

DE-RISKING POLICIES

OF THE BRITISH NAVY DURING THE PRE-WORLD WAR I YEARS



THE GERMAN RISK BUILD-UP

Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz was appointed Secretary of the German Navy in June 1897. Tirpitz came to office with a master plan to transform Germany into a global sea power by expanding its navy and creating a strong fleet of capital ships. This scheme, known as the Tirpitz Plan, entailed a significant naval build-up, aiming at challenging the hegemony of the Royal Navy.

To avoid this newly created fleet being regarded as an offensive force, Tirpitz articulated in 1899 a defensive narrative called the Risk Theory to rationalise his plan and portray the fleet as a defensive instrument.

According to this theory, the purpose of the fleet was to become a sufficiently powerful force to dissuade Britain from engaging against Germany. The key deterrent feature of the Risk Theory was that if the Royal Navy would engage against the German Navy, the British would sustain intolerable losses. The German fleet would therefore act as a security guarantee by creating an untenable risk for Britain.

BRITAIN’S DE-RISKING POLICIES

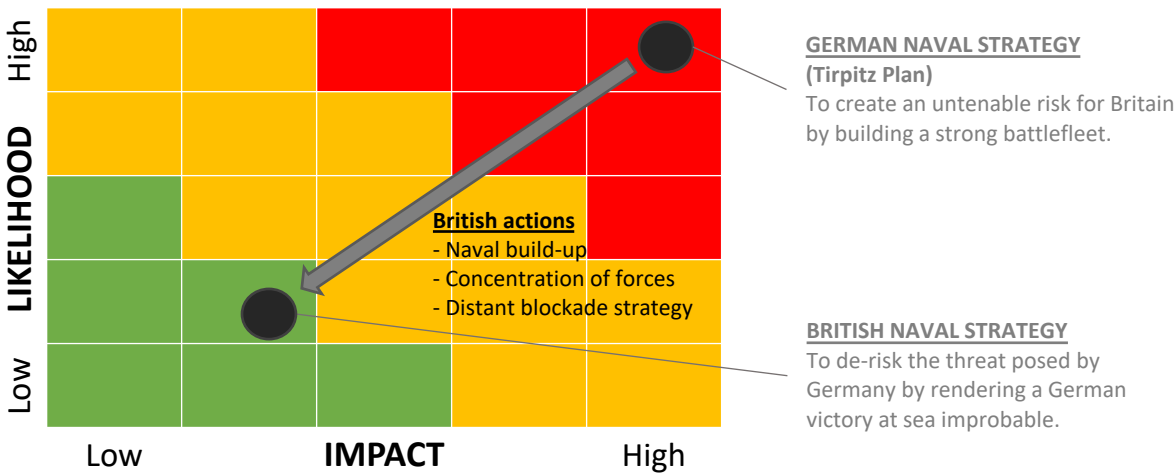
The British did not accept the risk imposed by Tirpitz's Risk Theory. Instead, they retaliated with back-to-back reforms and changes in naval strategy to offset the risk:

- Strengthening the fleet and introducing new ships to maintain an advance over Germany. The arms race that followed ultimately strangled the German Navy.
- Concentrating its forces in home waters. This rendered the prospect of a German victory in a symmetric decisive battle unlikely.
- Implementing a distant blockade. This deprived the German fleet from favourable conditions to engage against the Royal Navy near their own coastal waters.

These counter measures reduced the lethality and the ability of the German fleet to fight a fleet-on-fleet battle in favourable terms.

By actively addressing the risks, Britain de-risked the threat imposed by the Risk Theory and neutralised the pressure that Admiral Tirpitz intended to impose on the Royal Navy.

BRITAIN’S DE-RISKING TRAJECTORY IN PRE-WORLD WAR I YEARS



Source: Diagram prepared by MARITIME STRATEGY RESEARCH.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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