

Austen Chamberlain and Britain's relations with France  
in the Locarno Era, 1924-1929.

Gaynor Johnson.

Austen Chamberlain was one of the longest serving foreign secretaries of the twentieth century, remaining in office from October 1924 until the General Election in the early summer of 1929. His tenure coincided with the demise of the Geneva Protocol, the signature of the Treaty of Locarno, a major disarmament conference in Geneva, crisis in the Far East and a deterioration of Britain's relations with the United States.<sup>1</sup> By the time the second Baldwin government fell from office in the wake of the economic crisis caused by the Wall Street Crash, the diplomatic landscape was very different from that which had existed when Chamberlain had arrived at the Foreign Office. In particular, Britain had become party to two pacts that not only outlawed war but contained a commitment to use military might to enforce them. This was a remarkable departure from the more cautious approach of Chamberlain's predecessors, both before and after the First World War. They had been reluctant to allow Britain to offer concrete promises of assistance to her European neighbours in the event of invasion or war. Britain had, of course, been one of the founding members of the League of Nations, whose Covenant relied on the concept of collective security to operate effectively.<sup>2</sup> But by the mid 1920s, crises such as that caused by Mussolini's annexation of Corfu in 1923, had demonstrated that this system for ensuring the satisfactory resolution of disputes between states could not be relied upon.<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of the discussion about the effectiveness of the League as a keeper of the peace during the 1920s and the wider diplomatic initiatives of Chamberlain's Foreign Secretaryship is Britain's relationship with France. Indeed, few would disagree that that relationship is central to understanding Chamberlain's own views on foreign policy between 1924-1929. A man often criticised for inconsistency in many of policies, Chamberlain's Francophile inclinations were a unvarying feature of his diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> To his sister, Ida, he referred to 'our pleasant relationship' with France.<sup>5</sup> To diplomats, he used stronger language. British foreign policy should be structured around the need to 'remove the acute fears which distort French policy and reinforce French confidence in Britain'.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, within this wide acceptance of Chamberlain's pro-French sympathies, there are differences of opinion and of emphasis. In the early 1960s, Douglas Johnson portrayed Chamberlain as being so fanatically pro-French that he was almost guilty of ignoring British relations with other key European powers.<sup>7</sup> A generation later, Chamberlain's biographer, David Dutton, suggested that his subject's French sympathies were more subtle and complex but that he also derived considerable moral support from the fundamentally pro-French Foreign Office of the time.<sup>8</sup> Dutton's portrayal of Chamberlain as a more moderate Francophile has, in turn been challenged in recent years by Richard Grayson. The latter's argument centres on the premise that hitherto, historians have placed far too much emphasis on Chamberlain's French sensibilities.<sup>9</sup> Grayson's Chamberlain is the quintessential 'honest broker' – pro-European rather than specifically pro-French, whose diplomacy was rooted in the argument that the way to secure lasting peace in Europe was by according the same status to the diplomatic needs of the Germans as to those of France and Britain.<sup>10</sup> This is a point of view that the present author has taken some issue with, specifically in relationship to

Chamberlain's relationship with and attitude to the views of Lord D'Abernon, the British ambassador to Berlin between 1920 and 1926, during the negotiations of the Treaty of Locarno.<sup>11</sup> Viewed from this perspective, Chamberlain appears to be somewhere between the assessments of Dutton and Douglas Johnson.

This article broadens this analysis to examine Chamberlain's attitude towards France throughout the entire period of his Foreign Secretaryship. It will focus on four key events. The first of these is the link between the Geneva Protocol of 1924 and the security negotiations of the following year.<sup>12</sup> The Protocol had been proposed by Chamberlain's predecessor at the Foreign Office, Ramsay MacDonald and his French opposite number, Edouard Herriot, to toughen up the wording of the League of Nations' Covenant to include a more precise definition of what constituted an act of aggression and to introduce a compulsory system of diplomatic arbitration. The agreement also involved the British government in making more clearly-defined commitments to maintain French security from aggression; a feature that contributed to the decision of the Baldwin government, which succeeded the MacDonald administration in October 1924, to abandon it. Or at least to seek an alternative way of achieving a similar effect but by commandeering support for a multi-lateral security pact that did not require the British to act as sole guarantors of French territorial integrity in the event of invasion or war. The result was the second, and in many respects, the most important area of Chamberlain's Anglo-French diplomacy – the negotiation of the Treaty of Locarno in October 1925. This pact guaranteed the German frontier with France and Belgium as it had been defined by the Treaty of Versailles six years earlier, contained a promise that the signatory powers would not go to war for ten years, secured German membership of the League of Nations and undertook to step up efforts for a workable international agreement on disarmament.

