

# Present State of the British Empire

Sec. I.

Of their Situation

The British dominions consist of Great Britain, Ireland, and divers colonies and settlements in all parts of the world: there appears not any just reason for considering these countries in any other light than as parts of one whole. In a too common acceptation of the above title, the European dominions are only meant; but the Irish might as well be thought foreigners as the colonists: indeed the connection between Great Britain and the latter is more intimate than with the former. To obviate therefore any objections which might be formed against a partial and incomplete view, the clearest method is to consider them all as forming one nation, united under one Sovereign, speaking the same language, and enjoying the same liberty, but living in different parts of the world. Nothing is more common than to talk of nine or ten millions of British subjects (the supposed number in these two islands) and five millions of Spaniards: but why are not the North Americans to be included in one total, and the Spanish colonists in the other? Such distinctions are by no means just. The situation of the British dominions is most undoubtedly advantageous in a very high degree. The European territory being insular, is a blessing of the greatest and most striking value; for without recurring to the connection between that and a naval power, the benefits of preserving a national character – of being more free from the devastation of land wars than any continental territory can be – of being so distinct from other nations, that the government may, in a multitude of instances, be conducted in a more steady, determinate, and cheaper manner, than in countries otherwise situated: these and many other advantages attend an island, in whatever part of the world it may be situated, provided it be of size sufficient to contain a nation numerous enough for self-defence. These circumstances are almost equally advantageous in obscure ages, or those of commerce and luxury, but there are many others which are particularly relative to the latter.

In times when trade multiplies the conveniences and superfluities of life to such a degree, that all the productions of one clime become necessities in a thousand others; the situation of a country acquires a new relation to the interests of its inhabitants; these are the interests of commerce: those territories which are so situated as to command the greatest variety of productions which necessity or luxury renders useful, and at the same time enjoy the easiest communication between each other, possess in this respect the best situation; and, unless some peculiar obstruction arises from government, national character, or some other source, will likewise command the greatest commerce. A few instances will best explain this matter.

The Spanish dominions are the best situated of any in every respect, but that of the principal being a part

of the continent. They are the only people that possess a chain of territories around the globe, which might have a continued, free, and speedy communication from one to another; and this superiority results from their American ports in the South Sea, and their islands in the midst of it. It is true, they make scarce any use of these advantages, but the reality of their existence is nevertheless the same. No other people can send a ship around the world that can touch at so many necessary ports of their own; nor ought we to forget that this chain is everywhere composed of considerable links. It is true, a break appears between Spain and the Philippine islands; but the communication by the west most certainly answers every purpose of commerce. But if we except the insular situation, and a commercial chain of territories, and speak only of the situation of a principal dominion considerable enough to maintain numbers sufficient for defence against all invaders, the tract of country comprehended under the names of the Arabias and Turkey in Asia, exceeds all others. It is every where surrounded by seas, except the line of division between that and Persia, drawn straight from the Persian gulph to the corner of the Black Sea, and the small neck of land which connects Asia and Africa. This situation is incomparable: As a part of the continent, it is more advantageous and compact than any other; and, were it an island, it would exceed in situation all other islands. By means of the Mediterranean, Red, and the Black Seas, it has a prodigious fine communication with Europe and Africa; its souther coast opens directly upon all countries of the east; and the gulph is equally advantageous for a communication with Persia; and the finest situation for bot empire and commerce in the world.

The situation in the British dominions, though not equal to that of the Spanish, is greatly advantageous. All the northern parts of Europe are immediately open to the ports of England and Scotland, and the southern ones to those of Minorca and Gibraltar. Ireland, and the south-west parts of England, bear immediately upon North America; on the coast of Africa her settlements are considerable; St. Helena lies advantageously for an East India voyage; and in the Indies itself the British dominions are second to those of the Dutch, and of vast importance in themselves. These dominions fully enjoy a quick communication from Europe to the east and west; but when arrived, there is none from the one to the other: the only point in which Spain is superior. The French are greatly inferior, in the want of ports and colonies of consequence on the continent of North America; of considerable settlements in the East Indies, and of a sufficient extent of coast cut by ports in Europe. The Dutch in the East Indies are superior; greatly inferior everywhere else.

But the great and material point remains: A continental territory of a moderate power in land armies, may be attacked, and if not conquered by a superior one, at least involved in a multitude of miseries; and in a variety of circumstances, no conduct, however prudent, will be sufficient for preventing such evils. In the quarrels of bigotry, ambition, or folly, such a territory may be forced into a part, and find itself desolated by war, without a possibility of escape. But how different is the case with an island! If the situation in other respects, and the government, be favourable to commerce, a great trade may be raised, and a navy formed and supported. When once this is effected, nothing is wanting but prudent management in the administration to keep entirely clear of all the quarrels and wars that spread desolation around her. If a potentate be ever so powerful by land, of what consequence is it to the islanders? He must become so by sea before they can have reason to fear his menaces. But this advantage can never attend any continental territory. No people so connected with others can have any tolerable security but in extremely formidable armies; and it would be a very easy matter to point out from history, how vain such a

dependence has proved, chiefly from the schemes of ambition, not defence, which such armies occasion. A nation not numerous enough to keep up powerful armies, possesses scarcely any security; whereas in an island, five millions of people may be perfectly secure, though not twenty leagues distant from a potentate at the head of thirty millions of subjects. The continental nation is insecure with all her soldiers, and she cannot render herself otherwise with the most numerous fleets: whatever efforts she makes, nothing can give her a quarter of the security which an insular situation alone confers.

It may be asked, where is the insular security, if a continental neighbor becomes superior by sea? In answer to this, it is only necessary to observe, that no earthly advantages yield absolute safety; insomuch that we cannot estimate any thing but by comparison. In the case here stated, the superiority of an island yet remains evident: – such more powerful potentate cannot possibly carry on an offensive war against his island neighbor with the same ease as against a continental one: only small armies can be transported by sea; – supporting them is infinitely more difficult; nor can the fury of war spread as it does on the continent. Add to this, every offensive stroke depends on the winds, tides, and security from the adverse fleets. But if we consider that there are only two species of security, that one against invasions by land, and the other against those by sea; and that a continental territory must be deficient in one, without reaping any benefit or safety from the other; and, on the contrary, that an island is necessarily and absolutely secure against armies, with a probable ability of being the same against navies; the clear superiority of the latter must be apparent at once. Powerful armies spring up like mushrooms in every soil, but formidable fleets can only be built on like foundation of a vast trade; a fabric not commonly found. What a striking advantage therefore is the insular situation! Without even the defence of a navy, a neighbor's power by land cannot offend the happy inhabitants of an island; he must raise a commerce, command numerous sailors, and build fleets of ships, before his army can be wafted to its shores. How different with a continental neighbor! A general receives his instructions, and in six hours the grim fiend of war spreads desolation and terror in the country of the unfortunately situated enemy.

In respect, however, to the British dominions, it must be allowed, that it is only the European islands which are blessed with the security of the insular situation. The American colonies and the East-Indian territories are parts of the continent, and so far liable to attacks from enemies more powerful by land. I speak not of the improbability of such attacks in America; but the situation remains nevertheless open to them.

If we combine in one view the several circumstances of situation, such as security, national character, convenience of government, commerce, etc. we shall find that no people upon earth enjoy such advantages as the British nation. Some may be superior in one quarter of the globe, some in others: in respect of the chain of colonies, Spain may be superior; in the East Indies, the Dutch; but every circumstance included, none will be found on the whole so truly complete.

