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## GREAT BRITAIN'S STANCE TOWARDS POLITICAL CHANGES IN CHINA IN THE YEARS 1908–1909

**Abstract:** Between 1908 and 1909, significant political changes took place in China. Following the death of the nominal sovereign, Guangxu, and the Empress Dowager Cixi, who exercised real power, the minor Puyi was selected as the new emperor. The regency was assumed by the weak and inept Prince Chun, who dismissed the most influential imperial dignitary, Yuan Shikai, in early 1909. When the second major dignitary, Zhang Zidong, died shortly later, the Beijing authorities found themselves in crisis. The article shows how Great Britain, which had the strongest position among the powers in China, reacted to these developments.

**Keywords:** British foreign policy, Edward Grey's diplomacy, Great Britain's policy towards China, dismissal of Yuan Shikai, death of Cixi and Guangxu, death of Zhang Zidong, Zaifeng's regency.

Between 1908 and 1909, major political changes took place in China. They were initiated in November 1908 by the almost simultaneous deaths of the Emperor Guangxu, whose rule was but nominal, and of the Empress Dowager Cixi, who wielded actual power.<sup>1</sup> These events ushered in the regency of Prince Chun (Zaifeng), which he exercised on behalf of his minor son, the Emperor Puyi (who reigned as Xuantong). Early the following year, the regent dismissed General Yuan Shikai, perhaps the most prominent and enlightened dignitary of the empire. In the autumn of

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<sup>1</sup> In the article, I have given Chinese names and surnames according to the *Pinyin* transcription, and Japanese names and surnames according to the international transcription. I have made an exception for names and surnames that are firmly established in English (for example, Hong Kong, Sun Yat-sen). Further, as regards Chinese and Japanese surnames in the main body of the work, I have retained their original order, in which the surname proper precedes the first name, while I have given the surnames of Asian authors in accordance with the convention of footnotes.

1909, another highly influential supporter of the dynasty, Zhang Zidong, died. Thus, in just under a year, significant changes took place on the Chinese political scene, affecting the very functioning of the state. This was all the more important as social discontent – triggered by the manner of the country's top-down modernization and by interference from the powers – was growing at the time, as was the activity of various societies seeking to overthrow the ruling Qing dynasty, and even topple the entire political system. The situation was further complicated by the fact that from the end of the nineteenth century, all the global powers had their spheres of influence and manifold interests in China. Within this group, Great Britain was undoubtedly the strongest, and was therefore most able to influence the events taking place in the Middle Kingdom. Its response was thus crucial, and more important than that of the other powers, as was later confirmed during the 1911 Revolution.

In the article, I seek to outline Great Britain's position and actions with regard to the significant political changes that took place in China in the years 1908–09, aiming to show the causes and consequences of its attitude. Specifically, I am interested in how Britain perceived particular events, as well as the general political situation in China. How did Britain assess the new Beijing government and its actions? What influenced its attitude? Which Chinese politician did Britain favour? Did it intervene diplomatically on his behalf? If so, did it do so independently, or together with the other powers? What were the results of British intervention? To what extent did Britain's actions constitute interference in China's internal affairs? It was also important to explore how London thought changes in China might affect British interests and the security of foreigners, the position of the Beijing government, and the imperial programme of modernization. How did British diplomacy anticipate events in China would unfold? Finally, to what extent did these changes affect British policy towards the Middle Kingdom in later years?

The time frame of the main part of the article covers the years 1908–09, when political changes took place in China that were considered important by both British diplomats of the period and later historians. The crisis of the Beijing government, which escalated at the time, contributed to the outbreak of the 1911 Revolution in China. The rebellion was a watershed event, as it led to the abdication of the Qing dynasty, which had ruled since the mid-seventeenth century, the collapse of an empire that was more than 2,000 years old, and the establishment of one of the first Asian republics. A key role during the revolution was played by Great Britain, whose attitude was shaped in no small measure precisely by the events of 1908–09.

Since the article deals with one aspect of British policy towards China, British documents and English-language topical literature were of primary importance. I have used archival materials from the huge Foreign Office fonds located at The National Archives in London. This contains all the necessary diplomatic correspondence, including both official and private documents, together with particularly valuable minutes and notes made by Foreign Ministry staff. This is self-evident and does not need elaboration.

The issues which I have touched upon are only partially reflected in Western literature. Indeed, historians have often presented them from a different perspective — mainly the American or, understandably, the Chinese.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, authors focusing on British policy towards China have tended either not to mention London's position on the political changes of 1908–09, or to do so only cursorily, concentrating on other issues (among others on economic interests, modernization of the empire, Tibet, the opium problem, or the impact of the situation in the Far East on Britain's relations with other powers).<sup>3</sup> This is puzzling as the changes in question occupied British diplomats heavily, and accounted for a significant portion of their correspondence. The most comprehensive, though still not exhaustive, presentation of the issue which interests me has been given by Chan Lau Kit-ching. However, even she has devoted more space in her rather concise monograph to other threads, for example, the negotiations concerning

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen R. MacKinnon, *Power and Politics in Late Imperial China: Yuan Shi-kai in Beijing and Tianjin, 1901–1908*, Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, CA, and London, 1980; Patrick Fuliang Shan, *Yuan Shikai: A Reappraisal*, Vancouver, 2018; Jerome Ch'ên, *Yuan Shih-k'ai, 1859–1916: Brutus Assumes the Purple*, London, 1961; Paul A. Varg, *Open Door Diplomat: The Life of W. W. Rockhill*, Urbana, IL, 1952; Michael H. Hunt, *Frontier Defense and the Open Door: Manchuria in Chinese-American Relations, 1895–1911*, New Haven, CT, 1973; Zhihai Cui, 'Zaifeng's Dismissal of Yuan Shikai and Sino-U.S.-Japanese Diplomacy', in *China: How the Empire Fell*, ed. Joseph W. Esherick and C. X. George Wei, London and New York, 2014, pp. 197–213.

<sup>3</sup> Ewen W. Edwards, *British Diplomacy and Finance in China, 1895–1914*, Oxford, 1987; idem, 'Great Britain and China, 1905–1911', in *British Foreign Policy under Sir Edward Grey*, ed. Francis H. Hinsley, Cambridge, 1977, pp. 351–61; Ian H. Nish, 'Great Britain, Japan and North-East Asia, 1905–1911', in *ibid.*, pp. 362–67; Roman Kodet, 'Great Britain and China 1908–1909', *West Bohemian Historical Review*, 5, 2015, 2, pp. 193–217; Ian Phimister, 'Foreign Devils, Finance and Informal Empire: Britain and China c. 1900–1912', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40, 2006, 3, pp. 737–59; Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Britain and China, 1842–1914', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, 5 vols, Oxford, 1998–99, vol. 3: *The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Andrew Porter and Alaine Low, Oxford, 1999, pp. 146–69; Niels P. Petersson, 'Gentlemanly and Not-so-Gentlemanly Imperialism in China before the First World War', in *Gentlemanly Capitalism, Imperialism and Global History*, ed. Shigeru Akita, London, 2002, pp. 103–22.

railway loans and concessions.<sup>4</sup> Thus my article complements and builds on earlier research; it seeks to present more clearly the impact of the events of 1908–09 on subsequent British policy in China.

Following the defeat of the Boxer Uprising, the Qing government decided to carry out a top-down modernization of the state, which essentially consisted in the adoption of certain occidental and Japanese models and solutions. The aim of the programme, known as the New Policies (*Xinzheng*), was to curry favour with the dynasty's subjects, specifically in order to strengthen its position, but also to actually modernize China. The scale, depth and pace of change, especially when compared to previous efforts of this kind, were by no means negligible, and in some respects revolutionary (such as, for example, the decision to abolish the centuries-old examinations for civil servants). The reforms affected a number of spheres: the military, administrative, educational and legislative, and the economy. The state also began to combat various negative social phenomena, such as opium smoking and footbinding, and made it possible for women to obtain a basic education. The modernization programme culminated in a political transformation, which consisted in the adoption of a constitution, and the establishment of a parliament and provincial assemblies. In August 1908, a draft constitution and a date for its final introduction were made public. It was announced that this would take place in 1916, and that the elected parliament would convene a year later. While it is true that, according to initial guidelines, the emperor would have had very broad powers, and the prerogatives of parliament would have been limited, the transformation of China into a constitutional monarchy nevertheless constituted a progressive step. Similarly, other reforms, although not always well thought out or implemented, contributed to the modernization of the empire.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kit-ching Chan Lau, *Anglo-Chinese Diplomacy, 1906–1920: In the Careers of Sir John Jordan and Yuan Shih-kai*, Hong Kong, 1978. Another characteristic of the book — in keeping with its subtitle — is the strong prominence given to the person of Sir John Jordan, His Majesty's Minister to China, which brings his point of view more into focus than that of British diplomacy.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the reforms, see Chūzō Ichiko, 'Political and Institutional Reform, 1901–11', in *The Cambridge History of China*, 15 vols [14 vols of 15 vols to eventually appear, however, with vol 4 yet to be published], Cambridge, 1978–, vol. 11: *Late Ch'ing, 1800–1911*, part 2, ed. John King Fairbank and Kwang-Ching Liu, 1980, pp. 375–415; Mary Clabaugh Wright, 'Introduction: The Rising Tide of Change', in *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900–1913* (hereafter *ChiR*), ed. eadem, New Haven, CT, and London, 1968, pp. 24–30; Douglas R. Reynolds, *China, 1898–1912: The Xinzheng Revolution and Japan*, Cambridge, MA, 1993; Roger R. Thompson, 'The Lessons of Defeat: Transforming the Qing State after the

But the New Policies failed to achieve their other goal — that of strengthening the dynasty's position and increasing support from its subjects. Indeed, the effect was quite the opposite, that is, an increase in public discontent and resistance, with criticism usually not of the direction of change, but of the manner and pace at which it was implemented. Ironically, some felt that the process proceeded too tardily, and others that it was realized hastily, especially as the changes were many and fundamental in nature. Moreover, the reforms required significant funding, and, since there was a dearth of funds in the central budget, their costs were dumped on the shoulders of the provinces, where taxes were raised. This became a source of friction between Beijing and the provinces, as did attempts to centralize power and limit the competences of governors, and also to ignore the aspirations of the local elites.<sup>6</sup>