The first year of Chamberlain's period as Foreign Secretary represented the time when his pro-French sympathies are most evident and when his close rapport with his French opposite number, Aristide Briand, was at its height, and which observers were convinced was mutual.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Chamberlain's views on the Geneva Protocol and on the Locarno treaty represent the time when he was most confident of the Anglo-French relationship. The second two examples – the diplomacy surrounding the so-called Anglo-French Compromise on disarmament in 1928 and the implications to Britain of the Kellogg-Briand Pact the same year – deal with an Anglo-French relationship that was undergoing a partial realignment. The difference between perceived and actual diplomatic influence is also at the heart of the discussion of Chamberlain's post-Locarno diplomacy towards France, especially in his reaction to Briand's decision to lead negotiations of a pact to outlaw war permanently with the American Secretary of State, Frank Kellogg. The present author has written elsewhere that we still know disproportionately more about the first year of Chamberlain's foreign Secretaryship than we do about the remaining four.<sup>14</sup> While it is undoubtedly necessary to recognise the importance of his role in the negotiation of the Treaty of Locarno - and this article gives due credit to this - this still remains the case. This article attempts to continue the process of rebalance.

It is important to realise that Chamberlain's Francophile tendencies did not stem merely from the opportunities that presented themselves when he was Foreign Secretary, but from a life-long love affair with the country, its culture and its language.<sup>15</sup> As a young man, he had studied at the prestigious Ecole des Sciences Politiques in Paris, where he had heard lectures given by Albert Sorel.<sup>16</sup> To Chamberlain, France was simply the most sophisticated country in Continental Europe; a much older country politically than Italy and Germany and in possession of

a clearer national identity. As Beaverbrook sarcastically noted, Chamberlain was 'keener on the side of the French than the French premier...'.<sup>17</sup> France was, in short, the European power most like Britain; an association made all the more powerful by the relative geographical proximity of the two countries. Britain and France had a long tradition of democracy and had fought against autocracy during the First World War in a way that had forged an unprecedented degree of co-operation and understanding between the two countries. To Chamberlain, an Anglo-French diplomatic alliance as the basis of maintaining peace and the democratic tradition after the war was the logical extension of this.<sup>18</sup> The consequences of not doing so were, he argued, unimaginable. A memorandum about his grand vision for Britain's relations with France, written less than a month after his arrival at the Foreign Office, makes this clear.

If the Geneva Protocol falls through,...the whole question of French security will be re-opened; and if we do not show the French that we are still prepared to consider it with every desire to reach a satisfactory conclusion, we may expect renewed accusations of bad faith from France, with a consequent deterioration of Anglo-French relations and a possible renewal of the nightmarish happenings of the past five years.<sup>19</sup>

Reflecting on this period twenty years later, Chamberlain identified an even greater bond between the British and the French: 'The deeper Englishmen and Frenchmen penetrate into each other's nature', he argued, 'the more they will find they have in common...'.<sup>20</sup> The aspirations of other European powers lacked the simple straightforwardness of the French. Chamberlain lacked the patience to penetrate the

psychology behind Mussolini's foreign policy and the very different intellect of the German Minister for Foreign Affairs, Gustav Stresemann.<sup>21</sup> Many discussions of Chamberlain's Foreign Secretaryship quote the observation that he loved France 'like a woman'; that he remained pro-French despite recognising that French demands for additional protection from invasion were not always rational.<sup>22</sup> This article supports this point of view, although it also illustrates that Chamberlain himself would have preferred French policy to be less fickle and more consistently rooted in improving relations with Britain.

Traditionally, of course, consideration of foreign policy issues was not the province of the Cabinet. Since the First World War, this balance had been difficult to achieve, but both Chamberlain and Baldwin were anxious that, where possible, this arrangement should be maintained. It would be wrong to claim that this meant that Chamberlain was allowed to develop a personal style of diplomacy unfettered by his colleagues in government. But he undoubtedly enjoyed greater freedom than other members of the Cabinet in placing his individual imprint on the priorities of his department. And unlike Lord Curzon, the last Conservative Foreign Secretary, Chamberlain did not have to endure the interventions of a Prime Minister with a strong interest in international diplomacy.<sup>23</sup> This was just as well, as Chamberlain's ideas were radically more pro-French than those of Curzon and his predecessors, and were often at odds with those of his Cabinet colleagues. On Chamberlain's arrival at the Foreign Office, the British government was wedded to the nineteenth century view that when it came to involvement in European diplomacy, Britain's interests were usually best served by a policy of studied, partial detachment.<sup>24</sup> This, Chamberlain argued, was fundamentally wrong-headed. In a speech in the House of Commons in March 1925, he stated:

At periods in our history we have sought to withdraw ourselves from all European interests. No nation can live, as we live, within twenty miles of the shores of the Continent of Europe and remain indifferent to the peace and security of the Continent. It is more important today than ever before that we should regard ourselves as so protected and so separated from the rest of Europe and its misfortunes...as to remain indifferent to what happens, and callous and deaf to any appeal for help.<sup>25</sup>

