to place Britain outside Europe and focus entirely on imperial issues, but also to ensure Britain's freedom of action in international relations. Britain also wanted to avoid conflict, which they may not be able either to sustain or control.

Overall, there was a consistency in British foreign and imperial policy between 1846 and 1902.

- Russia was perceived as a threat and British governments never wavered from this view.
- Imperial trade had to be protected, as had the routes that enabled that trade to flourish.
- European peace, based on a balance of power, and the avoidance of European war were central themes in policy-making throughout the period.
- There was a remarkable degree of continuity of purpose in the principles that guided policy. It was the methods used to fulfil the principles that proved to be so variable in consistency.

**SUMMARY QUESTIONS**

1. Explain the importance of two of the principles that guided British foreign and imperial policy between 1846 and 1902.

2. Why were relations with Russia so central to British foreign policy from 1846?

3. Explain how and with what success British foreign and imperial interests were protected by political leaders up to 1902.

4. Assess the reasons why British foreign and imperial policies between 1846 and 1902 were consistently maintained.