Another problem was the central authorities' lack of standing with the people. The Manchurian Qing dynasty, although significantly sinicized, was still seen as foreign by a great many Chinese, who accused it of bringing about the collapse of the state, incompetence and corruption in governance, and looking after only its own interests. They did not believe it could carry out effective reforms, and they did not trust its intentions. The ruling family was also accused of being submissive to the powers, against whose thirst for conquest and demands it was unable to defend China. This was a weighty accusation, as Chinese nationalism was crystallising at the time, and manifested itself in a movement which aimed to reclaim the rights lost to foreigners (literally the

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Boxer War', *Modern Asian Studies*, 37, 2003, 4, pp. 769–73; Richard S. Horowitz, 'Breaking the Bonds of Precedent: The 1905–6 Government Reform Commission and the Remaking of the Qing Central State', *ibid.*, pp. 775–97; Luca Gabbiani, "'The Redemption of the Rascals": The Xinzheng Reforms and the Transformation of the Status of Lower-Level Central Administration Personnel', *ibid.*, pp. 799–829; Julia C. Strauss, 'Creating "Virtuous and Talented" Officials for the Twentieth Century: Discourse and Practice in *Xinzheng* China', *ibid.*, pp. 831–50; Jérôme Bourgon, 'Abolishing "Cruel Punishments": A Reappraisal of the Chinese Roots and Long-Term Efficiency of the *Xinzheng* Legal Reforms', *ibid.*, pp. 851–62. Previously, historiography frequently disparaged the New Policies, causing them to be relatively under-researched, whereas nowadays historians pay them considerably more attention, considering them an important stage in the development of modern China. The reform programme itself was perhaps overly ambitious, and its originators strove to change too much too quickly. Furthermore, it is difficult to evaluate it fully, for it was interrupted by the outbreak of the revolution in 1911. Thompson, 'The Lessons of Defeat', pp. 769–73; Strauss, 'Creating "Virtuous and Talented" Officials', pp. 831–34; Jakub Polit, 'Spór o chińską republikańską rewolucję Xinhai (1911–1912) w zachodniej historiografii', *KH*, 129, 2022, 1, pp. 81–116 (pp. 94–95, 101–06, 108–09).

<sup>6</sup> Wright, 'Introduction', pp. 29–30; Ichiko, 'Political and Institutional Reform', pp. 413–15.

'Rights Recovery Movement'). The politically conscious Chinese demanded that the state be strengthened in such a way that it could resist external pressure and eradicate foreign influences.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the incompetent dynasty, which had so far shown no willingness to thoroughly modernise and was pliable to the powers, appeared as an opponent of China's national aspirations, and its foreign ancestry only reinforced this impression. Although the ruling stratum was made up not only of Manchurians, but also of Han Chinese, and progressives and reactionaries were present among both nations, those attacking the central government appealed to anti-Manchurian resentments, especially when under the regency of Prince Chun there was a further reduction in the role of the Chinese in the upper echelons of the empire.<sup>8</sup> Various factions of Chinese émigrés also sought to alter the political situation. The more moderate monarchists wanted to reinstate Emperor Guangxu and introduce a constitution, while the radical republicans called for revolution and a change of the political system. The latter organized a series of coups, plots and uprisings to bring about not only the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, but also the fall of the empire, which they viewed as a relic and a hindrance to modernization.

In such circumstances, the introduction of reforms was difficult, but despite the obstacles, the New Policies programme was continued by the court — notably by the Empress Dowager Cixi and the Manchurian dignitaries Rong Lu and Prince Qing (Yikuang) — and the Chinese governors who supported it, chief among them Liu Kunyi, Zhang and Yuan.<sup>9</sup> In China, as in other autocracies, the success of various initiatives depended in no small part on the power and authority of those at the top of government. Nominally, the state was headed by Emperor Guangxu, who, however, was under palace arrest and had been virtually a figurehead since 1898, after a failed attempt to emancipate himself from the guardianship of his adoptive mother (the so-called Hundred Days of Reform).<sup>10</sup> Real power rested in the hands of Cixi, once the concubine of Emperor Xianfeng, who after his death played, first, one of the leading roles, and then the most important

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<sup>7</sup> Wright, 'Introduction', pp. 3–19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21–23.

<sup>9</sup> Ichiko, 'Political and Institutional Reform', p. 412.

<sup>10</sup> The Hundred Days of Reform — a period of intensive top-down modernization of China from June to September 1898, carried out by Emperor Guangxu and his Chinese advisers, notably Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao and Tan Sitong. It ended on 21 September, when Cixi's supporters, ousted from power and threatened with a further loss of influence (and, possibly, of freedom and life), staged a coup d'état, arresting the emperor and revoking his edicts. The Chinese reformers were executed (among others Tan) or fled abroad (Kang and Liang).

role in the state for almost half a century, when her own son, Emperor Tongzhi, and the adopted Guangxu ruled the country in succession. As this was one of the most tragic periods in China's history, historians often blame the empress dowager specifically for a series of failures and the collapse of the state.<sup>11</sup> However, even her harsh critics acknowledge that she exuded strength and character.<sup>12</sup> And, since she stayed in power for so long and in such difficult times, she must have also had a flair for politics. Her commitment to the modernization of China in the early twentieth century should be appreciated, even if this does not change the negative assessment of her rule as a whole. Generally speaking, we may consider that she held a tight rein on the central authorities. In fact, she even tried to strengthen them by co-opting two of China's most powerful governors, Yuan and Zhang in September 1907. Both became members of the Grand Council, and Yuan also headed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Waiwubu),<sup>13</sup> while Zhang was entrusted with the sphere of education. Although some saw this as an attempt to limit Yuan and Zhang's political role by cutting them off from their provincial bases, Cixi appears to have promoted them in order to strengthen Beijing's position vis-à-vis the provinces and the powers, so that reforms could be implemented effectively, and external pressure resisted.<sup>14</sup>

The situation in the Qing Empire was closely watched by the great powers, which had been intensively expanding their influences there since the late nineteenth century. Particularly prominent among these was Great Britain, which had an extensive sphere of influence in China, the most developed diplomatic apparatus, and held the largest share in foreign investments and trade. Coupled with the overall strength of her empire and her close relations with most of the other powers active in the Far East (alliances with Japan and France, an agreement with Russia, good relations with the USA), this gave her the most important voice in

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<sup>11</sup> For a brief overview of how Cixi is assessed in historiography, see the following review article: Agnieszka Łobacz, 'Cesarzowa Cixi w nowym świetle', *Azja-Pacyfik*, 18, 2015, pp. 259–66 (pp. 261–62). In recent years, attempts at rehabilitating the empress dowager have been made by Jung Chang, however her book is controversial. Jung Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China*, New York, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Jakub Polit, *Chiny*, Warsaw, 2004, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Officially, the Waiwubu was headed by Prince Qing, but the actual chief was Yuan, as Prince Qing did not actively participate in the work of the ministry. Minute by Beilby Alston, 4 January 1909, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), London, Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 371/612/254, fol. 372; John Jordan to Edward Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 463.

<sup>14</sup> MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, pp. 180–82. See also Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, p. 120; Ch'ên, *Yuan Shih-k'ai*, p. 97.

Chinese affairs.<sup>15</sup> London wanted to stop the further dismemberment of China and keep it open to economic penetration. It also sought to safeguard the interests of British companies, and prevent anti-foreigner riots — such as had occurred during the Boxer Uprising — and boycotts, which were becoming an effective tool of pressure employed by the Chinese. For this reason, London was anxious for the Beijing government to be in control of the situation in the country, to be able to ensure order and security, and also to meet its international obligations. Further, Whitehall on the whole supported China's top-down modernization, but more in the administrative, social and economic sphere than the political. For the British, order and stability remained paramount.<sup>16</sup>

This was the view expressed by Sir John Jordan, the British Minister in Beijing since 1906. He appreciated the enlightened reforms introduced in administration, education, the judiciary and transport, as well as the efforts undertaken to stamp out pathologies, change the mentality and promote progressive attitudes. Jordan believed that since Britain was so heavily involved in China, the country's modernization was in Britain's interest. However, he cautioned against an excessive tempo of change, fearing that it could destroy the existing social order.

An excessively fast pace of reform was precisely one of the reasons why Jordan was critical or at least sceptical of the process of political and structural change. He believed that China required a longer transitional period because the general population was ill-adapted to the new form of government. Moreover, he feared that the announced adoption of a constitution and convention of parliament would be interpreted as a sign of the court's weakness, which would embolden the opposition, strengthen separatist sentiments in the provinces, and lead to a further erosion of the authority of the central government, thus having the opposite effect to that desired.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, p. 217; Jakub Polit, 'Dyplomacja brytyjska, japońska i amerykańska w Chinach, 1895–1949', *DN*, 42, 2010, 1, pp. 19–40 (pp. 19–28, 38–39); Charles F. Remer, *Foreign Investments in China*, New York, 1968, p. 76; Wojciech Rojek, *Ekspansja mocarstw w Chinach i jej wpływ na rozwój stosunków międzynarodowych w latach 1895–1914*, Cracow, 1990, p. 24; Przemysław Piotr Damski, 'Najbliższe narody': *Stosunki brytyjsko-amerykańskie w dobie prezydentury Theodore'a Roosevelta (1901–1909)*, Warsaw, 2014, pp. 46–47.

<sup>16</sup> Jakub Polit, 'Mocarstwa wobec Rewolucji Xinhai', *Azja-Pacyfik*, 14, 2011, pp. 87–106 (pp. 87–88); Gilbert E. Hubbard, *British Far Eastern Policy*, New York, 1943, pp. 18–30; Edwards, 'Great Britain and China', pp. 351–53, 360.

<sup>17</sup> Jordan to Francis Campbell, 3 September 1908, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 65–68; Jordan to Campbell, 1 October 1908, *ibid.*, fols 71–73; Chan Lau, *Anglo-Chinese Diplomacy*, pp. 10, 22–23; eadem, 'Sir John Jordan and the Affairs of China, 1906–1916, with



Jordan's pessimistic predictions were prescient. As the court introduced more political reforms, criticism of its actions and pressure to speed up the political transformation intensified. This was part of the court's broader conflict with the provinces, which challenged or openly opposed many of its decisions. Jordan wrote about this repeatedly between 1907 and 1908, often in an alarmist tone. In November 1907, he reported — albeit with some exaggeration — that the authorities were unable to enforce their will in even a single province. This, in his view, threatened a complete loss of control by Beijing, the outbreak of an insurgency, and the disintegration of the state, which in itself ran counter to the aims of British diplomacy, and could also put British lives and assets in China at risk, especially as anti-foreigner sentiment was spreading in the provinces.