Predictably, Chamberlain received little support for this line of argument within the Cabinet. During the debate about the workability of the Geneva Protocol, Chamberlain's proactive pro-French inclinations came under attack. Despite what has been claimed elsewhere, Chamberlain did not reject the agreement because it appeared insufficient to French security needs.<sup>26</sup> To him, by enhancing the power of the League, *ipso facto*, the Anglo-French relationship became strengthened because it was the working relationship between these countries that drove the diplomatic agenda of that organisation. At the same time, the Protocol offered the perfect reassurance to those wedded to a less proactive role in foreign affairs because it reinforced the idea of collective security and therefore collective (not exclusively British) action should war break out. But despite this, even the great League champion, Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, who was in favour of the Protocol, objected to the way in which Chamberlain was using the negotiations to place particular emphasis on French security. '[W]e hear a great deal about the necessity for French security', he wrote, but 'the necessity for security for some other nations in Europe seems no less essential to peace'.<sup>27</sup> Their Cabinet colleague, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, also rejected the 'axiom that our fate is invariably

linked to that of France'.<sup>28</sup> Even three years later, when Chamberlain's reputation as an international statesman was more assured, he felt compelled to lament: '...I have been disappointed at receiving so little support from some of my colleagues and having my informed and considered opinions swept aside so lightly by them...[They] don't know what I know of the state of Europe and how thin the crust is on which I have to tread'.<sup>29</sup>

Nor could Baldwin's patronage entirely protect Chamberlain from other influential critics of his preferred policies. His instincts for a bilateral security agreement with France to build on the closer relationship proposed by the Geneva Protocol extended only later to include Germany, caused him to fall foul of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) during the early months of 1925.<sup>30</sup> This important group of predominantly Conservative grandees, which included the former Foreign Secretary, Curzon, raised different objections to Chamberlain's Cabinet colleagues. In particular, Chamberlain was accused of not paying sufficient heed to the text of the German note that had been dispatched to London and to Paris in February resurrecting an earlier plan for a security agreement between Britain, France and Germany – 'a three-handed game', as he termed it - in which the signatory powers undertook not to wage war for a generation.<sup>31</sup> After this date, because of the intervention of the CID, Chamberlain was compelled to abandon his plans for a bilateral pact between Britain and France in favour of a multilateral agreement. But the disappointment does not appear to have had a devastating effect on Chamberlain, although he never accepted that it was the best course of action.<sup>32</sup> However, in 1925, his reaction was stoic and was founded in the reasoning that any security pact as long as it included Britain and France, would serve his purpose. In this respect, he was indeed, as Self has argued, a *Realpolitiker*.<sup>33</sup>



Chamberlain's comments about the connection between the Geneva Protocol and what became the Locarno pact discussed above, also reveal another important point: that at the beginning of 1925, Chamberlain not only saw the Anglo-French relationship as being of great importance and potential but that he believed it to be weak not strong.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, he was faced with a situation where one of the defeated powers at the end of the First World War, Germany, appeared to have a clearer and more coherent strategy for moving forward the European security agenda than Britain and France. But it is debatable whether Chamberlain's response to this was to step up his personal contact with Briand.<sup>35</sup> While it is true that he savoured the opportunity to talk to Briand at Geneva when they gathered for League Assembly and Council meetings, much of Chamberlain's communication with the French government concerning the negotiation of the security pact was done by conventional diplomatic channels, through the Marquess of Crewe, the British ambassador to Paris, and through Crewe's opposite number, Aimé de Fleuriau.<sup>36</sup> Indeed the impact that Chamberlain's relationship with these two men had on Anglo-French relations in the mid 1920s is an important gap in our knowledge of Locarno diplomacy. That said, it would be wrong to suggest that Chamberlain believed that Briand played an insignificant role in shaping French security policy during the Locarno negotiations. Chamberlain greeted every response by Briand as each round of the security negotiations progressed as the start of a 'new chapter' in Anglo-French relations.<sup>37</sup> On conclusion of the Locarno treaty, Chamberlain generously celebrated the efforts of his friend. 'No praise is too high for the part played by Briand...His courage, his

statesmanship, and the generosity and liberality of his mind, made possible what with any lesser man might have seemed an impossibility'.<sup>38</sup>

The Locarno agreements were intended to herald a new dawn in European diplomacy, not merely for supporters of an Anglo-French security entente. They were also intended to pave the way for further agreements that would reinforce the desire for peace and to lay the ghosts of the residual hostilities after the First World War further to rest. But as Jon Jacobson and others have demonstrated, that did not happen.<sup>39</sup> So what went wrong? The answer as far as Chamberlain was concerned is again related to the concepts of actual and perceived influence. Chamberlain believed that his role in the conclusion of the Locarno pact had secured his reputation not only as Foreign Secretary but as an international statesman. This was not an unreasonable assumption, especially as he was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace in 1925, with Stresemann and Briand being similarly honoured a year later in recognition of their part in securing the Locarno pact. Yet, despite this, neither his contemporaries nor subsequent generations of historians appear to have viewed Chamberlain as a significant player in European diplomacy for most of the rest of his time in office. It would be wrong, of course, to claim that before 1924 that Chamberlain had lacked political presence and influence. But somehow, assessments of his period at the Foreign Office seem to have been tainted by the knowledge that had he not resigned the Conservative party leadership in 1922, he would have been Premier not Foreign Secretary between 1924 and 1929. That said, Chamberlain himself undoubtedly viewed the years of his Foreign Secretaryship as the high point of his career.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, both Briand and Stresemann had been the equivalent of Prime Minister before assuming the mantles of foreign minister, (although Stresemann has justly always been remembered more for his years at the *Auswärtiges Amt* than his period as

Chancellor). Neither came to Locarno with a reputation tainted by missed opportunity and misjudgement.

