

The Attitude of the British Dominions to the Geneva Protocol

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Abstract

The study is based on unpublished sources of British provenance and on scientific literature. It analyses the attitude of the British dominions to the suggested Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes (Geneva Protocol) in the autumn of 1924. Great Britain, as one of the main victors of the war, had to react to situations brought on by the new reality of the years following 1918. This primarily concerned its approach to the system of collective security that was constructed in order to prevent the horrors of war. The Geneva Protocol signified a certain climax in these efforts, in particular by France, who wanted to push through its views on collective security. After the victory of the Conservatives in the parliamentary elections in the autumn of 1924, it became clear that obligations such as compulsory arbitration or the possibility of the British Navy sailing out on behalf of the interests of the League of Nations were unacceptable to His Majesty's Government.

Keywords: collective security; Great Britain; Geneva Protocol; British dominions; Imperial Foreign Policy; British Empire.

Introduction

In 1918, World War I ended and Europe had to recover from the bloodiest conflict in its history. It was therefore no surprise that after the war ended, the majority of people wanted to feel safe and believed that something similar would never happen again. However, the question of how to achieve such security remained unanswered. The pre-war allied alliances and the Concert of Europe failed to resolve the problem, with the public blaming them for their competing interests causing the war. It was therefore generally muted that a new and better organization had to be formed, one based on cooperation and trust.

Great Britain, as one of the main victors of the war, and a world power whose interests almost covered the entire world, understood that collective security was not only its

responsibility, but a necessity as well. Its position after the war was very strong and weak at the same time – all of its enemies were defeated, but the costs of war had inflicted significant debts; the economic dominance of the country had definitely come to an end. It was therefore necessary to establish peace and prevent another war. This axiom became very important during the decision-making processes of British politicians in the inter-war period; to some extent it became the deciding factor.

Collective security, as interpreted by the newly established League of Nations, meant a system of mutual guarantees based on one general principle; potential conflicts were to be resolved peacefully, whereby the participants in the disputes promised to try to resolve their differences through negotiation. In case a situation arose where one of the countries were not to respect the set rules, sanctions would be imposed on it. In the first half of the 20th century it was France who felt the most threatened and feared a German attack. Paris therefore tried to convince Great Britain to jointly initiate a collective security system, thereby neutralizing Berlin. However, London looked at the European continent through the prism of its own specific interests; London did not share French concerns or rather directly or indirectly rejected them. The entire first half of the 1920s was marked by the vain efforts of France to engage Britain in “its” system of collective security.

London also had problems with the opinions of its dominions. Their independence increased after the war through their separate representation in the League of Nations. During the course of the 20th century, the idea that it would be possible to conduct imperial politics rapidly dissipated. The dominions frequently acted independently and, with regards to the issue of collective security for Europe, clearly and repeatedly voiced their disapproval of new British commitments. Under these circumstances, it was impossible for Great Britain to consider a system of collective security which would see it engaged everywhere in the world to an identical degree. Great Britain saw two options as possible solutions – international security in the broadest sense of the word as represented by the League of Nations, or a model of participation in the provision of security for those parts of the world that were vital to British interests.

The first option proved very difficult to realize after the United States of America were unable to ratify their obligation to join the League of Nations. This further increased the doubts of British Conservatives about the purpose of the new organization and its ability to assert itself in the field of international politics. During the first half of the 1920s, there were several attempts to create a system of collective security under the aegis of the League of Nations; the most important and most significant of these attempts was the Geneva Protocol. However, London rejected all of these attempts for one reason or another.

Materials and Methods

For the study, the direct analysis method was applied to the analysis of unpublished archive sources. This method is the most widely used among historians working in the field of the history of politics. It involves directly deriving information from one or more

historical sources, examined on the basis of external and internal critique, whereby questions concerning the origin of the sources, their societal function, and/or their interpretation are investigated.

The authors did not only focus on analysing unpublished sources, but also on a critical assessment and interpretation of scientific literature. They also tried to confront the facts contained in the sources with the opinions of historians and experts who had previously tackled the issue. They subsequently drew their own conclusions.

Great Britain was fully aware of the unfavourable impression that was left behind by it turning down the Draft Treaty of Mutual Assistance in the autumn of 1924, which is why it was forced to produce some kind of alternative plan (Novotný 2006; Břach 1992; Feriancová 2010). The draft of the Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes (also called the Geneva Protocol) was therefore discussed from the beginning of October 1924 until March 1925. The continental European countries pinned their hopes on this draft. The introduction of the principles of arbitration and the observance of the agreements on collective security and disarmament were supposed to “revive the languishing spirit” of the League of Nations. The Protocol was not only supposed to provide its signatories with security guarantees, but also to compel them to participate in declared sanctions against aggressors (Orde 1978).