But even if these threats were somehow avoided, the very growth of dislike for foreigners was damaging to British interests. Jordan warned that the period of unfettered economic exploitation of China was coming to an end, with the most blatant cases of oppression and extortion of concessions slowly becoming a thing of the past, and that the process could be halted only through military force. After all, it was impossible, as the diplomat argued, to build a railway line or a mine when faced with the hostile attitude of the local population. This put those in power in Beijing in a delicate position. According to Jordan, they were 'between the Devil and the deep sea', pressured on the one hand by the powers, which demanded that signed agreements be respected and new concessions granted, and, on the other, by the provinces, which categorically opposed this and threatened to rebel if the government made any concessions to foreigners.

Jordan blamed these developments partly on the government itself, which, in his view, acted ineptly and with insufficient energy. He held unflattering opinions of many of its members; for example, he characterised Prince Qing as a 'weak, vacillating old man', considered Guangxu a 'nonentity' in frail health, while of Cixi — although he appreciated her earlier achievements — he wrote that she was by then aged, ailing and tormented. The deteriorating health of the emperor and empress dowager gave rise to another problem — an heir to the throne had to be found, but none of the candidates rose above mediocrity. All of this meant that, according to Jordan, the future of China was uncertain, and in fact looked rather dark. The minister rejected the suggestion that

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Special Reference to the 1911 Revolution and Yuan Shih-k'ai', unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of London, 1968, pp. 47–49, 60–64.

British soldiers should be withdrawn from the capital province of Zhili (where they had been guarding the safety of foreigners since the Boxer Uprising), believing that it was too early to do so.<sup>18</sup>

One of the few positives that Jordan saw in China's situation at the time was that Zhang and Yuan had joined the Beijing authorities. Indeed, in the eyes of the British diplomat the latter had become the greatest hope of the Middle Kingdom. Jordan, who shared a friendship with Yuan,<sup>19</sup> believed that the general guaranteed both the maintenance of order and the continuation of well-thought-out modernization. Yuan, the driving force behind the creation of the elite Beiyang Army, enjoyed considerable authority and influence among the military, and, since he was also able to reach agreement with the local elites, it was thought that he would be able to calm the situation in the state, temper the aspirations of the provinces, and strengthen the authority of the central government. At the same time, as he showed while serving as governor general of Zhili (1901–07), he was a gifted administrator, who carried out reforms with considerable skill.<sup>20</sup> In Jordan's view, under Yuan, the capital province was actually a model example of modernization. Jordan approved of Yuan's approach: as a conservative progressive, he acted prudently and did not yield to utopian visions or engage in the euphoria of change. He was also distinguished by his common sense, patriotism, and gift for selecting collaborators. For Jordan and the other foreign diplomats, Yuan had another asset that was of fundamental importance: namely, he showed no hostility or resentment towards foreigners and the achievements of the Western world. On the contrary, during the Boxer Uprising, for example, he refused to obey

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<sup>18</sup> Excerpt based on: Jordan to Campbell, 17 October 1907, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 1–3; Jordan to Campbell, 31 October 1907, *ibid.*, fols 4–6; Jordan to Campbell, 14 November 1907, *ibid.*, fols 6–8; Jordan to Campbell, 28 November 1907, *ibid.*, fols 9–11; Jordan to Campbell, 12 December 1907, *ibid.*, fols 12–14; Jordan to William Wilkinson, 12 December 1907, *ibid.*, fol. 14; Jordan to Arthur Moore, 16 December 1907, *ibid.*, fols 15–17; Jordan to Moore, 29 December 1907, *ibid.*, fol. 18; Jordan to Campbell, 9 January 1908, *ibid.*, fols 20–22; Jordan to Campbell, 19 March 1908, *ibid.*, fols 36–37; Jordan to Campbell, 28 May 1908, *ibid.*, fols 46–48; Jordan to Campbell, 12 November 1908, *ibid.*, fols 78–80; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 2. Quotations are from the third, fourth and fifth documents.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen R. MacKinnon notes that from 1901, Yuan had a special relationship with Great Britain, which became even closer when Jordan was appointed minister in Beijing. MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, pp. 217–18.

<sup>20</sup> On Yuan's activities as governor general of Zhili, see Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, pp. 105–20; MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, pp. 37–179; Ch'ên, *Yuan Shih-k'ai*, pp. 76–97; Mateusz Nowikiewicz, 'Yuan Shikai jako reformator armii chińskiej u schyłku panowania dynastii Qing (1895–1908)', in *Kadry decydują o wszystkim: Studia z zakresu biografistyki wojskowej*, ed. Jacek Jędrzyński et al., Wrocław, 2015, pp. 423–48.

an order to attack the 'foreign devils' and protected foreign missionaries. In addition, he was interested in modern inventions, employed foreign advisers, and sent his sons to American universities. And although he often firmly defended the national interest when negotiating with the powers, Western diplomats regarded him as a reasonable interlocutor, especially when compared to other Qing officials, who regularly acted in a dilatory manner. All these traits caused the majority of the leaders of the Western community in China, Sir John first and foremost among them, to view Yuan as the most valuable dignitary of the empire.<sup>21</sup>

The hopes which Jordan had for Yuan started to materialize. Once the general became head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British diplomacy was able to successfully settle a number of issues previously viewed as insurmountable. According to Jordan, Yuan strengthened the position of the central authorities and helped ensure that no major problems occurred in the empire at the time, however even he could not establish full control over the provinces.<sup>22</sup>

In Jordan's opinion, the second pillar of the Qing government besides Yuan was Zhang. In fact, he had even more administrative experience, a far better education, and a higher reputation. Jordan, however, valued him less than Yuan because, compared to the general, who was a man of action and exuded energy, Zhang had a considerable penchant for theorizing and, as a greater traditionalist, advocated more limited modernization. The two Chinese, with their experience, authority and sound understanding of the situation in the state, were able to become a mainstay of the central authorities and act as a calming influence on the often stubborn and impulsive Manchurian dignitaries.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the transferral of Yuan and Zhang to Beijing was a good omen; nevertheless, according to Jordan, the prognosis for China's future was still not good.

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<sup>21</sup> Jordan to Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 463; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, pp. 3–4; Chan Lau, 'Sir John Jordan', pp. 72–73; eadem, *Anglo-Chinese Diplomacy*, p. VII; MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, p. 217; Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, pp. 120–23, 139; Jan Pajor, *Chiny w polityce zagranicznej Stanów Zjednoczonych w latach 1911–1918*, Łódź, 2019, pp. 65–67. Jordan also noticed Yuan's faults, and considered that not only were his achievements not outstanding, but also that his morality left much to be desired.

<sup>22</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 17 October 1907, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 1–3; Jordan to Campbell, 14 November 1907, *ibid.*, fols 6–8; Jordan to Campbell, 12 December 1907, *ibid.*, fols 12–13; Jordan to Alexander Hosie, 4 March 1908, *ibid.*, fols 31–32; Jordan to Campbell, 3 September 1908, *ibid.*, fols 65–68; Jordan to Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 463; Jordan to Campbell, 21 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 94–96; Chan Lau, 'Sir John Jordan', pp. 73–74.

<sup>23</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 21 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 94–96.

Jordan's opinions had a significant impact on British perceptions of the situation in China, and did much to shape London's policy towards the country. He was an experienced diplomat, but more importantly he was fully trusted by Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary. 'I rely very much — wrote Grey to Jordan — on your knowledge of how to deal with the Chinese, and I hope you will write to me freely, or telegraph, whenever you require support, or think we are not taking the right line at home [that is towards China — J.P.]'.<sup>24</sup>

Jordan's knowledge and diplomatic acumen came in handy when major political changes took place in China in the years 1908–09. Guangxu died on 14 November, and Cixi a day later. This puzzling coincidence of events led contemporaries to suspect that the emperor had been assassinated or forced to commit suicide on the orders of Cixi, who, sensing her own end, was unwilling to allow him to outlive her and assume power. Research carried out in the early twenty-first century confirmed that the emperor had been poisoned with arsenic.<sup>25</sup>

Paradoxically, the deaths of Cixi and Guangxu were at once surprising and expected. Although both were clearly experiencing declining health, no one expected them to die at that very time.<sup>26</sup> While Guangxu's death, apart, of course from the necessity of selecting a new emperor, had little significance for the functioning of the state, that of Cixi, who had exercised real power for several decades, was an important event. Its momentousness was emphasised by Jordan, who actually wrote about the end of a chapter in China's history. He drew a positive portrait of the deceased, whom he regarded as a great personality and one of the most important personages of the nineteenth century. The minister devoted more attention to her talents and achievements than to her character flaws and the negative aspects of her rule (for example, he completely omitted her role in the Boxer Uprising, during which she supported the insurgents, ordered the killing of foreigners, and took the decision to declare war on the powers). Jordan defended her against allegations of

<sup>24</sup> Grey to Jordan, 13 August 1909, TNA, FO 800/44/22, fol. 128. See also Minute by Grey, January 1909 [no exact calendar date], TNA, FO 371/612/2002, fol. 413. Grey even stated that Jordan was so important for British diplomacy that if he felt his health was deteriorating, he could take an extended leave of absence.