But there were also other factors at work. Another point that mitigated against Chamberlain's desire to keep alive a rapport with the French was that he failed to realise that his relationship with Briand during the Locarno negotiations was the exception rather than the rule when it came to Britain's relations with France. The concept of an 'Entente Cordiale' was always perceived by the Foreign Office as an ironic term; that for the most part Britain's relationship with France was not close and harmonious.

In reality, during the Locarno negotiations, the relationship between Chamberlain and Briand flourished because it was in the interest of both parties and the diplomatic circumstances were auspicious for it to do so. However, after 1925, other factors entered the equation that disrupted this equilibrium. The crisis affecting British interests in the opium trade in China and the Far East forced Chamberlain to give European affairs lower priority. But even then, Chamberlain did not lose sight of the British entente with France, as he feared that the two countries might be compelled to pursue separate policies that it might undermine their relationship.<sup>41</sup> He also became increasingly overwhelmed by the proceedings of the Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1927 which threatened to impose more restrictions on the level of assistance that Britain could offer France in the event of an invasion of French territory. Locarno diplomacy was now fraught with tension. So much so that by 1927 Chamberlain was describing his meetings with Stresemann and Briand as 'combats'.<sup>42</sup>

Once again, we return to the concepts of perceived and actual influence. During the final years of his Foreign Secretaryship, Chamberlain's principal interests

in European diplomacy were disarmament and the quest to secure permanent peace. For the most part, these were also the objectives of Briand and to a lesser extent, Stresemann. A further example of the difference between real and perceived influence in Chamberlain's diplomacy was his misjudgement concerning the so-called Anglo-French Compromise on Armaments in the spring of 1928. The origins of the compromise lay in the deadlock that had existed in the League's Preparatory Commission on Disarmament since the end of 1926. This hiatus was caused by a conflict between British desire to limit fleets on the basis of battleship size and French plans to calculate the reduction on the basis of tonnage.<sup>43</sup> There were also differences between the two powers on the issue of army conscription, with the French favouring its retention and the British favouring its abandonment. At Geneva in March 1928, Chamberlain had given Briand a clear indication that if France would give way on the naval question, Britain would agree to allow the French to retain conscription. This disastrous move immediately antagonised the Germans whose recent history with France had taught them that the French were willing to use their large conscript army to invade Germany in the event of German default of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. And since the Ruhr crisis, the additional sanction of the Locarno treaty had been created. In the weeks that followed, Chamberlain displayed a remarkable degree of insensitivity to German concerns. In his mind, he was quite clear that it had been the Germans who were providing the obstacle to the success of the disarmament negotiations.<sup>44</sup> In words hardly resonating with the 'spirit of Locarno', in June 1928 Chamberlain wrote: 'Unless we make some progress in the question of disarmament we shall be faced inevitably by Germany's repudiation of the disarmament provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, with what consequences for the immediate or future peace of the world I cannot at this moment pretend to predict.'<sup>45</sup>

The Americans were also annoyed by the Foreign Secretary's willingness to alter the outcome of the Washington Naval Conference seven years earlier without reference to the other signatory powers.<sup>46</sup> Yet by the end of July 1928, despite Cabinet opposition, especially from Walter Bridgeman, First Lord of the Admiralty, which he eventually overcame through support from Baron Cushenden and the Marquess of Salisbury, Chamberlain was authorised to sign the compromise proposal document with Briand. Some have expressed surprise at the lack of Cabinet interest in what Chamberlain was trying to achieve, especially given the delicacy of the diplomatic situation, especially in regard to the United States.<sup>47</sup> And it would be tempting to view this situation as an example of Chamberlain imposing his personal authority on the development of the Anglo-French relationship. Chamberlain himself certainly wished that this had been the case. But as his comments discussed earlier suggest, despite his established reputation as an international statesman, after 1925 Chamberlain continued to fail to command the confidence of his Cabinet colleagues.

On 30 July 1928, Chamberlain announced the Anglo-French compromise in a speech in the House of Commons.<sup>48</sup> The agreement was immediately denounced in the press as a 'betrayal' rather than a 'concession' to the French.<sup>49</sup> For those who believe that Chamberlain's diplomacy was rooted in a desire to broker personal agreements with the French, the Anglo-French Compromise has been seen as an example of the continuation of this strategy after his Locarno success.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, scholars of the disarmament negotiations of the late 1920s are inclined to suggest that Chamberlain's relations with Briand were less convivial and that he concluded the Compromise to foster Anglo-French co-operation over the League's role in brokering a disarmament agreement.<sup>51</sup> It is claimed that this was because Chamberlain believed that in the summer of 1928, Anglo-French relations were at their lowest ebb since the