The Geneva Protocol provided solutions to a number of significant issues in connection with collective security. A war of aggression was prohibited. Unless otherwise approved or commanded by the Council of the League of Nations, the signatories were bound not to enter into any armed conflict in order to enforce their own interests. In such cases where a conflict could not be resolved by mutual agreement, the Protocol offered a solution either in the form of a ruling by the Permanent Court of International Justice or in the form of an arbitration award by the arbitration commission. The aggressor was defined as the country who chose to conduct war despite conciliation efforts under the Protocol. In such cases, sanctions were to be imposed on the aggressor. Under the Protocol, the signatories were duty bound to participate in these sanctions according to their geographical location and military power.

At that point in time, it seemed that the issue of collective security had been resolved. Unfortunately, the opposite was true. The parliamentary elections in Great Britain towards the end of October 1924 ended in a landslide victory for the Conservative Party, which returned to power after almost a year in opposition. Stanley Baldwin became the new Prime Minister, who nominated the experienced politician Austen Chamberlain as the head of the Foreign Office.

The Conservative victory was a severe threat to the plans of everyone who supported the Geneva Protocol. On the other hand, it strengthened the hopes of its opponents (primarily the representatives of the government administration and the dominions) (Novotný 2006). Both the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister were of the opinion that they should take into consideration the opinions of the dominions in their discussions concerning the Protocol, and act accordingly. Some members of the cabinet

were even convinced that the best way of implementing British interests would be not to intervene on the continent at all.

In December 1924, in light of the importance of the issue and the fundamental importance of the attitude of the British dominions, the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, Leopold Amery, started to organize a special meeting of the Imperial Conference for March 1925 in order to discuss its stance on the Protocol (Cmd. 2458 1925). Towards the end of December 1924, the Prime Minister of Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie King, told him that the proposed date of the meeting was not ideal. The Ottawa government thereby stated that it would be grateful if “the decision on the Geneva Protocol came to a similar conclusion” as the Draft Treaty on Mutual Assistance. His Australian counterpart, Stanley Bruce, for a change, strongly argued that the Empire should “in difficult and delicate matters keep a united front and speak as one united voice”. The prime ministers of Australia, New Zealand, Union of South Africa, and Newfoundland echoed the statements made by Mackenzie King with regards to them being too busy and that it would be impossible to meet in person. It is for this reason that they mutually agreed that consultations should be held telegraphically, which is why Amery consistently sent them reports and memoranda (Cmd. 2458 1925).

Towards the end of 1924, it became clear that the majority of the British government rejected the draft of the document and that they regarded it merely as a tool for meeting French security needs (Cassels 1980; Grayson 1997). On the other hand, the ministers realized that simply rejecting the document would anger France, which could have led to complications on the continent. Austen Chamberlain proposed implementing a pact between Great Britain, France, and Belgium. In December 1924, two meetings of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) took place. The meeting drew the conclusion that a new CID subcommittee should be implemented to examine the document and release a report on it (TNA, CAB 2/4 1924). The CID subcommittee soon came to the conclusion that it was almost impossible to accept the Protocol because its philosophy was based on compulsory arbitration and automatic sanctions against the aggressor, both of which could restrict the freedom of conduct of the British government. Its members also established the issue of the consent of the dominions (TNA, CAB 16/56 1924).

The opinions of the individuals who rejected the Geneva Protocol in Great Britain can be summarized in two points – too loosely defined obligations, not only economical but military as well, and the submission of national sovereignty to the League of Nations. Nevertheless, there were some people who supported the document. According to their views, the document’s goal was not to restrict the country’s sovereignty. However, it is important to note that the supporters of the Protocol were in a clear minority amongst British politicians and belonged to the old guard that no longer peddled much influence with regards to defining foreign policy (Novotný 2006).

The Prime Minister of Australia, Stanley Bruce, unlike his Canadian counterpart Mackenzie King, chose a more careful approach and suggested that if the Protocol was rejected, then an alternative political solution should be formulated (Cmd. 2458 1925).