<sup>25</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 26 November 1908, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 81–83; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 2; Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, p. 366; Jerzy Bayer and Waldemar J. Dziak, *Historia polityczna Chin 1839–2014: Kronika najważniejszych wydarzeń*, Warsaw, 2015, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 12 November 1908, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 78–80; Jordan to Campbell, 26 November 1908, *ibid.*, fols 81–83; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, pp. 2–3.

ordering Guangxu's murder, considering the accusations baseless. He also sought to justify her conduct during the Hundred Days of Reform, and at once portray Guangxu in a bad light. Further, he argued that Cixi and her conservative supporters had actually been forced to intervene when the young and weak emperor, 'acting under the influence of a band of hot-headed visionaries entitling themselves "reformers"', began to rapidly introduce ill-considered changes. After the pacification of the Hundred Days of Reform, Guangxu found himself under palace arrest and, unlike Cixi, no longer played any political role, which fact was emphasised in the symbolic sphere: during audiences for foreign diplomats, it was she who sat on the throne, while he sat below her on a smaller seat.<sup>27</sup>

In the longer term, the death of the empress dowager, who had cemented the apparatus of power over the past several decades, may have weakened the position of those ruling in Beijing and exacerbated the state's difficulties.<sup>28</sup> Serious political unrest could also have occurred immediately, due to the almost simultaneous deaths of Guangxu and Cixi. British diplomacy feared that this potentially pivotal moment would be exploited by one of the anti-dynastic associations to spark another uprising, or that there would develop a debilitating internal power struggle between the Manchurian and Chinese factions. But the worst-case scenario did not materialize. For although there were rumours of factional infighting and an attempted palace coup, they turned out to be untrue, and the enthronement of Puyi proceeded without a hitch.<sup>29</sup> A military revolt broke out only in one province, Anhui, and was quickly put down. Despite the animosity and internal friction, the political elites behaved maturely and remained united, fearing social unrest. Jordan was encouraged by this attitude, but at the same time surprised that the deaths of Guangxu and Cixi provoked little reaction from their subjects. In Beijing, at least, life went on completely normally, and there were few signs of mourning or compassion for the court.<sup>30</sup>

As the political transformation had been fairly peaceful, and the leading imperial dignitaries supported the new authorities, Jordan initially believed that China's prospects looked marginally better than

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<sup>27</sup> General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, pp. 1–2.

<sup>28</sup> Wright, 'Introduction', p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> The only 'disturbances' during the ceremony were the screams of Puyi, who was just under three years old. Pu Yi, *The Last Manchu: The Autobiography of Henry Pu Yi, Last Emperor of China*, ed. Paul Kramer, transl. Kuo Ying Paul Tsai, New York, 1987, pp. 4–5.

<sup>30</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 26 November 1908, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 81–83; Memorandum by Alston, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3666, fol. 438; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 3.

before. Although the long-lasting regency had, in his view, a number of disadvantages and was not the most fortunate solution, he felt that it was unavoidable in the circumstances of the times. He was moderately optimistic that it was to be held by Prince Chun, whom the minister portrayed in a rather positive light. The new regent seemed sensible and reasonable, and enjoyed widespread support. Another of his strengths was his relative familiarity with the world, at least by Chinese standards, and his experience of dealing with foreigners, which gave hope that he would be more progressive and open to foreign ideas than previous Chinese rulers, living in seclusion in the Forbidden City.<sup>31</sup> At the very beginning of his reign, Prince Chun reaffirmed his pro-reform stance by announcing his intention to continue efforts aimed at introducing a constitutional monarchy. Jordan saw this — as well as plans to curb the overwhelming influence at court of the reactionary eunuch clique — as a positive sign. The diplomat even stated that under its new leadership, China ‘was entering an era of enlightened reform’. By no means an uncritical supporter of the regent, he also recognized his shortcomings — most notably the lack of a strong personality, an average intellectual potential, and a susceptibility to the influence of others. Overall, however, Jordan’s initial assessment was moderately favourable.<sup>32</sup> This changed the following year, and one of the reasons for his less favourable evaluation was the decision to dismiss Yuan.

As had been the case with the deaths of Guangxu and Cixi, Yuan’s resignation was at once surprising and anticipated. Yuan, who in 1898 had failed — despite assurances — to support the emperor, and, in an act some saw as a betrayal, had gone over to the side of the empress dowager, thus contributing to the suppression of the Hundred Days of Reform, knew that he would be in a dangerous position after the death of his by then aged protectress. If real power had then been regained by Guangxu, the general would most likely have been executed out of

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<sup>31</sup> In 1901, Zaifeng was sent to Germany on an expiatory mission after the Boxer Uprising. In the following years, he took part in various events organized at court with the participation of foreign diplomats. He also headed the special commission which in 1906 recommended the introduction of a constitutional monarchy in China. General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 3; Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, p. 357.

<sup>32</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 26 November 1908, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 81–83; Jordan to Campbell, 24 December 1908, *ibid.*, fols 87–88; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, pp. 3–4; Annual Report on China for the year 1909, *ibid.*, pp. 1–2. The quotation is from the third document. At first, the majority of foreigners and Chinese also held a good opinion of the regent. Edward J. M. Rhoads, *Manchus and Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861–1928*, Seattle, WA, and London, 2000, pp. 132–33.

revenge. We may therefore conclude that, from his perspective, the ultimate course of events in November 1908 was rather successful, or that at least he avoided the worst-case scenario. However, his problems did not end there. It was also important who would become the new emperor, as the assumption of the Dragon Throne by a person with close ties to the previous ruler could have posed an equally deadly threat. Thus, Yuan tried unsuccessfully to persuade Cixi to designate other successors, who in Yuan's view would be more favourably inclined to him. However, to the surprise of many — including Yuan — the empress dowager chose Puyi. Her decision was not directed against Yuan, and was primarily intended to ensure that she retained her dominant position, but when Cixi died shortly thereafter, Yuan found himself in a difficult position.<sup>33</sup> This was because it was suspected that the regent would want to avenge his dead brother. Yuan therefore awaited the development of events with deep anxiety. Initially, it may have seemed that he would remain in favour, since he was entrusted with organising the funeral ceremonies of Guangxu and Cixi, for which he was promoted and given another honourable title. Relations between him and the regent were apparently harmonious, and their last meeting, held just a few hours before his deposal, reportedly passed off in a friendly atmosphere.<sup>34</sup> In this context, it is understandable that the decision to remove Yuan from office took a number of people by surprise.

But on the other hand, it can hardly be called completely unexpected, as there were many factors working against Yuan and signs that he might meet an unfavourable fate. On his deathbed Guangxu apparently asked his brother for Yuan's swift execution.<sup>35</sup> Soon afterwards, rumours emerged that the regent intended to fulfil this request. The regent was also called upon to punish Yuan in an exemplary manner by certain Manchurian princes and the exiled Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, who accused the general not only of treason, but also of Guangxu's murder.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> One of the most important reasons for the selection of Puyi as emperor was Cixi's belief that his father, Prince Chun, who had a reputation for being indecisive, submissive and purblind, would obey her will as regent. Reportedly, Prince Chun did not want his son to become emperor and himself regent, and tried to dissuade Cixi. Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, pp. 366–67; Rhoads, *Manchus and Han*, pp. 131–32; Jun Zhang, 'Spider Manchu: Duanfang as Networker and Spindoctor of the Late Qing New Policies, 1901–1911', unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of California, 2008, pp. 227–28.

<sup>34</sup> General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 4; MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, p. 206.

<sup>35</sup> Polit, *Chiny*, p. 52; Ch'ên, *Yuan Shih-k'ai*, p. 98.

<sup>36</sup> Cui, 'Zaifeng's Dismissal of Yuan Shikai', pp. 198–99. Interestingly, Kang also asked US President Theodore Roosevelt twice to intervene against Yuan.

Another worrying sign were the formal charges brought against Yuan by the censors controlling the officials.<sup>37</sup> These actions were probably inspired by the Manchurian clique, which included, among others, the regent's two younger brothers and the head of the Ministry of War, Tieliang, all of whom were fierce opponents of Yuan and sought to limit his position in the army and politics. As they were the closest associates of the regent, who was susceptible to suggestions, they played an increasingly important role at court. Personal rivalries also formed part of the broader context of the power struggle between the Manchurians and the Han Chinese, which intensified towards the end of Qing rule. While after the Boxer Uprising Cixi tried to alleviate tensions and lifted some of the prohibitions that were discriminatory to the Han (for example, the ban on mixed marriages), the years of Prince Chun's regency saw a further strengthening of Manchurian domination, which of course gave rise to discontent among the Han, whose most important imperial dignitaries were Zhang and Yuan himself.<sup>38</sup> Further, the latter's position as the person responsible for foreign policy was shaken in the late autumn of 1908 by an ultimately fruitless attempt to strengthen relations with the United States and involve it in cooperation against Japan in Manchuria. Not only was the goal not achieved, but at the very same time, on 30 November, Washington and Tokyo arranged their relations by signing the Root–Takahira Agreement,<sup>39</sup> which Japanese diplomats in Beijing tried to portray as a declaration of American disinterest in the situation in Manchuria. At the same time, they conspired against Yuan, trying to instigate his removal, for the Japanese viewed him unfavourably, if not with open hostility.<sup>40</sup>

Jordan wrote about Yuan's precarious position several times. As early as December 1907, he cited the predictions of an influential Chinese, who prophesied Yuan's downfall, the rise to power of extreme reactionaries, and China becoming steeped in a crisis similar to the Boxer Uprising. The minister found this vision unlikely, but was probably more disbelieving of its second part than of Yuan's dismissal. He later mentioned

<sup>37</sup> Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, pp. 125, 130; MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, pp. 206–07.

<sup>38</sup> Ichiko, 'Political and Institutional Reform', pp. 395–96, 411; Rhoads, *Manchus and Han*, pp. 70–172.

<sup>39</sup> The agreement between the United States and Japan, concluded on 30 November 1908 by Secretary of State Elihu Root and the Japanese Ambassador to Washington, Takahira Kogorō, regarding the maintenance of the *status quo* in the Pacific region and recognition of the signatories' mutual possessions there, which presumably also included Japan's special position in Manchuria.