Ruhr crisis.<sup>52</sup> This latter view is too extreme. In 1923, the crisis surrounding the occupation of the Ruhr, in which the British and French had conspicuously failed to support each other, had brought Europe to the brink of potential war.<sup>53</sup> There was no situation of comparable severity between 1924 and 1929. What there was after 1925 was a gradual change of emphasis within the Entente, particularly in Paris; but never a major rift. Briand, in particular, wished to keep his diplomatic options as open and as varied as possible, to include negotiation with the United States as well as with the European powers. Indeed, the records of the British commissioners on disarmament in the mid 1920s suggest that the Anglo-French Compromise was concluded because Chamberlain was anxious to secure agreement with the French on disarmament because intelligence received from Sir Esme Howard, the British ambassador in Washington, suggested that the French and Americans were on the verge of signing a similar agreement themselves and that it would exclude Britain.<sup>54</sup>

Further evidence that the Anglo-French relationship underwent a process of realignment rather than radical deterioration can be seen through an examination of the extent to which Chamberlain was excluded from the wider debate about disarmament and security between 1925 and 1929. Chamberlain's correspondence with Howard makes it clear that the Foreign Secretary was concerned that Kellogg did not understand the 'special relationship' that existed between Britain and France.<sup>55</sup> During the negotiation of the second and more important diplomatic agreement of 1928, the Kellogg-Briand Pact – the Franco-American construct Chamberlain had been so concerned about during the Compromise negotiations - the authors made it clear that the Locarno powers would be asked to comment on drafts of the agreement before it was finally concluded. Chamberlain frequently received copies of the diplomatic correspondence that flew between Paris and Washington concerning the

pact. Furthermore, Chamberlain received excellent intelligence from Howard and from Crewe about the strategic thinking of the American and French governments on these issues. But what is important is how Chamberlain felt about Britain's new role of relative as opposed to central diplomatic importance. His policies did not contain the bitterness of a jilted lover, to extend the simile used earlier of Chamberlain loving France as a woman. Instead he adopted a pragmatic approach that centred on ensuring that the interests of the other Locarno powers were adequately represented during the Kellogg-Briand negotiations. Consequently, it was at this time, and not during the preliminary negotiations of the Locarno Pact, that Chamberlain sought and found a *modus vivendi* with Stresemann.<sup>56</sup> The man who had expressed profound scepticism at the German role in the negotiation of the 1925 treaty was now describing his German opposite number as his 'good friend' and the 'strongest of allies'.<sup>57</sup>

But too much should not be made of this warmer relationship with Stresemann. The highly successful loan system between Germany and the United States that had been established under the terms of the Dawes Plan, created a bond between the two countries that had the potential at least to extend into a wider system of commercial and fiscal agreements. While American financial aid was also offered to the French to help prop up their ailing currency in the late 1920s, the main economic axis nevertheless ran from Washington to the German capital. The recovery of reparations payments, which the Dawes Plan was supposed to ensure, was still of vital importance to the British and French economies. Nevertheless, the high-profile economic role of the United States in European affairs exposed another area of disagreement between the governments in London and in Paris. Throughout his period as Foreign Secretary, Chamberlain viewed the United States as the power that

had let down the entente alliance after the First World War by refusing to sign the Treaty of Versailles and join the League of Nations. This existence of such diplomatic selfishness was confirmed to him by the willingness of the American government to show much greater levels of economic benevolence to its former enemy after 1924 than it had to its allies concerning the repayment of war debts. The Kellogg-Briand pact was therefore little more than an opportunity for the American government to reinforce those economic links politically and strategically.<sup>58</sup> Yet Briand believed that by working with the Americans rather than against them could prove advantageous, especially if France's borders came under attack again. It was therefore Briand who was more inclined than Chamberlain to overlook previous American diplomatic transgressions. Different priorities thus made agreement between the British and French about the desirability of American involvement in matters relating to security unlikely. A detailed discussion of Briand's diplomatic priorities is beyond the remit of this article, but in emphasising his enthusiasm for American involvement in international diplomacy, it is important to note that the French foreign minister did not abandon his Locarno allies after 1925. His interest in and commitment to European integration is well known and his status as one of the founding fathers of the European Union is widely accepted.<sup>59</sup> As the present author has written elsewhere, in many respects, it is Briand who deserves to be seen as the quintessential Locarno statesmen; going further than Chamberlain, Stresemann or Mussolini to ensure a lasting legacy of European peace.<sup>60</sup>

It is ironic given the importance that Chamberlain himself placed on his role in the conclusion of the Locarno pact that it was his reaction to the negotiation of the Kellogg-Briand pact that reveals more about his general diplomatic strategy concerning France on issues other than simply security. In particular, these



negotiations revealed that, like his forebears at the Foreign Office, Chamberlain believed in balance of power diplomacy and in the creation of spheres of influence. In the summer of 1928, Chamberlain demanded that as a condition of British signature of the pact to outlaw war, Briand and Kellogg should acknowledge the right of the British government to maintain special influence in areas of the world of strategic importance to Britain. He wanted a 'British Monroe Doctrine'.<sup>61</sup> In particular, he was anxious to guard British interests in Egypt and the Suez Canal region.<sup>62</sup> Thus we have a continuity with the rationale for the original Entente Cordiale agreement of 1904 – an understanding concerning spheres of influence and one born more out of mutual diplomatic mistrust and jockeying for position than from a deep-rooted desire to work together. As in 1904, in 1928, the British government was concerned about the impact of French foreign policy on British strategic interests. And as in 1904 also, it was speculation about German motives that coloured both British and French thinking.