The Prime Minister of New Zealand, Vincent Massey, thought that the text of the document lacked quality, endangered domestic jurisdiction over immigration and was generally dangerous to the British Empire. That is why he suggested that Britain should reject the document (Chaudron 2011; Cmd. 2458 1925). The Prime Minister of South Africa, General James Hertzog, on the other hand did not particularly trust the international position of the League of Nations because the United States of America, Germany, and the Soviet Union were not amongst its members. He therefore feared the obligations that would arise from signing the Geneva Protocol. He suggested that the final decision should be made by the Committee of Imperial Defence (Cmd. 2458 1925). The Irish representatives also did not recommend signing the document. The Indian representatives shared the fears of the leaders of the dominions and added that the Protocol should not be applied overseas and would therefore have to be geographically restricted to Europe (TNA, CAB 24/172/11 1925). Even though all the prime ministers of the dominions supported the League of Nations and believed in its ideals, they tried to avoid the guarantees, which would economically, politically, or militarily restrict them. This is the main reason why they were against signing the Protocol (Moore 1931).

On 13th February 1925, a CID meeting started that would last six days and which was supposed to definitively determine the attitude of the His Majesty's Government towards the Geneva Protocol. The members of the committee prepared several suggestions for the cabinet to assess. However, most of the members of the committee believed that the best solution at that moment would be not to react at all; each had different reasons for this attitude (Orde 1978). After six days, and during another CID meeting, it was decided that the committee would recommend the government to reject the Protocol. Ever since the Conservatives had won the election it was clear that the chances of the document being ratified were significantly lower. None of the members of the CID or the government were unequivocally for accepting the document. Some almost flatly rejected any kind of British engagement in Europe and put the Empire's interests first (Leo Amery, Lord Birkenhead, Sir Samuel Hoare), whereas others supported a kind of regional pact – either only with France, such as Austen Chamberlain, or to hold talks with Germany as well (Sir Winston Churchill).

The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Leopold Amery, was not amongst the supporters of the ratification of the Protocol because he saw it as controversial due to extremely isolationist objections and the almost hostile attitude of the United States of America (Burks 1959). From Amery's point of view, the document generated more disadvantages than advantages for the Empire. London's politicians generally viewed the Protocol as untrustworthy; there were definitely more influential opponents than supporters of the document. During February 1925, expert discussions were held to analyse the impact of the security commitments on Imperial foreign policy and defence. The discussions were not only held at all levels of government, but also in the Committee of Imperial Defence, which was strongly against signing the document (TNA, CAB 24/172/5 1925).

On 4th March 1925, the British government was in session. The ministers considered all the presented memoranda, which politically, economically, and militarily spoke against

the Geneva Protocol. They therefore came to the “logical” conclusion that it was impossible to accept the document of the League of Nations. This, even though the former British Prime Minister, James Ramsay MacDonald, had jointly helped to phrase the document with his French counterpart, Édouard Herriot. On 12th March, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Austen Chamberlain, announced the rejection to the League of Nations in the name of Commonwealth (TNA, CAB 24/172/36 1925). There were four main reasons why Britain rejected the document: 1) negative attitudes of the dominions; 2) fear of possible complications with the United States of America; 3) unwillingness to guarantee the geographical arrangement in Central and Eastern Europe; and the 4) deeply rooted aversion of Foreign Office employees to compulsory arbitration (Walters 1952).

Conclusion

The Geneva Protocol was unacceptable to the Conservative government from the start. Terms such as compulsory arbitration, automatic implementation of sanctions if arbitration was rejected, the possibility of the British Navy sailing out in the interests of the League of Nations, or restricted decision-making with regards to war or peace, created insurmountable objections for the opponents of the Protocol. These opponents not only included members of the cabinet, but also members of the government administration and representatives of the army. Their objections were not necessarily focused on every suggestion with regards to finding a solution for collective security, but rather focused on every attempt to force London to accept too extensive commitments on the continent and to deprive it of its freedom to negotiate in conflict situations. The rejection of the Geneva Protocol in March 1925 was a failure of a certain concept of collective security; it did however offer Germany a way out of isolation and back into the fold to become a great European power.

There were also very few supporters of the Protocol among the representatives of the dominions. Overseas politicians often held almost isolationist attitudes and were not very open to accepting any more binding economic, political, or military obligations, which had not been fully discussed with them and their British representatives. The British realized that possible guarantees for Western Europe were only acceptable to a certain extent with the support of the dominions, or rather India. Chamberlain, by declaring a new British principle on collective security, started a new approach that eventually led to the acceptance of the Locarno Treaties, which would shake Imperial foreign policy to the core.

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