<sup>40</sup> Hunt, *Frontier Defense*, pp. 173–77; MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, p. 207; Cui, 'Zaifeng's Dismissal of Yuan Shikai', pp. 202–05, 209–10. On the reasons for Japan's attitude towards Yuan, see Polit, 'Mocarstwa', p. 96.



the uncertainty of the situation and concerns about the general's future several more times. Towards the end of 1908, after the regency had already been established, he wrote that the new authorities were functioning well, but that Yuan had increasingly less influence, and seemed to be in a state of physical and mental decline, which could be blamed on his wife and numerous concubines.<sup>41</sup> The spectre of Yuan's deterioration or political degradation troubled Jordan, who still pinned his highest hopes for China's development on the general.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the various signals, Yuan's deposition took both the Chinese, including himself, and foreigners by surprise. On 2 January 1909, the regent ordered Yuan to step down from all posts and proceed to his native province of Henan in order to receive treatment for his allegedly ailing leg. Fearing for his life, Yuan fled the following day by train to Tianjin, where he took refuge in an extraterritorial British concession. Having received guarantees of safety through the intercession of other prominent courtiers (among them Prince Qing and Zhang), he returned to the capital the same day. On 5 January, after completing formalities, he left for Henan with his family. He was forced to remain on convalescent leave until the autumn of 1911, when the dynasty, trying unsuccessfully to suppress the revolution, summoned him back to Beijing and offered him the position of prime minister.<sup>43</sup>

News of the dismissal came as a nearly complete surprise to British diplomacy, and it was even speculated whether the first, unofficial reports were not false.<sup>44</sup> However, the Foreign Office immediately realized the significance and negative consequences of the regent's decision, and this led to it taking certain actions in support of Yuan. What is more, the British seriously considered giving him asylum in Hong Kong, to where he reportedly intended to flee from Tianjin for fear of reprisals.<sup>45</sup> The provision

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<sup>41</sup> Yuan had a wife and nine concubines, and sired thirty-two children. Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, p. 139.

<sup>42</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 31 October 1907, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 4–6; Jordan to Moore, 16 December 1907, *ibid.*, fols 15–17; Jordan to Campbell, 6 February 1908, *ibid.*, fols 26–27; Jordan to Campbell, 12 November 1908, *ibid.*, fols 78–80; Jordan to Campbell, 24 December 1908, *ibid.*, fols 87–88; Jordan to Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 463.

<sup>43</sup> Imperial Decree, 2 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 464; Jordan to Grey, 3 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/255, fol. 376; Jordan to Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 463; Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, pp. 132–33, 141.

<sup>44</sup> Minutes by Walter Stewart, Alston and Campbell, 2 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/220, fol. 362; Jordan to Campbell, 7 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 90–91.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Hillier to Jordan, 3 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 464; Jordan to Grey, 3 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/255, fol. 376; Minute by Alston, 4 January 1909, *ibid.*, fol. 375.

of shelter turned out to be unnecessary, however, because Yuan, having obtained guarantees of security through his own connections, abandoned the plan of escape, and information reached London from various sources that his life was not in danger.<sup>46</sup>

In the circumstances, Great Britain decided to undertake a diplomatic initiative, and became the *spiritus movens* of intervention in favour of Yuan. Already on 2 January, Jordan — along with his counterparts from the USA (William Rockhill) and Germany (Count Arthur von Rex) — proposed that the diplomats in Beijing submit a note to the regent warning that the deposal of Yuan, ‘universally considered the guarantee of his country’s political stability’ and of the progress of the empire, would create a very bad impression abroad and negatively affect China’s relations with other countries.<sup>47</sup>

The initiative gained the approval of the Foreign Office, which shared Jordan’s positive opinion of Yuan as China’s most influential, talented and enlightened dignitary.<sup>48</sup> However, much thought was given as to whether the proposed note could constitute interference in China’s internal affairs. Sir Francis Campbell, the Assistant Under-Secretary of State, opined that it probably should have been considered as such, but, as he stated with disarming frankness, Great Britain sometimes meddled in Chinese affairs and this was difficult to avoid.<sup>49</sup> A different view was held by Beilby Alston, the head of the Far Eastern Division, who felt that there could be no question of interference since the powers did not intend to ask for Yuan’s reinstatement, but merely wanted to express their concern, as they had often done in the past when they feared unrest.<sup>50</sup> Alston’s argument was not entirely accurate. Yes, neither the original nor the final version of the note demanded that Yuan’s dismissal be rescinded, but one would nevertheless have the impression that such was precisely the intention of the powers. This was borne out by the comment of Walter Stewart, a clerk in the Far Eastern Department, who, after reading Jordan’s first telegram, which suggested the issuance of a note, concluded that despite the lack of

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<sup>46</sup> Claude MacDonald to Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/734, fol. 381; MacDonald to Grey, 23 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6865, fols 451–52; Jordan to Grey, 23 February 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/7345, fol. 485.

<sup>47</sup> Jordan to Grey, 2 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/251, fol. 366; Jordan to Grey, 3 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/253, fol. 369. The quotation is from the former document.

<sup>48</sup> Minute by Stewart, 2 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/220, fol. 362; Memorandum by Alston, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3666, fol. 438.

<sup>49</sup> Minute by Campbell, 4 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/253, fol. 368.

<sup>50</sup> Minute by Alston, 4 January 1909, *ibid.*; Memorandum by Alston, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3666, fol. 438.

any tangible hope of success, it was worth trying to get Yuan reinstalled.<sup>51</sup> Other Foreign Office staff wrote of a 'protest', a 'joint intervention at Beijing in favour of Yuan', or of an 'action for the reinstatement of Yuan'.<sup>52</sup> It is very much possible that such an effect was also secretly hoped for by Jordan when he insisted on making a *démarche* as soon as possible before Yuan left the capital.<sup>53</sup>

Despite these doubts, on 4 January Grey expressed his consent for Jordan to join the diplomatic initiative.<sup>54</sup> The minister wanted it to be implemented immediately, but negotiations dragged out due to the stance of the powers. His predictions that the majority of the countries concerned would support the initiative did not come true.<sup>55</sup> Japan adopted an ambiguous position from the outset. While the head of imperial diplomacy, Count Komura Jutarō, assured the British Ambassador in Tokyo, Sir Claude MacDonald, of his readiness to provide approval, the Japanese Minister in Beijing, Ijūin Hikokichi, did not — according to Jordan — show the slightest willingness to cooperate, and even tried to dissuade the authors of the note from the idea of sending it. Japan, long hostile to Yuan and, as was suspected, secretly happy with his downfall, was reluctant to take action in his defence. Ultimately, therefore, it did not join the initiative, arguing that it would be an interference in China's internal affairs, and perhaps even a *sui generis* threat.<sup>56</sup> The tsarist government, which, like Tokyo, viewed Yuan as an enemy, also responded in the negative. The withdrawal of Japan and Russia caused Germany and France, who had made their consent conditional on the unanimity of all interested powers, to drop out.<sup>57</sup> In this situation, Great Britain had to decide whether to

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<sup>51</sup> Minute by Stewart, 4 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/251, fol. 365.

<sup>52</sup> Minute by Charles Sebastian Somers Cocks, 11 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1188, fol. 392; Minute by Charles Hardinge, 19 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3016, fol. 424; Minute by Cocks, January 1909 [no exact calendar date], TNA, FO 371/612/3056, fol. 425. Campbell, on the other hand, claimed that there were no plans to request Yuan's return to power. Minute by Campbell, 9 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1138, fol. 386.

<sup>53</sup> Jordan to Grey, 3 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/253, fol. 369; Chan Lau, 'Sir John Jordan', p. 77. Yuan's possible reinstatement was hoped for by Rockhill. Cui, 'Zaifeng's Dismissal of Yuan Shikai', p. 200.

<sup>54</sup> Grey to Jordan, 4 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/253, fol. 370.

<sup>55</sup> Jordan to Grey, 2 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/251, fol. 366.

<sup>56</sup> MacDonald to Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/734, fol. 381; Jordan to Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 463; Jordan to Grey, 9 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1138, fol. 387; MacDonald to Grey, 10 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1188, fol. 393; Jordan to MacDonald, 19 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 93–94; MacDonald to Grey, 23 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6865, fols 451–52.

<sup>57</sup> Jordan to Grey, 16 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/8719, fol. 487. Germany did

abandon the idea of the note, implement it on its own, or perhaps put it into effect jointly with the United States. The third option was supported by Jordan and Rockhill, and was also favoured by Washington, although the latter made it clear from the outset that due to the small scale of American interests in China, it did not intend to play a leadership role.<sup>58</sup> London decided to take the lead and cooperate with the US. Campbell suggested approaching allied France, but Grey was against this, fearing that other states might reject the proposal and inform Beijing in order to gain some benefits.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, on 15 January 1909, Jordan and Rockhill submitted notes during a meeting at the Waiwubu with Prince Qing and his deputy, Liang Dunyan. The documents expressed London and Washington's concern as to the consequences of Yuan's deposition, namely, the risk of cessation of reforms and a change in China's foreign policy. Prince Qing assured the ministers that Yuan's deposal, which he himself regretted, would not mark a departure from the course hitherto pursued in domestic and foreign policy. The prince — as Liang later revealed to Jordan — intended to hand over the notes to the regent the following day, and thought they would have a 'salutary effect'.<sup>60</sup>

In order to assess the effects of the initiative, it is first necessary to describe the objectives that British diplomacy hoped it would help achieve. When on 2 January Jordan proposed the sending of a note, he probably reckoned that it would help protect Yuan, whose life was feared for at the time, from further repressions. Perhaps Sir John, as has already been mentioned, hoped that Yuan would be reinstated. Whereas there is no doubt that he wanted to express his dissatisfaction and warn the regent against actions that could jeopardise the stability of the state and those reforms which had already been implemented. Jordan desired to cool the regent's eagerness and thus ensure that he would not radically alter the existing order of things, carry out a purge (for example,

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not actually join the initiative, as it did not want to alienate Beijing, which at the time was considering the choice of an arms supplier for its army and eventually decided on the German Krupp concern. Petersson, 'Gentlemanly', pp. 111, 120.

<sup>58</sup> This contradicts Cui Zhihai's view that it was the US that reacted most strongly to Yuan's dismissal and played the most important role in the sending of the note. Cui, 'Zaifeng's Dismissal of Yuan Shikai', pp. 200–02.

<sup>59</sup> Jordan to Grey, 9 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1138, fol. 387; Minutes by Cocks, Campbell and Grey, 9 January 1909, *ibid.*, fol. 386; James Bryce to Grey, 10 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1187, fol. 391; Grey to Bryce, 11 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1204, fol. 397; Minutes by Cocks, Campbell and Grey, 11 January 1909, *ibid.*, fol. 395.