Like most of his generation, Chamberlain's understanding of how to conduct diplomacy included the concept of the sphere of influence, especially the maintenance of British interests in this way. However, it is also possible to view Chamberlain's general approach to improving relations with France during his period at the helm of the Foreign Office as being partly concerned with a similar defensive phenomenon. Indeed, it is possible to see his Francophile tendencies as being fuelled partly by a desire to capitalise on French diplomatic associations with the successor states in Eastern Europe; a region not normally within the British sphere of influence. Through France the link would be created but one which Britain would not be directly tied to maintaining. When the Little Entente powers expressed concerns about the impact of the Kellogg-Briand Pact on their relationship with France, Chamberlain

indicated that handling any diplomatic fallout would be French, not British responsibility. As he told Howard, it was not the British government's role to 'defend or explain the French position'.<sup>63</sup> When pressed by Viscount Chilton on the same issue a few months later, Chamberlain was even more direct: 'it is true that we share certain obligations and rights under the Covenant of the League and Treaty of Locarno with France as also indeed with Germany but policy of His Majesty's Government will be guided entirely by consideration for British and Imperial interests and obligations'.<sup>64</sup>

The Locarno treaty five years earlier can also be seen as a statement of British and French balance of power diplomacy; linking as it did German signature of the treaty to membership of the British and French-dominated League of Nations.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, the French were not entirely to be trusted. The United States was also recognised by Chamberlain and Briand as a player of balance of power diplomacy through the development of the Dawes and Young Plan loans to Germany and the loans to the French to prop up the ailing franc prior to and during the Ruhr crisis. Chamberlain realised that British interests needed to be safeguarded should the French or Germans decide to offer an open door to greater American involvement in European affairs. Nor did this necessarily imply that the British government intended to pursue a policy of peace at all costs despite what compliance with the terms of the Kellogg-Briand Pact would entail. As Chamberlain told Howard: 'our position in the world requires us, even in the altered circumstances in which modern warfare and modern commerce are conducted, to maintain as hitherto belligerent rights at as high a level as possible'.<sup>66</sup>

While Briand saw every advantage to concluding a pact to outlaw war with Kellogg, or the Pact of Paris as it became known, it was to be Chamberlain who was

to have a clearer perception of how the pact would affect the conduct of European diplomacy.<sup>67</sup> By January 1928, it was also apparent that Chamberlain was concerned that sharing centre stage with the Americans during the Pact negotiations could go to Briand's head, leading to an increasingly bullish French foreign policy. The French Minister for Foreign Affairs might be tempted to go down a path that played down the entente with Britain in a display of French diplomatic 'independence' intended to impress the Americans. As Chamberlain told the Cabinet, the proposed pact could give France a 'free hand to pursue in Europe policies appearing aggressive in American eyes'.<sup>68</sup> The only way of preventing that was for the British government to ensure that the balance of power remained with all of the Locarno powers, not with France.

Nevertheless, Chamberlain did not simply intend the Locarno powers to act as one merely to protect the integrity of the 1925 treaty. His vision, as Howard told the new Foreign Office Assistant Under Secretary, Robert Vansittart, extended beyond this. The Locarno powers were to form a single European bloc of diplomatic power – almost with the status of a mini state – with which to negotiate the pact to outlaw war with the Americans: to create 'a bond of union between the United States and Europe'.<sup>69</sup> In this process, Chamberlain saw little reason why he could not reprise his Locarno role of the 'honest broker'. That position had placed British interests at the heart of the negotiating process in 1925.<sup>70</sup> It was arguably even more vital that that should be the case in 1928 given Briand's propensity for negotiating with the Americans without Chamberlain at his side. Nor was Chamberlain prepared to allow the Americans to pursue a policy of divide and rule at the expense of Britain and France. No power should ever be in a position to set 'France and England at

loggerheads and destroying the basis of our common policy in Europe', he told Crewe.<sup>71</sup>

It is hardly original to claim that Chamberlain was a Francophile. What has perhaps been lost sight of, however, is that his love of France and the French was not unquestioning or two-dimensional but varied in degree and intensity while never entirely disappearing from view. Others have also claimed that his relationship with Briand is of central importance to understanding Chamberlain's European diplomacy in the mid 1920s. This is not disputed in this article, but attention has also been drawn to the Foreign Secretary's willingness to take a pragmatic and independent view of French foreign policy objectives if they were not entirely consistent with British interests. The first tests of the unity of the Locarno powers revealed a still fragile relationship between Britain and France that had not entirely overcome or forgiven the tensions of the first five years of peace. In that context, Chamberlain's efforts changed nothing. The Locarno treaty was, of course, to be subjected to much sterner challenges in the decade that followed, but there was something incongruous about Chamberlain's belief that Briand's foreign policy should be rooted in European affairs, with French global interests forced into a secondary role, when he manifestly would not have argued for that for Britain. In 1904, it was acceptable for France to behave as a world power, if that status was not greater than that of Britain or that it did not threaten British interests. By 1929, Britain was less certain that such a strategy would work but could not decide whether it was worth the effort to try. The price was a greater British commitment to maintain European security, and, despite Chamberlain's rhetoric at Locarno, that was something even he shied away from after 1925. As to whether there was an Entente Cordiale between 1924 and 1928, the

answer is that Chamberlain and Briand wanted it to exist, but for different reasons and on different terms, and it was for this reason that it was, in effect, unworkable.