<sup>60</sup> Jordan to Grey, 16 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/8719, fol. 487.

by dismissing or persecuting Yuan's associates), rule autocratically, or allow himself to be overly influenced by the Manchurian faction that was suspected to have been behind Yuan's downfall. At the Foreign Office it was anticipated that the note could have yet another benefit – gaining Yuan's gratitude. Had he been returned to power, he would have surely remembered that Britain had rallied behind him.<sup>61</sup>

It seems that with such stated objectives, the *démarche* produced moderately positive results. However, it should be noted straight away that the opinions of some historians, who maintain that London's intervention saved Yuan from death, are exaggerated.<sup>62</sup> They find no confirmation in sources, and are also contradicted by the chronology of events. When Jordan and Rockhill finally submitted their notes on 15 August, Yuan had been away from the capital for ten days and by that time his life was unlikely to have been in danger. It would have been different if the notes had been presented on, for example, 3 January, when Yuan was in hiding in Tianjin and seriously feared for his safety; then, they could have well impacted his potential rescue. This does not mean, however, that they were irrelevant. On the contrary, they clearly signalled the disquiet and expectations of perhaps the two mightiest powers of the time. China, with its limited sovereignty, had to consider all sorts of 'advice', 'suggestions' and instructions from foreign diplomats. External pressure was an additional factor in the regent's decision not to take further steps against Yuan.<sup>63</sup> The regent's assurances that he intended to maintain particularly friendly relations with Great Britain and the United States were interpreted by Jordan as a positive response to the US-British initiative.<sup>64</sup> This also provided an argument for the imperial dignitaries who opposed Yuan's deposition. During his meeting with Jordan and Rockhill, Prince Qing did not hide his satisfaction, believing that the note would have a calming effect on the regent.<sup>65</sup> Both British and American diplomats were convinced that

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<sup>61</sup> Minute by Stewart, 4 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/251, fol. 365; Jordan to Campbell, 21 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 94–96; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, pp. 207–08, 218; Polit, 'Mocarstwa', pp. 95–96. Presently, however, Jakub Polit is of a different opinion. Idem, 'Pożegnanie z łotrem? Yuan Shikai w świetle nowych badań', *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historyczne*, 147, 2020, 3, pp. 505–27 (pp. 517–18).

<sup>63</sup> Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, p. 134; Cui, 'Zaifeng's Dismissal of Yuan Shikai', pp. 201–02, 209–10. It is difficult to agree with Cui Zhihai's view that American intervention was more important than British, given that at the time London enjoyed a stronger position in China than Washington. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>64</sup> Jordan to Grey, 23 February 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/7345, fol. 485.

<sup>65</sup> Jordan to Grey, 15 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/2002, fol. 414; Jordan to Grey,

it would have a positive effect.<sup>66</sup> Over time, other diplomats in Beijing came to a similar conclusion, recognizing that, had it not been for the intervention, ‘things might have proceeded further than they have done’, which could be interpreted as the prevention of sudden political change or indeed the persecution of Yuan’s associates and protégés, and perhaps of Yuan himself.<sup>67</sup> In addition to expressing broad support for Yuan and widespread concern over the situation following his dismissal, restraining the regent and receiving from Beijing assurances of China’s readiness to continue its existing domestic and foreign policies, Grey saw two more positives from sending the note: strengthening cooperation with the US and gaining Yuan’s gratitude.<sup>68</sup>

As well as helping Yuan, British diplomacy tried to find out the reasons for his dismissal. The Foreign Office agreed with Jordan’s opinion that the dismissal had been brought about by palace intrigues and pressure exerted on the regent by the Manchurian faction.<sup>69</sup> The Chinese legation in London, whose secretary shared his superior’s thoughts with Alston, took a similar view.<sup>70</sup> Alston, on the other hand, initially suspected that Yuan’s

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16 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/8719, fol. 487. Jordan had never seen Prince Qing more satisfied — and he had known him for over twenty years. Jordan to Campbell, 21 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 94–96.

<sup>66</sup> Jordan to Grey, 15 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/2002, fol. 414; Report by William Rockhill, 15 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3621, fol. 432; Minutes by Alston, Campbell and Grey, 16 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/2002, fol. 413; Grey to Jordan, 18 January 1909, *ibid.*, fol. 415; Minute by Cocks, January 1909 [no exact calendar date], TNA, FO 371/612/3056, fol. 425; Memorandum by Alston, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3666, fol. 438; Minute by Robert Collier, January 1909 [no exact calendar date], TNA, FO 371/612/3621, fol. 431. Secretary of State Root was most pleased with the note. He initially wanted to protest more vehemently against the regent’s decision, but was dissuaded from doing so by Yuan’s close collaborator, Tang Shaoyi, who happened to be in Washington at the time on a diplomatic mission. Varg, *Open Door Diplomat*, p. 80; Hunt, *Frontier Defense*, pp. 177–78.

<sup>67</sup> Jordan to Grey, 4 February 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/10652, fol. 508.

<sup>68</sup> Minute by Grey, January 1909 [no exact calendar date], TNA, FO 371/612/2002, fol. 413. See also Minute by Cocks, January 1909 [no exact calendar date], TNA, FO 371/612/3056, fol. 425. We may assume that the idea of sending a note also cemented Grey’s confidence in Jordan. The foreign secretary had his doubts at first, but trusted the intuition of his minister, which, as he himself said, proved to be the right decision, as the note had an ‘excellent effect’.

<sup>69</sup> Jordan to Grey, 2 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/251, fol. 366; Minute by Cocks, January 1909 [no exact calendar date], TNA, FO 371/612/127, fol. 279; Jordan to Campbell, 7 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 90–91; Jordan to Grey, 16 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/8719, fol. 487; Memorandum by Alston, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3666, fol. 438; Minute by Collier, February 1909 [no exact calendar date], TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 462.

<sup>70</sup> Note by Alston, 5 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/850, fols 384–85.

removal may have been more a decision of the regent himself, fearful of the general's overly powerful position.<sup>71</sup> Japan presented the dismissal similarly, although stressing that it was the regent's personal revenge for 1898.<sup>72</sup> Campbell at first found this explanation plausible, but later became sceptical.<sup>73</sup> It was, however, embraced by Jordan, who started to place greater emphasis on the role of the regent, taking revenge — perhaps also at the instigation of his own mother and Tieliang's wife — for the events that had occurred over a decade earlier.<sup>74</sup>

At the same time, London received signals from various sources that Yuan's downfall had been contributed to by Japan, on account of past animosities, a fear of China excessively strengthening its position, and the anti-Japanese policies pursued by the general's protégés in Manchuria.<sup>75</sup> Komura categorically denied these accusations, with assurances that not only was Japan not involved in any behind-the-scenes machinations against Yuan, but, on the contrary, that it was trying to ease tensions within the Qing government. Once the surprise dismissal had taken place, the minister instructed Ijūin to obtain guarantees from Beijing that Yuan would be safe and that his collaborators would not lose their posts. In general, British diplomacy did not give credence to the accusations made against Japan, believing that while Tokyo rejoiced in Yuan's downfall, it had not contributed to it. Komura's assurances were most trusted by MacDonald and Campbell. Jordan thought the same, although he was not as convinced as his colleagues because of Ijūin's behaviour regarding the note and the various charges brought against Japan by the American and British consuls. His doubts were probably heightened by the fact that the Japanese legation in Beijing maintained close contacts with the leader of the Manchurian faction, Tieliang, who was widely regarded — rightly

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<sup>71</sup> Minute by Alston, 2 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/220, fol. 362.

<sup>72</sup> MacDonald to Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/734, fol. 381; MacDonald to Grey, 23 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6865, fols 451–52.

<sup>73</sup> Minute by Campbell, 7 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/734, fol. 380; Minute by Campbell, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3056, fol. 425.

<sup>74</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 7 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 90–91; Jordan to Campbell, 21 January 1909, *ibid.*, fols 94–96; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 4. Shan, who cites eight possible reasons for Yuan's deposal in his book, considers the regent's desire to avenge 1898 as the most likely. Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, pp. 128–32, 141.

<sup>75</sup> Edward Guy Hillier to Charles Addis, 5 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3056, fol. 426; Bryce to Grey, 10 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1187, fol. 391; Jordan to Grey, 11 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1369, fol. 402; Memorandum by Alston, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3666, fol. 438; Jordan to Grey, 4 February 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/10652, fol. 508.

so, in Jordan's view — as the main instigator of Yuan's removal from power.<sup>76</sup>

An identification of the reasons for the dismissal would allow a better assessment of its consequences. If Japan had been behind Yuan's removal, this would amount to an increase in its influence in China. A similar conclusion could be drawn with regard to the Manchurian faction. If, on the other hand, the dismissal had been a personal decision of the regent, it revealed a great deal about him. The news of the end of Yuan's political career worried Great Britain. The country's diplomats were seriously concerned about both China's future and British interests. The removal of China's most influential politician, who for the past ten years had been, in Alston and Jordan's view, the guarantor of 'order, progress, and stability of government', heralded a series of problems.<sup>77</sup> Above all, it significantly weakened the Beijing government, already held in low esteem and having considerable difficulty with maintaining control over the provinces. In the new situation, as Jordan wrote repeatedly in 1909, their impotence became even more acute, and the provinces' resistance fiercer still. This threatened a paralysis of the state apparatus, destabilization, and the collapse of the political order.<sup>78</sup>

That China might fall into crisis appeared all the more likely to British diplomats as they became increasingly critical of how the regent exercised power. In their view, Yuan's removal revealed Zaifeng's true nature — that of a vindictive and stubborn man who put personal grudges above the good of the state and disregarded foreign opinion.<sup>79</sup> Jordan hoped that the re-

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<sup>76</sup> Jordan to Grey, 11 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1369, fol. 402; MacDonald to Grey, 14 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/1966, fol. 408; Jordan to Grey, 16 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/8719, fol. 487; Jordan to Campbell, 21 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 94–96; MacDonald to Grey, 23 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6865, fols 451–52; Grey to MacDonald, 28 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/2635, fol. 419; Jordan to Grey, 4 February 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/10652, fol. 508; Minute by Campbell, 23 February 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 462; Minute no. 1 (author not identified), 20 March 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/10652, fol. 505; Chan Lau, 'Sir John Jordan', pp. 79–80.

<sup>77</sup> Memorandum by Alston, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3666, fol. 438; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 3. The quotation is from the latter document.

<sup>78</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 21 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 94–96; Jordan to Campbell, 20 April 1909, *ibid.*, fol. 111; Jordan to Campbell, 22 June 1909, *ibid.*, fols 121–22; Jordan to Grey, 28 June 1909, *ibid.*, fols 122–23; Jordan to Grey, 7 October 1909, TNA, FO 350/6, fols 13–15.

<sup>79</sup> Jordan to Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 463; Jordan to Campbell, 7 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 90–91; Memorandum by Alston, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3666, fol. 438; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, pp. 3–4.



gent would over time gain leadership qualities, but this did not happen. He turned out to be devoid of strength of character, lethargic and indecisive, and — finally — headstrong and insufficiently knowledgeable. His overall weakness and irresolution must have been glaring if, as Jordan noted with amazement, even officials, hitherto scrupulously concealing the secrets of the court, were now allowing themselves to make critical comments, making it clear that the regent was incapable of taking any decision. The ruler's lack of charisma and authority — qualities so acutely important in Eastern monarchies — emboldened the provinces to increase their resistance and defy Beijing's decisions with even greater vigour. It was not only his vapid personality, however, but also his poor choice of advisers that led Jordan to blame the regent for the weakness of the central government as a whole. Indeed, the regent surrounded himself with people who were as inexperienced and uninspiring as he, distrusting politicians with greater seniority and their own opinions. Besides, the imperial dignitaries who had hitherto been held in esteem preferred not to get involved, and, mindful of what had happened to Yuan, chose to remain in the background.<sup>80</sup>

Instead, influence was gained by the regent's two young and inexperienced brothers, Zaixun and Zaitao, the Finance Minister, Zaize, and Tieliang, who together made up the core of the Manchurian faction. This dovetailed with the broader activities of the regent, who strove to strengthen the Manchurians at the expense of the Han Chinese. Having abandoned the recently introduced policy of equating the rights of the two nations and mitigating conflicts between them, he restored the historical privileges of his kinsmen and appointed them to senior positions in the administration and military.<sup>81</sup> The dismissal of Yuan, and thereafter some of his Chinese protégés, among whom there were many worthy progressives, allowed the regent to achieve this goal as well.<sup>82</sup>

The regent's actions were viewed with concern by Great Britain, for it feared a rise in discontent among the Qing's Chinese subjects and an

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<sup>80</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 6 May 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 113–15; Jordan to Campbell, 22 June 1909, *ibid.*, fols 121–22; Jordan to Grey, 28 June 1909, *ibid.*, fols 122–23; Jordan to Grey, 7 October 1909, TNA, FO 350/6, fols 13–15; Annual Report on China for the year 1909, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> Admittedly, the tendency to appoint more Manchurians to high positions had already become apparent towards the end of Cixi's reign, however it increased significantly during the regency of Zaifeng, who also favoured members of his own family, and, unlike Cixi, did not attempt to eliminate the differences between the two nations. Rhoads, *Manchus and Han*, pp. 119–20, 170–72.

<sup>82</sup> General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 4; Annual Report on China for the year 1909, *ibid.*, pp. 2, 5; MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, pp. 208–10; Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, p. 135.

exacerbation of the tense relations between Beijing and the provinces. It also held an unfavourable view of the increased influence of the reactionary, anti-Chinese and anti-foreigner Manchurian faction, as in addition to the most obvious complications this could have led to the abandonment or curtailment of reforms. Significantly, such a prospect was disadvantageous to London in and of itself, and could have been yet another factor stirring up public discontent. British diplomats further suspected that the rise to prominence of Tieliang *et consortes*, who remained in close contact with Japan, would make it easier for Japan, and perhaps also Russia, to obtain new privileges and concessions in Manchuria. Among the repercussions of Yuan's removal, they additionally cited the considerable weakening of the Waiwubu, which made it difficult for them to settle diplomatic matters.<sup>83</sup>

Yuan's removal may also have had a negative impact on British interests in China. Jordan predicted that following the general's ousting negotiations over the succession to Sir Robert Hart, Inspector-General of China's Imperial Maritime Custom Service, would become complicated, while the reforms and undertakings which Britain considered important and in which it was to participate would be abandoned or postponed indefinitely. Above all, however, the central authorities had lost 'the really one strong man in the Central Government whose orders commanded respect in the provinces', thereby guaranteeing the maintenance of order and peace necessary for the development of British trade. Yuan's dismissal was 'a severe blow' to Great Britain also because it had built up a good relationship with the general over the years, counting on his favour when bidding for business and military contracts. Indeed, the British even feared that these friendly relations may have become a liability, especially as Yuan's main rival, Tieliang, who was negatively disposed to Great Britain, had consolidated his position at court.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> W. Hillier to Jordan, 3 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 464; Jordan to Grey, 3 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/255, fol. 376; Minute by Alston, 4 January 1909, *ibid.*, fol. 375; Jordan to Grey, 6 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6900, fol. 463; Jordan to Campbell, 7 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 90–91; Jordan to Grey, 16 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/8719, fol. 487; Jordan to MacDonald, 19 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 93–94; Memorandum by Alston, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3666, fol. 438; Robert Willis to Jordan, 2 February 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/10652, fols 508–09; General Report on China for the year 1908, TNA, FO 405/425, p. 4; Jordan to Campbell, 22 June 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 121–22.

<sup>84</sup> Jordan to Campbell, 7 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 90–91; Jordan to Cecil Clementi Smith, 9 January 1909, *ibid.*, fols 91–92; Jordan to Grey, 16 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/8719, fol. 487; Jordan to MacDonald, 19 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 93–94. The quotations are from the third and fourth documents.

British anxiety intensified when Zhang died in October 1909, and, shortly afterwards, the regent dismissed another progressive dignitary highly regarded by foreign diplomats — Duanfang, the Manchurian governor general of Zhili.<sup>85</sup> In particular, however, it was the death of Zhang, one of the most prominent politicians of his generation, that — in Jordan's view — represented an irretrievable loss for China. Zhang had served his homeland with dedication for several decades, earning the respect of his compatriots and foreigners alike. He stood out for his thorough, classical education and integrity, the latter especially noticeable against the backdrop of numerous corrupt imperial officials. Although he received an old-style education, he became a leading advocate for its reform. British diplomats appreciated his sterling reputation, sincere desire to modernize, and his wise political choices — during the Boxer Uprising, he did not join the insurgents, instead reaching an understanding with the powers. And even though some in the Foreign Office complained about his annoying impracticality and lack of business talent, positive opinions were on the whole prevalent. According to Jordan, Zhang was the most important pillar of the Qing authorities after Yuan.<sup>86</sup>

After Zhang's death, Jordan correctly predicted that the provinces would soon begin to oppose Beijing's decisions with still greater firmness, making it supremely difficult for the powers to conclude and implement various agreements — in particular those concerning the financing and construction of railways.<sup>87</sup> His concerns about the position of the Beijing government, which had been further weakened, also proved justified. In November, Jordan informed Campbell that, in the unanimous opinion of all commentators, the government was weaker than ever before, and actually only held on because there was no one better on the horizon to replace it. In retrospect, Jordan concluded that with Cixi's death, the Qing had lost all strength, and with Yuan and Zhang no longer

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<sup>85</sup> Duanfang was dismissed for a trivial reason; namely, he was accused of showing disrespect at Cixi's funeral by, among others, instructing his subordinates to take photographs of the mourners. Perhaps the real reason for his deposition was that he had fallen into disfavour with the regent (he had sent him memoranda demanding the continuation of constitutional reforms) or his overbearing wife. Annual Report on China for the year 1909, TNA, FO 405/425, pp. 5–6; Zhang, 'Spider Manchu', pp. 220–29.

<sup>86</sup> Minute by Cocks, January 1909 [no exact calendar date], TNA, FO 371/612/734, fol. 380; Jordan to Campbell, 21 January 1909, TNA, FO 350/5, fols 94–96; Memorandum by Alston, 26 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/3666, fol. 438; Annual Report on China for the year 1909, TNA, FO 405/425, pp. 6–7.

<sup>87</sup> The provincial elites, involved in the movement for regaining China's full sovereignty, were especially strongly opposed to contracts granting foreign capital the right to finance and build railways.

at their side, they had become still more helpless and paralysed. In the near future, Jordan actually expected a revolution or at least the loss of power by the regent and his entourage, heading inevitably for a fall. In early 1910, he stated that it seemed 'almost incredible' that the existing political situation could continue for another dozen or so years. The other danger he perceived was that the weak Beijing authorities could not guarantee the fulfilment of foreign commitments and agreements, which would unavoidably, albeit sooner or later, lead to a confrontation between China and one or more of the powers. Great Britain, which had the greatest economic interests in the Middle Kingdom, was one of the main candidates for such a scenario, especially as Grey, with Jordan's approval, planned to demonstrate firmness in the near future in order to prove to China that it could not 'trifle' with him.<sup>88</sup>

In the following months, Jordan and his deputy, William Grenfell Max Müller<sup>89</sup>, tended to be equally pessimistic. While they were pleasantly surprised by the progress in introducing parliamentarism and transforming China into a constitutional monarchy, negative developments were predominant. In their view, the growth of the 'Rights Recovery Movement' was leading to an intensification of anti-foreigner sentiment, thus threatening a repeat of the Boxer Uprising. The danger of revolution was also increasing. Although the circles that sought to provoke it were, in the opinion of British diplomats, insufficiently organized, they nevertheless planned successive political coups and were relentless in their efforts to overthrow the empire, being aided by widespread popular discontent with both Qing rule and the existing polity. Jordan and Max Müller were highly critical of the Beijing government, considering it to be one of the most corrupt, incompetent and inept in the entire period of Manchurian rule. What was lacking was a strong leader who would be able to protect China from turmoil and revolution, and also guide its modernization with intuition and moderation.<sup>90</sup>

The negative assessment of the situation in China was shared in London. In February 1911, Grey in a conversation with the Japanese

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<sup>88</sup> Grey to Jordan, 13 August 1909, TNA, FO 800/44/22, fol. 128; Jordan to Grey, 7 October 1909, TNA, FO 350/6, fols 13–15; Jordan to Campbell, 28 October 1909, *ibid.*, fols 18–19; Jordan to Bryce, 2 November 1909, *ibid.*, fol. 20; Jordan to Campbell, 11 November 1909, *ibid.*, fols 21–23; Jordan to Alston, 7 January 1910, *ibid.*, fols 40–42. The quotations are from the first and last documents.