Notes.

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- <sup>1</sup> The wider context of these issues in European international history has been discussed by a large number of historians in the past. One of the best, and most recent, is Z. Steiner, *The Lights that Failed. European International History 1919-1933* (Oxford University Press, 2005). The best study of the American dimension to Chamberlain's diplomacy remains B.J.C. McKercher, *The Second Baldwin Government and the United States, 1924-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- <sup>2</sup> G.W. Egerton, 'Conservative Internationalism: British Approaches to International Organization and the Creation of the League of Nations', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 5 (1) 1994, pp.1-20.
- <sup>3</sup> P.J. Yearwood, "'Consistently with Honour': Great Britain, the League of Nations and the Corfu Crisis of 1923", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21 (4) 1986, pp. 559-579.
- <sup>4</sup> Leo Amery to Chamberlain, November 20 1925, AC 37/12, University of Birmingham Library, Austen Chamberlain Papers.
- <sup>5</sup> Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, January 22 1927, AC 5/1/46.
- <sup>6</sup> Chamberlain to D'Aberton, March 18 1925, AC 52/264.
- <sup>7</sup> D. Johnson, 'Austen Chamberlain and the Locarno Agreements' *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, VIII (1) 1962, pp. 62-81.
- <sup>8</sup> D. Dutton, *Austen Chamberlain: Gentleman in Politics* (Bolton: Ross Anderson, 1985), pp. 259-299.

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- <sup>9</sup> R.S. Grayson, *Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe. British Foreign Policy 1924-1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1997).
- <sup>10</sup> Chamberlain to Crewe, January 20 1925, AC 50/28.
- <sup>11</sup> G. Johnson, 'Lord D'Abernon, Sir Austen Chamberlain and the Origin of the Treaty of Locarno', *Electronic Journal of International History* 1, 1, (2000); G. Johnson, *The Berlin Embassy of Lord D'Abernon, 1920-1926* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002).
- <sup>12</sup> Chamberlain's views on MacDonald's conduct of the negotiations of the Geneva Protocol can be found in Chamberlain to Mrs Carnegie, September 11 1924, cited in Johnson, 'Austen Chamberlain and the Locarno Agreements', p. 65.
- <sup>13</sup> Viscount D'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace* Vol. III, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), p. 23.
- <sup>14</sup> G. Johnson, 'Austen Chamberlain and the Negotiation of the Kellogg-Briand Pact' in G. Johnson (ed.), *Locarno Revisited. European Diplomacy 1920-1929* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 60.
- <sup>15</sup> See Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, January 22 1927, AC 5/1/406.
- <sup>16</sup> Dutton, p. 16.
- <sup>17</sup> Beaverbrook to Borden, April 29 1925, House of Lords Record Office, Beaverbrook Papers, C/51.
- <sup>18</sup> See his minutes on Memorandum by Tyrrell, May 2 1928, *Documents on British Foreign Policy* (hereinafter referred to as *DBFP*), Series Ia, Vol. V, No. 335.
- <sup>19</sup> Memorandum on the Necessity of the Early Consideration of the Question of French Security, November 4 1924, cited in F.G. Stambrook, "Das Kind"-

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- Lord D'Abernon and the Origins of the Locarno Pact', *Central European History*, 1968, p. 236.
- <sup>20</sup> A. Chamberlain, *Down the Years*, (London: Cassell, 1935), p.229.
- <sup>21</sup> See J. Wright, *Gustav Stresemann. Weimar's Greatest Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- <sup>22</sup> C. Petrie, *The Life and Times of the Right Hon. Sir Austen Chamberlain*, Vol. II (London: Cassell, 1940), Vol. II, p. 304.
- <sup>23</sup> Chamberlain to Mary Carnegie, September 20 1925, AC 4/1/1264; K. Middlemas and J. Barnes, *Baldwin* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), pp. 342-6.
- <sup>24</sup> G.A. Craig, 'The British Foreign Office from Grey to Austen Chamberlain' in G.A. Craig and F. Gilbert (eds), *The Diplomats 1919-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), Vol. 1, pp. 15-48.
- <sup>25</sup> Speech by Chamberlain in the House of Commons, March 5 1925, cited in Petrie, *The Life and Times...*, Vol. II , pp. 261-2; A. Chamberlain, *Down the Years* (London: Cassell, 1935), pp. 165-6.
- <sup>26</sup> R. C. Self (ed.), *The Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters* (Cambridge: Royal Historical Society, 1995, p. 265.
- <sup>27</sup> Cecil to Chamberlain, November 17 1924, cited in Johnson, 'Austen Chamberlain and the Locarno Agreements', p. 72.
- <sup>28</sup> Churchill to Chamberlain, December 1 1924, cited in Johnson, 'Austen Chamberlain and the Locarno Agreements', p. 73.
- <sup>29</sup> Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, February 20 1927, AC 5/1/410.
- <sup>30</sup> The impact of this was not lost on Baldwin. Baldwin to Chamberlain, March 12 1925, AC 52/80.