<sup>89</sup> Max Müller was the Secretary at the Embassy in Beijing, but for most of 1910 he stood in for Jordan as *Chargé d'Affaires*.

<sup>90</sup> Jordan to Grey, 11 January 1911, TNA, FO 350/7, fols 14–16; Annual Report on China for the year 1910, TNA, FO 405/425, pp. 2–4.

ambassador stated that '[...] it would be very desirable to have a better Government in China. The present Government was weak and undecided. It went to the extreme of provocation by its unbusinesslike methods and then found itself confronted by risks which might entail revolution in China'. The foreign secretary was very sorry that Yuan was still in political banishment.<sup>91</sup> He was perhaps the only person who at the time offered any hope of overcoming the crisis, but his return to power seemed increasingly unlikely. Shortly after his dismissal, some Chinese and foreigners speculated that he would be quickly restored to favour, however the regent remained unyielding despite various pressures.<sup>92</sup>

The absence of a proper leader and the Qing government's lack of authority also reflected negatively on British-Chinese relations. Jordan and Max Müller complained that they were finding it increasingly difficult to get anything done at the Waiwubu, which was headed almost entirely (especially after Liang Dunyan's departure) by incompetents with no decision-making power. To cap it all, they negotiated in bad faith, practised obstruction, and even backtracked on agreements already made. This prompted Grey to manifest his displeasure more forcefully. He stated that the Chinese military mission would not be allowed to come to Great Britain until the Beijing authorities demonstrated goodwill and positively resolved several long-standing issues (among others, they were required to agree to submit the border dispute with Portugal over Macau to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague for resolution, reach an understanding with the British-controlled Chinese Engineering and Mining Company regarding the Zhili mines, and immediately pay the full agreed amount due to the British-owned London and China Syndicate for the resale of the Anhui mining concession).<sup>93</sup> Thus, Jordan's prediction of a confrontation between China and one of the powers came true — at least to an extent — although fortunately it was of a diplomatic nature only. All these negative situations and developments caused Great Britain to look at China's future with immense trepidation.

The concerns proved to be justified. In October 1911, an uprising broke out in Wuchang, which, despite being poorly prepared, led to

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<sup>91</sup> Peter Lowe, *Great Britain and Japan, 1911–1915: A Study of British Far Eastern Policy*, London and New York, 1969, p. 59.

<sup>92</sup> Note by Alston, 5 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/850, fols 384–85; Jordan to Grey, 15 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/2002, fol. 414; MacDonald to Grey, 23 January 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/6865, fols 451–52; Minute by Alston, 11 October 1909, TNA, FO 371/612/10652, fols 505–07; Cui, 'Zaifeng's Dismissal of Yuan Shikai', pp. 205–09.

<sup>93</sup> Annual Report on China for the year 1910, TNA, FO 405/425, pp. 5–6; Jordan to Alston, 8 March 1911, TNA, FO 350/7, fol. 30.

a nationwide revolution that ended the following February with the abdication of the Qing dynasty, the collapse of the empire, and the establishment of a republic. The Beijing government, steeped in crisis following the deaths of Cixi and Zhang, the dismissal of Yuan and the assumption of power by the inept Prince Chun, proved unable to quell the revolution. We may therefore consider that the political changes that took place in China between 1908 and 1909 paved the way for the revolution. In turn, its success was determined by the support of the army, the provincial assemblies, and the constitutionalists, as well as by the actions of the revolutionaries and Yuan.<sup>94</sup> It is worth noting that all these forces were directly or indirectly affected by Yuan's deposal. When he was removed from office, discontent grew among the soldiers whom he had recruited and trained. The risk of mutiny in the army was great enough to prompt the regent not to punish Yuan more severely. The rebellion did not ultimately occur, but the loyalty of the soldiers — or at least of the Beiyang Army — and their motivation to defend the dynasty certainly diminished. The revolutionaries were very well aware of this. Their leader, Sun Yat-sen, welcomed Yuan's dismissal, believing it would weaken the Beijing authorities and the imperial troops' will to fight.<sup>95</sup> This is what in fact happened — it was the military conspirators who started the uprising in Wuchang, and in the following weeks some army units went over to their side. In addition to the revolutionaries, attempts to exploit the weakness of the central government were also made by the provinces and members of the constitutional movement, who placed further demands and demonstrated their dissatisfaction with what they considered to be Beijing's incorrect decisions. It was the violent anti-government protests in Sichuan, triggered by the nationalization of the railway line and the transferral of rights thereto to foreign banks, that immediately preceded the outbreak of the revolution, during which successive provinces declared independence.

Finally, the dismissal affected the attitude of Yuan himself, as became apparent in the autumn of 1911, when he was called upon by the frightened dynasty to pacify the revolution. It quickly became obvious that he had other plans, and did not intend to rescue the Qing, against whom he harboured a grudge. Instead, he effectively became the third party to the conflict, situating himself between the two existing opponents and playing one off against the other. He made superb use of his

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<sup>94</sup> Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, p. 163; Polit, 'Mocarstwa', p. 103.

<sup>95</sup> Shan, *Yuan Shikai*, pp. 134–35; Cui, 'Zaifeng's Dismissal of Yuan Shikai', pp. 199, 202.

favourable position, bringing about Puyi's abdication and concluding an agreement with the revolutionaries, who consented to his becoming the interim president of the republic. Interestingly, the political exile he had been in since 1909 seems to have helped him during the critical events of 1911–12: while the court, acting out of fear, acceded to all his demands just to persuade him to return, the revolutionaries held him in high esteem and tried to win him over to their cause, among others because they did not view him as a fully devoted henchman of the Qing, but to some extent as a victim of the Manchurian dynasty. Furthermore, it can be surmised that if Yuan had not been deposed and had still been in office when the revolution broke out, he would probably have been more willing to fight in defence of the existing order.

The events of 1908–09 also shaped much of the policy that Britain later pursued during the revolution in China. When the Wuchang Uprising broke out, London declared neutrality, which, however, was more advantageous to the revolutionaries in the circumstances. This decision was taken for a variety of factors (including the fact that the revolutionaries controlled most of the territory belonging to the British sphere of influence), among which disillusionment with the Qing government was very important. British diplomacy concluded that a weak, incompetent and corrupt dynasty which, unlike the revolutionaries, did not enjoy popular support was doomed to failure, and thus was not worth supporting. The Foreign Office was so negative in its assessment of the regent that it decided to abandon the principle of non-intervention that it had adopted during the revolution. In early December 1911, Grey supported Jordan's proposal to put pressure on the regent in order to induce him to resign. The loss of faith in the dynasty was also one of the reasons why over time Great Britain, as virtually the only power, began to favour the idea of establishing a republic in China. The British felt that the final years of Manchurian rule had completely discredited the Qing, and did not even consider the idea of placing another dynasty on the Dragon Throne. In such a situation, the best option seemed to be a change of the political system. From the very beginning, Great Britain had an ideal candidate for the post of president of the new republic — Yuan. British diplomats welcomed his return to power and supported him behind the scenes, believing him to be the only person who could restore order in the state. Britain also made its position known to the revolutionaries. When Sun, seeking the help of the powers, arrived in London in the autumn of 1911, Grey let him know that he supported Yuan, which probably further contributed to the revolutionaries' rather positive attitude towards the general. Eventually, the Qing abdicated

and the empire was replaced by a republic headed by Yuan, whom Britain went on to support until his death in 1916.<sup>96</sup>

Britain played a key role during the revolution because, as the strongest power in China, it set the tone among the foreign states, restraining the inclination of some of them to intervene, brokering negotiations between Yuan and the revolutionaries, and, over time, lending its support to the republican solution. Since the framework of the British approach was developed as result of the political changes that took place in the Middle Kingdom between 1908 and 1909, we may surmise that these changes not only contributed indirectly to the outbreak of the 1911 Revolution, but also seriously influenced the stance and actions of the powers during this landmark event in China's history.

(Translated by Maciej Zakrzewski)  
(Proofreading Jan Czarniecki)

## Summary

The aim of the article is to outline Britain's position and actions towards the political changes that took place in China in the years 1908–1909. These were initiated in November 1908 by the deaths of Emperor Guangxu and Empress Dowager Cixi. The minor Puyi was then placed on the imperial throne, while his father Prince Chun, exercised a regency on his behalf. One of the regent's first decisions was to dismiss General Yuan Shikai, the most influential and enlightened dignitary of the empire. In the autumn of 1909 there occurred the death of Zhang Zidong, the second most important supporter of the Qing dynasty. These events led to a weakening of the Beijing government, which found it increasingly difficult to enforce fulfilment of its decisions from the provinces.

The situation in China was watched closely by Great Britain, which had the greatest influence of all the great powers in the country. Britain considered it important for the Beijing authorities to be able to ensure order, and therefore feared that the deaths of Guangxu and Cixi would lead to a weakening of these authorities, and that the change of reign could be used to instigate unrest. However, as Puyi's enthronement proceeded peacefully and the regent initially gave a positive impression, Great Britain felt that China's prospects looked marginally better than before.

But this opinion changed significantly when the regent dismissed Yuan, who was seen as a guarantor of progress and order. London then communicated its

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<sup>96</sup> Lowe, *Great Britain and Japan*, pp. 58–88; Polit, 'Mocarstwa', pp. 87–106; Chan Lau, 'Sir John Jordan', pp. 84–203; MacKinnon, *Power and Politics*, p. 208; Ernest P. Young, 'Yuan Shih-k'ai's Rise to the Presidency', in *ChiR*, pp. 428–33.



discontent to Beijing and began to take a critical view of Prince Chun, who, moreover, proved to be an inept and weak leader. Further, when Zhang died in the autumn of 1909, Great Britain became increasingly concerned that the weakened Beijing authorities would fail to maintain order and unrest or revolution would ensue. This opinion later influenced British policy during the revolution that eventually broke out in China in 1911.

(Translated by Maciej Zakrzewski)  
(Proofreading Jan Czarniecki)

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