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31 The Cuno Plan of 1923. For its details, see G. Johnson: “‘Das Kind’  
Revisited: Lord D’Abernon and German Security Policy, 1922-1925’,  
*Contemporary European History*, 9 (3) 2000, pp. 209-24; Chamberlain to  
Crewe, February 16 1925, AC 52/189.

32 Chamberlain, *Down the Years*, pp. 152-3, 166.

33 Self, *Diary Letters*, p. 266.

34 In this Chamberlain was not alone. C.f. Amery to Chamberlain, February 6  
1925, AC 52/25.

35 Dutton, in particular, has emphasised the importance that Chamberlain placed  
on his personal conversations with Briand. Dutton, p. 246.

36 Of the many examples, see Crewe to Chamberlain, 25 January 1925, AC  
52/181. Fleuriau was French ambassador to London 1924-1933.

37 For example, Chamberlain to D’Abernon, April 2 1925, The National  
Archives (hereinafter referred to as TNA)/FO800/127.

38 Chamberlain to Murray Butler, November 2 1925, AC 37/60.

39 J. Jacobson, *Locarno Diplomacy. Germany and the West 1925-1929*  
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

40 Chamberlain to Amery, November 21 1925, AC 37/13.

41 Chamberlain to Briand, August 29 1925, AC 52/110.

42 Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, March 14 1927, AC 5/1/412.

43 D. Richardson, *The Evolution of British Disarmament Policy in the 1920s*  
(London: Pinter, 1989), p. 177.

44 Chamberlain to Howard, May 25 1928, *DBFP*, Series Ia, Vol. V, No. 358.

45 Memorandum by Chamberlain, June 9 1928, CP 183(28).



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- 46 See E. Goldstein and J. Maurer (eds), *The Washington Conference, 1921-1922*  
(London: Frank Cass, 1994).
- 47 Richardson, p. 179.
- 48 *House of Commons Debates*, Fifth Series, Vol. 220, col. 1837.
- 49 *The Manchester Guardian*, August 3 1928, p. 4.
- 50 Dutton, p. 279.
- 51 Richardson, p. 180.
- 52 D. Carlton, 'The Anglo-French Compromise on Arms Limitation, 1928',  
*Journal of British Studies* 8, (2) 1969, p. 161.
- 53 E.Y. O'Riordan, *Britain and the Ruhr Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-  
Macmillan, 2001).
- 54 For example, Memorandum by Cushenden, May 1 1928, Disarmament Policy  
Committee, Memoranda PRA (27) 45, TNA/CAB 27/362.
- 55 For example, Chamberlain to Howard, January 20 1928, *DBFP*, Series Ia, Vol.  
IV, No. 256; Howard to Chamberlain, January 27 1928, No. 263; Chamberlain  
to Howard, February 13 1928, AC55/266.
- 56 See Grayson, pp.121-2.
- 57 Chamberlain to Lindsay, May 2 1928, AC 55/312
- 58 Johnson, 'Lord D'Abernon, Sir Austen Chamberlain and the Origin of the  
Treaty of Locarno', p. 6.
- 59 For example, R. Boyce, 'Was there a "British" alternative to the Briand Plan?'  
in P. Catterall, C.J. Morris (eds), *Britain and the Threat to Stability in Europe  
1918-1945* (London: Leicester University Press, 1993), pp. 17-34.
- 60 Johnson, 'Austen Chamberlain and the Negotiation of the Kellogg-Briand  
Pact', p. 60.

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- 61 Memorandum by Craigie, May 31 1928, TNA FO371/12793/A3700/1/45.
- 62 Chamberlain to Howard, May 25 1928, *DBFP*, Series Ia, Vol. V, No. 358.
- 63 Chamberlain to Howard, May 22 1928, TNA/FO371/12792/A3497/1/45.
- 64 Chamberlain to Chilton, July 4 1928, TNA/FO371/12794/A4480/1/45.
- 65 Chamberlain to Howard, January 23 1928, *DBFP*, Series Ia, Vol. IV, No. 261.
- 66 Chamberlain to Howard, April 5 1928, TNA/FO371/12823/A2280/133/45.
- 67 Crewe to Chamberlain, January 9 1928, *DBFP*, Series Ia, Vol. IV, No. 249.
- 68 Memorandum by Chamberlain, January 24 1928, *DBFP*, Series Ia, Vol. IV,  
No. 262, C.P. 22 (28).
- 69 Howard to Vansittart, January 13 1928, TNA/FO371/12789/A290/1/45.
- 70 Chamberlain to Crewe, April 27 1928, *DBFP*, Series Ia, Vol. V, No. 327.
- 71 *Ibid.*